

# American Art Review

An abstract painting with a dense, textured surface. The composition is dominated by a large area of blue and green, with a prominent diagonal band of brown and orange. The brushstrokes are visible and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is one of a complex, layered visual experience.

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# American Art Review

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COVER: John Singer Sargent, *Val d'Aosta: Stepping Stones* (detail), c. 1907, o/c, 22 x 28, Michael and Jean Antonello.

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# *The Eight and American Modernisms*

by Elizabeth Kennedy

**T**he artists who comprised The Eight embraced the romantic notion of pure art as expressed by the French critic Charles Baudelaire:

What is pure art according to the modern idea? It is to create a suggestive magic, containing at the same time the object and the subject, the world external to the artist and the artist himself. For these artists making art was their life,

not merely the practice of their profession. Arthur B. Davies, William Glackens, Robert Henri, Ernest Lawson, George Luks, Maurice B. Prendergast, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan—each dedicated himself to continuous creative experimentation as a necessity of his artistic philosophy. Their commitment was exemplified by Prendergast, the oldest of the group and the last to become an artist, who was admiringly described by fellow painter Marsden Hartley as “a person of fiery en-

thusiasm as regards painting. It was the one thing worth doing in life—it was the means of life to him.”

Strangely enough these individualists are forever linked by their one and only collective enterprise, their February 1908 New York exhibition at Macbeth Galleries; a century later, their artworks are still hung together in American art collections. Notably, all installations of pictures by The Eight mimic that earlier historical moment, recreating a contextual display that is a trib-





*The Eight and American Modernisms* is on view from March 6 through May 24, 2009, at the New Britain Museum of American Art, 56 Lexington Street, New Britain, Connecticut, 06052, 860-229-0257, [www.nbmaa.org](http://www.nbmaa.org). Organized by the Milwaukee Art Museum and the New Britain Museum of American Art in partnership with the Terra Foundation for American Art, the exhibition is accompanied by a 144-page catalogue edited by Elizabeth Kennedy. It will travel to the Milwaukee Art Museum, 700 North Art Museum Drive, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 53202, 414-224-3200, [www.mam.org](http://www.mam.org), from June 6 through August 23, 2009.

RIGHT: George Luks, *Sunset*, c. 1928-32, w/c on paper, 14 1/2 x 18, New Britain Museum of American Art, gift of Olga H. Knoepke.

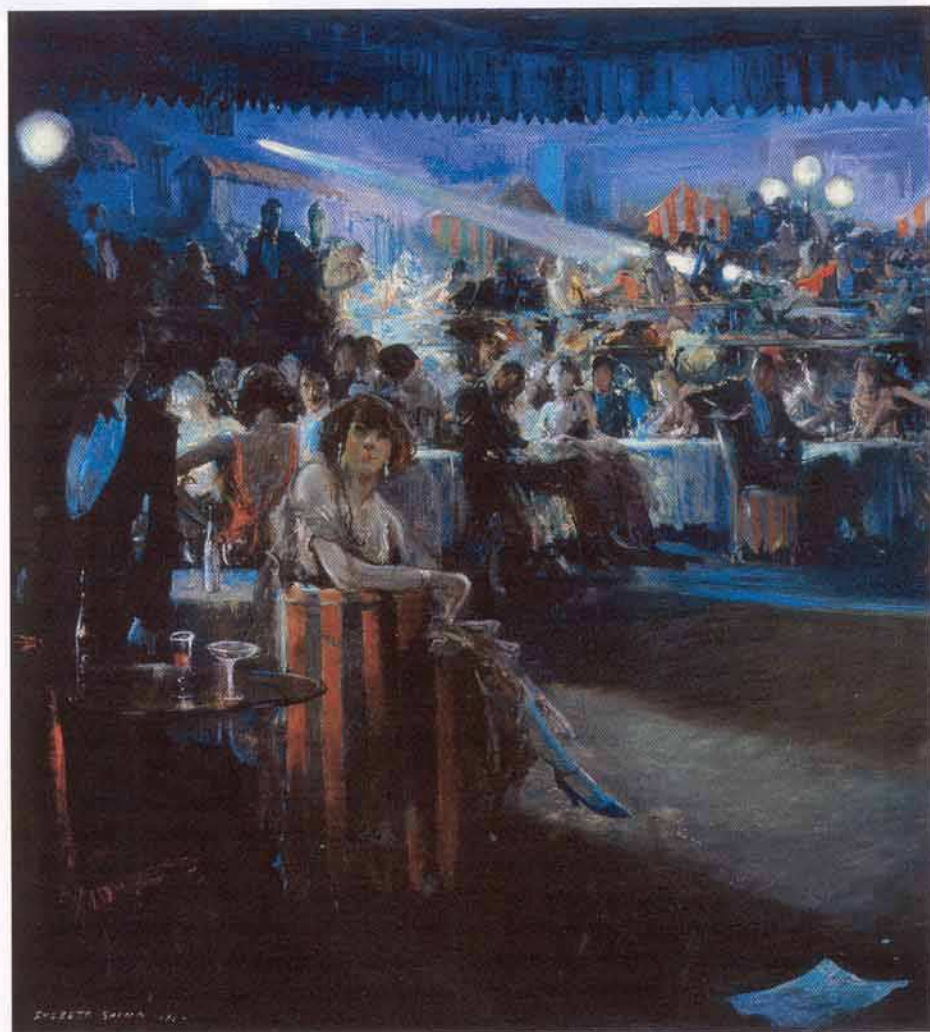
BELOW RIGHT: Everett Shinn, *Nightclub Scene*, 1934 (possibly reworked later), o/c, 36 x 34, Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Abert in Memory of Harry J. Grant.

LEFT: William Glackens, *Breezy Day, Tugboats, New York Harbor*, c. 1910, o/c 26 x 31 3/4, Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Abert and Mrs. Barbara Abert Tooman.

ute to The Eight's embodiment of artistic individuality as a collective experience.

The artists of The Eight were a curious mixture of Greenwich Village bohemians and bourgeois professionals who entered their studios daily to work, went home to their wives, and enjoyed the urbane pleasures of city life. Notwithstanding the lionization of Henri as the natural leader of the group, the members were in truth more friends than followers. It is significant that The Eight adopted Henri's foundational philosophy, which departed from conventional rhetoric by touting artists as exemplars of virile American manhood as well as creative, but not elitist, beings. Not surprisingly, their art reflected aspects of their personal lives as well as the visualization of abstract concepts.

The Eight's contemporaries viewed their art as uncommon and praised them for creating "modern art of one kind and another." Yet, in Milton W. Brown's *The Story of the Armory Show*, to use just one example, The Eight's tenure as progressive artists ended in 1913, when the increasingly formalist-driven art of European modernism







on display at the International Exhibition of Art, more popularly known as the Armory Show, rendered their purportedly realistic art and their careers irrelevant. This exaggeration of the rapid ascendancy and demise of The Eight's contribution to a nascent American avant-garde obscures a far more

complex tale, for each artist experienced a successful professional journey that defies group labeling, with its implication of a single unifying ideology or a static artistic outlook. In fact, the legendary aura of the men of The Eight influenced artists all across the country throughout the 1930s.

ABOVE: Robert Henri, *An Imaginative Boy*, 1915, o/c, 24 1/8 x 20, New Britain Museum of American Art, Harriet Russell Stanley Fund.

ABOVE LEFT: William Glackens, *Portrait of a Young Girl*, c. 1915, o/c, 32 x 26 1/8, New Britain Museum of American Art, A.W. Stanley Fund.

LEFT: Maurice B. Prendergast, *Picnic by the Sea*, 1913-15, o/c, 23 x 32, Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of the Donald B. Abert Family in His Memory, by exchange.

RIGHT: Ernest Lawson, *Brooklyn Bridge*, 1917-20, o/c, 20 3/8 x 24, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection.

By 1907, The Eight were established mid-career, critically acclaimed, New York-based artists. If success can be measured by sales, Davies was flourishing, with several devoted patrons, for whom he served also as an art advisor. Henri could boast of a prestigious professional tribute: the purchase of *La Neige* by the French government for its contemporary art museum in 1899. Four years later portraiture, commissions as well as figure studies, dominated Henri's artistic energies, varied only with plein-air landscape subjects made during summer respite from his teaching duties.





Key sources of income for Lawson and Luks were acquisitions by collectors and monetary prizes awarded at exhibitions. Family assistance supplemented the sporadic sales of their works for Glackens and Prendergast, who devoted their energies exclusively to generating their art. The talented Shinn creatively fulfilled multiple artistic commissions but lacked the dedication to painting to become a distinguished artist. Sloan, the last of the group to relocate to New York (apart from Prendergast), relied on teaching and illustration assignments while he struggled to establish himself as a respected artist.

Frustrated with the jury process for National Academy of Design's 1907 spring exhibition, Henri joined with likeminded colleagues to stage an alternative show. A man of action and an experienced exhibition

organizer, Henri's fluent discourse on contemporary American art provided excellent copy for newspaper and magazine journalists. What is remarkable but seldom accentuated is The Eight's desire—emphasized in the publicity—to have their independent show serve as something more than a sales opportunity: the fulfillment of their mission to recognize various modes of progressive art. The prospect of critical notice not only for these artists but also for other independents was worth the cost of a self-organized show at William Macbeth's gallery.

The most relevant document that insightfully demonstrates the varied styles of The Eight is the pamphlet published for the event, titled simply "Exhibition of Paintings," listing the eight artists' names alphabetically on the title page. Inside, on the other hand, their works were listed ac-

cording to their arrangement in the two octagonal galleries, with two pages—one listing the artworks and the other reproducing a photograph of a representative work—dedicated to each artist. By organizing the pamphlet as the artworks were arranged in the galleries, the artists encouraged visitors to view the paintings in a particular order, one that emphasized the diversity of the group's members.

In the first room, for example, Shinn's paintings of cosmopolitan vaudeville entertainments in such international locales as Paris and London were paired with Lawson's rural New York landscape scenes. The thematic disjuncture between them is analogous to the visual contrast of dark theater interiors, in which performers are bathed in bright artificial light, and country vistas awash in post-impressionist color and pat-





LEFT: George Luks, *Knitting for the Soldiers: High Bridge Park*, c. 1918, o/c, 30 3/16 x 36 1/8, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection.

BELOW LEFT: Ernest Lawson, *Spring Tapestry*, c. 1930, o/c, 40 1/8 x 50, New Britain Museum of American Art, Charles F. Smith Fund.

RIGHT: William Glackens, *Beach, St. Jean de Luz*, 1929, o/c, 23 3/4 x 32, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection.

BELOW RIGHT: John Sloan, *Isadora Duncan*, 1911, o/c, 32 1/2 x 26 1/4, Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Abert.

next room.

In the second gallery, according to the printed guide, works by Luks, Henri, Glackens, and Davies were hung successively. Luks's art was undeniably vulgar, and he set out deliberately to shock the refined art lover with his portrayals of barnyard animals and the humblest of people. It must have been startling to turn next to Henri's adjacent portraits, mostly of children. Henri's performance of painting is evident in the gestural freedom used to apply buttery pigments in deeply saturated colors, set off by black. Next to Henri's portraits and landscapes, Glackens's art was optimistically anecdotal. His views of New Yorkers' recreational activity in his four brightly colored park scenes and the sophisticated shoppers and diners in his two large paintings are a far cry from the somber, impoverished figures portrayed by Luks and the working-class citizens depicted by Sloan. Works by Davies enjoyed the final word in the second gallery, although his ambiguous titles and enigmatic imagery required much from the visitor interested in interpreting their meanings. Imagine pondering Davies's dreamy symbolist painting of two nude women in a lush landscape and then turning to encounter Luks's *Pigs* just across the gallery!

This modest exhibition guide demonstrates that as early as 1908 the artists of The Eight were dedicated to developing their own expressive styles with a variety of subjects based on modern life that reflected their identities as painters, not illustrators or journalists. There is no doubt that many of the themes were vulgar, but few, if any, of these exhibited works could be characterized as stark realism.



tern. Sloan's art presented a third topic: bustling New York street life, in views that affectionately evoke the lived experiences of the working class. Immediately following them was the transatlantic jolt of Prendergast's eight small oil studies recalling the gaiety of the French beach resort at St.

Malo; the Boston artist added even more chromatic plenitude with the "spotty" colors of additional park and beach scenes. This gallery's viewing ended with the audacious juxtaposition of Sloan's somber palette next to Prendergast's riot of color before the visitor doubled back to enter the





This landmark event had a remarkable afterlife. The overwhelming numbers of visitors to the Macbeth exhibition ensured its legendary status, while Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's purchase of works by Davies, Henri, Lawson, and Luks established a pattern for The Eight's continued alliance in future American art collections.

The exhibition of The Eight also had an impact nationally. Following the New York showing, it traveled to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and then on to six museums in the Midwest (the Art Institute of Chicago, the Toledo Museum of Art, the Detroit Museum of Art, the John Herron Art Institute, the Art Association of Indianapolis, the Cincinnati Art Museum, and the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh), ending the tour in the spring of 1909 with two venues on the east coast, the Bridgeport Art Association in Connecticut, and the Newark Museum Association in New Jersey (both institutions associated with local libraries). At these art organiza-



tions and their affiliated schools, artists and art students became aware of the eight artists' independent styles and their reputations continued to rise.

The traditional narrative of American

art history grants The Eight less than a decade of leadership in the development of early modernism in the United States. The achievements of The Eight as individualist artistic exemplars are especially undermined by the careless application of the "Ashcan school" label as an equivalent identity to the group and, even more egregiously, to individual members. This perpetual practice of associating The Eight with urban realism fails to acknowledge their ceaseless, if at times unsuccessful, formalist experiments. Focusing insistently on "urban realism," just one dimension of the art practiced by four of the artists, is to lose sight of their richly complex personas and the full development of their mature styles. The Eight's simultaneous recognition of non-representational art as a valid expression of contemporary art styles while refusing to embrace the authority of abstract art as the only "true" vehicle for modernity encouraged other American artists to insist on the integrity of their own creative visions. In the





LEFT: John Sloan, *Dunes at Annisquam*, 1914, o/c, 26 x 32, Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Juel Stryker in Honor of her Parents, Clinton E. and Sarah H. Stryker.

BELOW LEFT: Robert Henri, *Betalo Nude*, 1916, o/c, 41 x 33, Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Abert.

RIGHT: Everett Shinn, *French Vaudeville*, 1937, o/c, 25 1/8 x 30 1/8, New Britain Museum of American Art, Harriet Russell Stanley Fund.

BELOW RIGHT: Arthur B. Davies, *Rhythms*, c. 1910, o/c, 35 x 66, Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Abert in Memory of Harry J. Grant.



last decades of their careers (only Shinn and Sloan lived past the 1930s), The Eight's success in the art world and their autonomous stance made them profoundly relevant to their contemporaries.

While their early experiences as newspaper illustrators may have informed a reportorial impulse among the so-called Philadelphia Four (Glackens, Luks, Shinn and Sloan), by 1905 these artists had relinquished such work to concentrate on fine art, with only occasional commercial illustrating assignments. The artists regarded their art as the acme of modern painting, based on memory and imagination, gained from their prowling the streets and byways of New York in search of scenes for "pictures." A 1908 review celebrated the artists' distinctiveness: "These eccentric 'Eight' are by no means rebels against the academy or its tradition, they are merely individualists, bound together in a league of originality and unconventionality."

Other accounts politicized their art as carrying a message in a manner that was hotly denied by the artists themselves. The Eight never aspired to elevate "urban realism" to a philosophy of social concern or a celebration of American life. Nevertheless, within a year New York art critic Sadakichi Hartman categorized Glackens, Henri, Luks, and Sloan as proponents of "vigorous realism." Hartman linked these artists to such revered figures of the American school as Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer, famous for their approach to American subjects, whose works were considered to be encrypted with a national style, valorizing the "unvarnished truth" of a democratic society.

A generation later in the 1930s during





the nation's economic instability, the picturesque phrase "Ashcan school" was attributed to many artists of the 1910s who explored urban themes, thereby offering them as exemplars of an ideology of social concern in picturing city life. For the artists of The Eight interested in the quotidian experiences of their neighbors, however, the motivation was strictly artistic. In replacing the rural European peasants of academic painting with the colorful polyglot citizenry of contemporary New York, they were motivated by a fundamental humanism but not by a particular political agenda; their often overtly imaginative compositions reveal little of a documentary impulse.

The notion of realism as the defining characteristic of The Eight was debunked in 1979 by art historian Judith Zilczer, citing Henri's *The Art Spirit*, his 1923 treatise



of his beliefs:

Low art is just telling things, as, there is the night. High art gives the feel of

night. The latter is near reality although the former is a copy.... Reality does not exist in material things. Rather paint the





ABOVE: Maurice B. Prendergast, *Salem*, 1913-15, o/c, 14 1/4 x 18 1/4, New Britain Museum of American Art, Harriet Russell Stanley Fund.



LEFT: Ernest Lawson, *Boat Club in Winter*, c. 1915, o/c, 16 5/16 x 20 1/4, Milwaukee Art Museum, Samuel O. Buckner Collection.

RIGHT: Robert Henri, *Spanish Girl of Segovia*, 1912, o/c, 40 3/4 x 33 1/8, New Britain Museum of American Art, A.W. Stanley Fund.

flying spirit of the bird than its feathers.

Articulating further that "The brush stroke at the moment of contact carries inevitably the exact state of being of the ...artist at that moment into the work," Henri declared his preference for emotion over beauty and his conviction that a painting's formal aspects reveal the artist's inner emotional state, a more important purpose than an overt "message" deliberately conveyed through subject matter. The philo-





sophical underpinnings of Henri's ideas were adopted by his friend Sloan, who continued to teach that self-expression is the foundation of modern art. The series of exhibitions that culminated in the founding

of the Society of Independent Artists, presided over by Sloan from 1918 to 1944, was one of the greatest legacies of The Eight's progressive attitude toward art of diverse expressions.

The Eight's experimentation with theory—in both color and composition strategies—is often overlooked, but its impact on the artists' compositions was commented  
*(continued on page 144)*



their position.

Benton, who long outlived Wood and Curry by almost three decades, would continue to act as a spokesman for Regionalism, still insinuating its values in the discourses on art well into the 1950s. (Wood died in 1942, Curry in 1946, and Benton in 1975). Benton knew that Regionalism could never make a comeback. It would take the expiration of the modernist period in the late 1960s for local narratives in contemporary art to capture national attention again. In his painting *After Many Springs* Benton conceded as much, with a lonely farmer tilling his field as a prominent skull looms in the lower right foreground.

—For complete annotation see Debra Bricker Balken's essay in the book accompanying the exhibition from which this article has been adapted.

### The Eight (continued from page 127)

upon by critics and by other artists. It is perhaps most evident in these artists' treatment of the universal theme of the human body, especially the female nude. The study and portrayal of the figure is fundamental to western art and is the heart and soul of academic training. Until total abstraction predominated in modern art at mid-century, the study of the nude was a constant that linked generations of American artists' varied stylistic manifestations.

As art instructors, Henri and Sloan

taught life study classes for advanced students, and they were dedicated to the representation of the human figure as the vehicle for portraying their expressive ideas. Among the members of The Eight, Lawson is notable as the only artist to neglect the nude in his painting; the rest approached the subject with considerable individual variation. The symbolist Davies exploited a vast repertoire of female nudes frolicking in idyllic landscapes, as in *Rhythms*, and in his works on paper he drew women in blatantly erotic poses. After 1910, Prendergast developed his own version of generic nude female forms to infuse his pastoral landscapes with suitable lyricism. Shinn, when needed, adapted the naked bodies of women as decorative elements in his rococo house designs. As easel painters, Glackens and Luks on occasion rendered sensitive studio nudes—using the human figure as a vehicle for exercises in shape and color.

Studio models painted by Henri and Sloan were realized as tangible women who evoked formal artistic statements. In *Betalo Nude* Henri clothed his nude model in lush colors applied with caressing brushstrokes that emphasize the act of painting to chastely portray the human figure as the ideal of art. Sloan's more analytical approach was intended to eliminate the sensual in depicting the female nude. Deliberately choosing less attractive models, he intellectualized the modeling of form to achieve a volumetric

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expression of the figure, entangling the model in a geometric scheme of red cross-hatching. Experimental painting of the nude model in the studio was one of the theoretical strategies that some of The Eight continued late into their careers.

As older artists The Eight began to savor their successful careers and to take pleasure in the respect of their peers and patrons based on their award-winning pictures before and after 1913. Championed as modern men who succeeded in disassociating themselves from dated sentimentality while resisting uninspired efforts to "Americanize" avant-garde European styles, The Eight found "suggestive magic" in their art and encouraged countless American artists also to value their independence.

—For complete annotation see Elizabeth Kennedy's essay in the accompanying exhibition catalogue from which this article has been adapted.

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