

## THE ASHCAN SCHOOL

### The Immortal Eight

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American Art was at a low ebb. Some reasons may have been there were huge contrasts in society, terrible poverty, unimaginable conditions in sweat shops and extravagant life styles of the rich and famous. At the same time millions of immigrants were coming to America to find a better life. We're not sure why the art scene was so stagnant but some of these conditions could have contributed to this situation.

This was the setting for a group of artists who made Philadelphia, Pennsylvania their home. Many were already self supporting artists working as newspaper illustrators (this was before photography was used in the publishing business). Many of these artists were interested in fine art and in their off hours took archaic art classes at the Philadelphia Academy of Art. Through this maze of academic sterility emerged a handful of artistic greats.

Listed below are the artists who later became THE ASHCAN SCHOOL - THE IMMORTAL EIGHT.

1. Robert Henri 1868-1929. Born in Cincinnati, Ohio. Leader and teacher. Encouraged friendship and loyalty. Taught to paint from life, even the lowest stratum of society. He was a sportsman and well traveled. Spent many years in Paris.
2. William Glackens 1870-1938. Artist reporter for the Philadelphia Press. He worked with Albert Barnes, the Philadelphia Art Collector, guiding him in the purchase of artworks by Cezanne, Renoir, Monet, Van Gogh and Matisse. He was a prolific painter.
3. George Luks 1867-1933. Born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania to artist parents who sent him to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art. He also studied in Dusseldorf, Paris and London. A practical joker often causing witty problems. He was an actor and a troublemaker.
4. Arthur B. Davis 1862-1928. Landscape and figurative painter often in the symbolist style.
5. Earnest Lawson 1873-1939. Born in San Francisco. Landscape painter. Thick pigmentation. Had 4 paintings in the 1908 show.

6. Maurice Prendergast 1858-1924. Born Newfoundland, Canada. Impressionist style. Lived and studied many years in Paris. He was subsidized by Boston collector Sarah Choate Sears. He was a confirmed bachelor and quoted Rudyard Kipling "If a man would be successful in his Art, art, art. He must keep the girls away from his heart, heart, heart." '

7. Everett Shinn 1876-1957. Handsome, funny, newspaper reporter, magazine illustrator. Moved From Philadelphia to New York City in 1897. Playwright, actor, mechanical mind. Worked  
In pastels, New York street scenes, the Bowery etc

8. John Sloan 1871 -1951. Born Loch Haven, Pennsylvania.. Moved to Philadelphia with parents when he was five years old. At twenty he worked at the Philadelphia Enquirer. He was a teacher, etcher and oil painter. He had 7 pieces in the 1908 show. Died , Hanover, NH. John Sloan was a very influential participant in "The Group of Eight".

This group of artists led by Robert Henri was a follower of Thomas Eakins, a maverick in his own time trying to update the education in art schools. Henri too, was a rebel who challenged the Academy and their methods. Henri had the capacity to motivate the creative talent of the artists round him. He lectured to peer deeper into the heart of American Art. Because many of these artists knew one another from their newspaper jobs and art school their friendship blossomed under the tutelage of Robert Henri.

This friendship led to soirees both social and educational in the Henri studio. He believed in Realism. He preached that artists should paint what they feel as well as see.

These artists were very serious except on alternate Tuesday evenings when the studio was turned into a performance place. Original plays were acted out with a mood of hilarity. Costumes were elaborate and because there were no women in the group the men played the female roles. These were very talented men who left their solemnity behind to create for themselves and others a raucous display of their other talents. It was a privilege to be a guest at one of these performances of silliness and carousing.

Most of these artists were well traveled abroad and in the United States but they always seemed to come back to their base in Philadelphia.

As the years passed the artists continued their friendships, continued their art and submitted their  
works to exhibitions only to be rejected. On rare occasions a work was accepted only to be placed in a dark corner.

These outcasts came up with a plan. They would have their own show. A \$50 good faith deposit was collected from each. With that they went searching for exhibition space. This was not easy because no one wanted to encourage these radicals who strayed so far from the norm of art at that time.

A Gallery owner a Mr. MacBeth who sympathized with their cause agreed to rent them space February third through the fifteenth, 1908. They all got to work planning this momentous event. 2500 invitations were sent, 63 artworks were hung.

At the opening 300 people an hour surged through. They ran out of catalogs. Mr. MacBeth was thrilled with the almost \$4000 in sales. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney purchased 7 pieces. There were mixed reviews but the disapproval of the show was rampant. The critics called the show garbage. Thus, the term "Ashcan School" was born. Another more sympathetic critic said "that 'The Eight' have among them strong painters. That cannot be denied. Their first show may impact present and future conditions. Who can say?".

Most of the artists continued to paint. They followed Robert Henri's philosophy. Most were successful. Although there were no similarities in their work they continued to be called "The Eight" or Ashcan artists. Other artists joined the group namely Rockwell Kent and George Bellows with his famous boxer paintings.

The "Eight" never had another show but their 1908 Exhibit led to the organization and development of the 1913 Armory Show and the founding of "Independent Artists" in 1918.

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