

VISUAL ARTS

AMERICAN IMPRESSIONISTS

Gardening with a paintbrush

BY MARK ST. JOHN
ERICKSON
Tribune Newspapers

When the first American impressionists began returning from Europe in the mid-1880s, they soon found themselves embracing a familiar yet unexpectedly rich and rewarding subject.

Newly trained by their French mentors to paint out of doors — where they could revel in the mysteries of shifting light and color — they set out looking for American settings just as the nation's late-19th-century garden movement was taking off.

So as they had seen the great Claude Monet do in his beloved home garden at Giverny, artists started packing up their palettes, canvases and paints and walking out their back doors in search of spaces filled with flowers.

What resulted was one of art history's great marriages of subject and style as — over the following three decades — such talented painters as Frederick Childe Hassam, Philip Leslie Hale and Maria Oakey Dewing paired the country's new fascination for horticulture and gardens with their own blossoming passion for loose brushwork, dappled light and seemingly infinite variations of color.

A century later, more than 70 of the finest and most eye-catching examples can be found at the Chrysler Museum of Art in a new traveling show called “The Artist's Garden: American Impressionism and the Garden Movement, 1887-1920.”

And not only does the checklist read like a Who's Who of the nation's great impressionist school, but it also includes several paintings so highly regarded that they rarely leave their home museums.

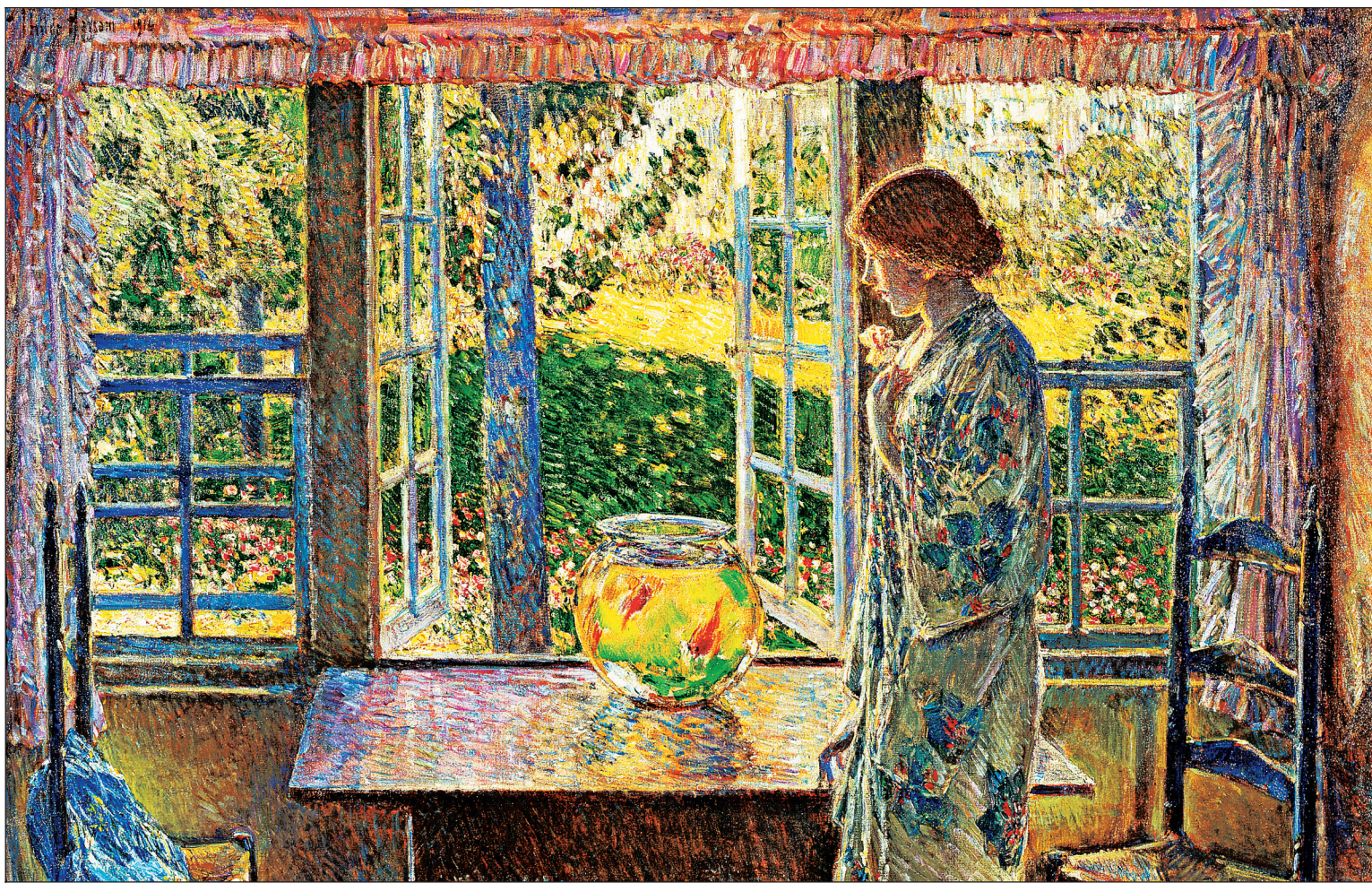
“Everybody was excited when they heard this show was being put together,” American art curator Alex Mann says, describing the Chrysler's own notable loans to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, which organized the exhibit.

“So many museums wanted to be part of it that it has become one of the really rare opportunities to see some of the country's best American impressionist painters and paintings.”

Despite its wide popularity today, the American impressionist school was far from fashionable when the earliest paintings in the exhibit were completed in the late 1880s. But within a decade, its arresting explorations of light and color had not only won acceptance, but also commanded an increasingly dominant share of the American art world.

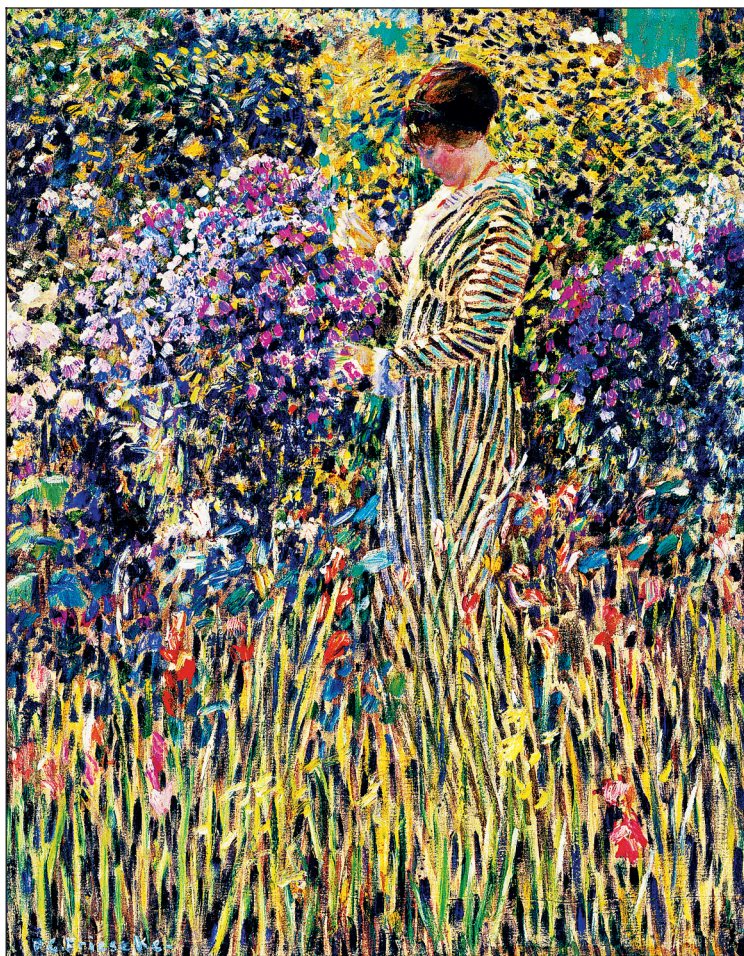
“American impressionism was born in Europe — but after they brought the style home, they made it their own,” Mann says. “By the end of the period we're looking at here, it had become a powerhouse — and it was the beauty of these paintings done in gardens that helped drive that popularity.”

Many American painters discovered the artistic potential of gardens and flowers through their travels and studies in Europe during the 1880s. Among them was Theodore Robinson, the pioneering American impressionist who not only befriended and worked alongside Monet, but also moved into a



CURRIER MUSEUM OF ART, MANCHESTER, N.H.

A new traveling show on American impressionists holds over 70 paintings, such as Frederick Childe Hassam's 1916 “The Goldfish Window,” above, that paired the country's fascination with gardens, starting in the late 1880s, with artists' rising passion for loose brushwork and dappled light.



TERRA FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART, CHICAGO

Frederick Carl Friesseke, who spent time at Giverny, home of Claude Monet's garden, painted “Lady in a Garden,” above, around 1912.

neighboring house in the picturesque French village of Giverny in 1888.

John Leslie Breck became Monet's friend, confidant and neighbor at Giverny, too, and he absorbed the lessons he learned there so adeptly that his 1890 show in Boston ranks as one of the first American impressionist shows in the country.

Frederick Carl Friesseke followed in 1906, inaugurating a rich period of productivity in which the neighboring Frenchman's garden helped shape not only the flower beds so famously tended by Friesseke's wife, but

shimmering sunlight and vibrant flowers.

“It is sunshine, flowers in sunshine; girls in sunshine; the nude in sunshine, which I have been principally interested in,” he wrote. “If I could only reproduce it exactly as I see it, I would be satisfied.”

Such arresting images had an indelible impact on the sensibilities of many American artists studying in Europe, and when they returned home, they looked for ways to apply those lessons to American settings.

Among the most remarkable examples are Thomas Wilmer Dewing and his wife, Maria Oakey Dewing, who met at Giverny in 1885, then became two of the most influential members of a new artist's colony that sprang up in Cornish, N.H. Avid gardeners as well as artists, the couple inspired a horticultural craze among their fellow painters when they cleared their yard and began planting a new, flower-filled landscape around their summer cottage.

Maria's own work responded, too, reflecting what she described as “a long apprenticeship in the garden.” Painting flowers with a close-up, gardener's vision, she cast the traditional still life aside for images that immersed their viewers in a near-abstract “worm's-eye view” of leaves, stalks and blossoms.

In “Iris at Dawn (Iris),” which she painted in 1899, “Rose Garden” in 1901 and “A Bed of Poppies” completed nearly a decade later, the effect is larger than life, transforming a subject of often intimate character and scale into something far more ambitious. Dewing herself described her remarkable flower paintings as “portraits,” writing — as any truly impassioned gardener might — that “flowers offer a removed beauty that exists only for beauty, more abstract than it can be in a human being, even more exquisite.”

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts curator Anna Marley, who organized the show, says, “They are not still lifes, but portraits — and ambitious, full-scale ones at that.”

They “take on the format of horizontal landscape paintings rather than the traditional small scale of still lifes.”

Such transformative visions are a hallmark of Marley's exhibit, demonstrating how frequently artists such as Dewing, Friesseke, Hassam, Hale and others combined flowers, gardens and their own impressionist style to push their imaginations forward. In Hassam's evocative 1916 canvas “The Goldfish Window,” for example, he portrayed a figure of a woman looking out a window into a light-filled garden as if she glowed with some sort of luminous aura.

Hale's rendering of a seemingly secondary female model in “The Crimson Rambler” has a similar effect, lavishing attention on the burgeoning expanse of luscious red blooms in a way that helps define both the sumptuous red bow trailing from her bright white dress and the bouquet of flowers that tops her sunbonnet.

So central did gardens become to many American impressionists' work that — even in winter — they could be found outside, looking, studying and painting their snow-covered trees, shrubs and flower beds.

“Even when covered with snow, gardens fascinated these artists,” Mann says. “In their eyes, a blanket of white is really a luxurious patchwork of blues, grays and purples.”

“The Artist's Garden: American Impressionism and the Garden Movement, 1887-1920,” through Sept. 6, Chrysler Museum of Art, One Memorial Place, Norfolk, Va. Free; 757-664-6200 or www.chrysler.org.

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MUSEUMS

Pick of the week: Julie Green's plate paintings are more than art, with Green vowing 15 years ago to create 50 illustrations every year of the last meals of death row prisoners until there is no longer capital punishment in the U.S. “The Last Supper: 600 Plates Illustrating Final Meals of U.S. Death Row Inmates” is a collection of Green's plate art, where she only includes the date and state in the description, no names or crimes. *Through Aug. 9, Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, 40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston; 847-491-4000, www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu*

ARC Gallery and Educational Foundation
2156 N. Damen Ave.; 773-252-2232, www.arcgallery.org
Through July 18: “The Base Line: An Exhibition on Drawing”: an homage to one of the most important elements of art, drawing, a simple-yet-complex construction.

Art Institute of Chicago
111 S. Michigan Ave.; 312-443-3600, www.artinstituteofchicago.org
Through July 12: “Chatter: Architecture Talks Back”: Technology has, of course, played a major role in architecture as it has in many other industries. But this exhibit has five firms speaking on how this modern



BLOCK MUSEUM OF ART

A plate painting from Julie Green's “The Last Supper.”

means also can celebrate architectural history. Work on display will be from the

architecture and design collections of Bureau Spec-tacular, Erin Besler, Fake

Industries Architectural Agonism, Formlessfinder and John Szot Studio.
Ongoing: Statue of Young Dionysos: The statue of the son of Zeus, from 100 B.C. to A.D. 100, is one of the few large bronze sculptures from antiquity in North America.

Beverly Arts Center
2407 W. 111th St.; 773-445-3838, www.beverlyartcenter.org
Through July 12: “Reflections”: Terrence Reese gives a documentary-style photographic look at the living spaces of well-known Americans, including former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, photographer/filmmaker Gordon Parks and blues icon B.B. King.

Cleve Carney Art Gallery
McAninch Arts Center, College of DuPage, Fawell and

Park boulevards, Glen Ellyn; 630-942-2321, www.cod.edu/gallery
Through July 31: “New Acquisitions From the Collection of Andree Stone”: Works from the late gallery owner and philanthropist's collection include paintings and sculpture from nationally known artists.

Hyde Park Art Center
5020 S. Cornell Ave.; 773-324-5520, www.hydeparkart.org
Through July 26: “Scenic Overlook”: Susan Giles explores the modern megolith in this exhibit. Her large-scale wooden sculptures use up two floors of the Hyde Park Art Center, with designs that imitate features from some of the world's tallest architectural structures.

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