



COVER: William Merritt Chase, *Tired*, c. 1894, o/panel, 13 x 9 1/2, private collection.

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William Merritt Chase: A Modern Master

by Elsa Smithgall

American artist William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), a renowned figure in the international art circles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was a brilliant observer of contemporary life, an innovative painter, and an influential teacher. This retrospective presented on the centennial year of the artist's death explores the full range of Chase's multifaceted artistic practice, from striking portraits and still lifes to glorious urban park scenes, landscapes, and interiors. In a career that straddled two continents and two centuries, Chase was, in the words of American art critic Frank Jewett Mather, "a

William Merritt Chase: A Modern Master is on view through September 11, 2016, at The Phillips Collection, 1600 21st Street NW, Washington, D.C., 20009, 202-387-2151, www.phillipscollection.org. Co-organized by The Phillips Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Fondazione Musei Civici Venezia, and the Terra Foundation for American Art, a catalogue, published by The Phillips Collection in association with Yale University Press, accompanies the exhibition. It will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, October 2016 through January 2017, and the International Gallery of Modern Art, Venice, Italy, in February 2017.

citizen of the world."

In 1872, when a group of St. Louis businessmen offered to sponsor his study abroad in Munich, Chase enthused, "I would rather go to Europe than go to heaven." The twenty-three-year-old happily set off for the Bavarian art capital, where he joined large numbers of compatriots

seeking training at the Royal Munich Academy. During his formative six-year residency, Chase began to develop a personal artistic language that married the Munich school's bravura brushwork and dark tonal contrasts with the painterly realism and contemporary subject matter of the Dutch, Spanish, and French masters he





ABOVE: *At the Seaside*, c. 1892, o/c, 20 x 34, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot.

RIGHT: *Spring Flowers (Peonies)*, by 1889, pastel on paper, prepared with a tan ground, and wrapped with canvas around a wooden strainer, 48 x 48, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection.

LEFT: *A City Park*, c. 1887, o/c, 13 5/8 x 19 5/8, Art Institute of Chicago, bequest of Dr. John J. Ireland.

deeply admired, among them Frans Hals, Anthony van Dyck, Diego Velazquez, and Edouard Manet.

Chase's celebrated works of this period, including *Keying Up*, *The Court Jester* and *The Turkish Page*, reveal his early talent for rendering brilliant surface qualities and rich color harmonies, laying the foundation for the work that followed. While achieving recognition in Munich, Chase was simultaneously building his reputation as an original and virtuosic painter in the United States. In New York, his Munich painting *Ready for the Ride* received critical acclaim in the 1878 Society of American Artists exhibition. The striking female figure paint-





ing—later deemed the “turning point” in his career—hailed Chase’s return to America later that same year.

“The future of art lies in America,” the great Munich teacher Karl von Piloty told his star pupil. Heeding the call, Chase re-

turned to New York in 1878 to take a teaching post at the Art Students League, the first of many in his distinguished career. He established himself as a tastemaker in New York by commanding the “finest studio in the city if not the entire world” in the famed Tenth Street Studio Building, formerly home to Albert Bierstadt and the Hudson River School artists. Seeking to rival the grand artist studios of Europe, Chase filled his studio with an eclectic display of Eastern and Western objects, paintings, textiles, furniture, and bric-a-brac, as well as copies and photographs of works by old masters that he had amassed from his travels. Drawing a host of visitors, his studio, which he occupied through 1895, became at once a space for art consumption, self-promotion, and inspiration. It was here where the artist made some of his finest early portraits on view in this gallery.

Chase’s painting of textile designer Dora Wheeler posed in front of a gold silk embroidered tapestry earned honorable



ABOVE: *The Open Air Breakfast*, c. 1888, o/c, 37 3/8 x 56 3/4, Toledo Museum of Art, purchased with funds from the Florence Scott Libbey bequest in memory of her father, Maurice A. Scott.

RIGHT: *The Young Orphan*, c. 1884, o/c, 44 x 42, National Academy Museum, New York

ABOVE LEFT: *Idle Hours*, c. 1894, o/c, 25 1/2 x 35 1/2, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

LEFT: *Hall at Shinnecock*, 1892, pastel on canvas, 32 1/8 x 41, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection.

mention at the 1883 Paris Salon and a gold medal at the Munich Crystal Palace exhibition. The next year Chase painted *The Young Orphan*, a striking red on red composition showcasing his facility with subtle modulations of color in the manner of American painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler. On a trip to Europe in 1885, Chase paid the esteemed expatriate a visit in London, accepting his proposal that they sit for each other's portraits. The previous year, Chase and Whistler joined John Singer Sargent as the trio of Americans invited to present their





ABOVE: *Self-Portrait in 4th Avenue Studio*, 1915-16, o/c, 52 1/2 x 63 1/2, Richmond Art Museum, purchase and gift of Warner M. Leeds.

LEFT: *Just Onions (Onions; Still Life)*, 1912, o/wood panel, 21 x 25 11/16, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mary D. Keeler Bequest.

RIGHT: *Portrait of Dora Wheeler*, 1882-83, o/c, 62 5/8 x 65 1/8, The Cleveland Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. Boudinot Keith in memory of Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Wade.

work in an exhibition of the Belgian avant-garde group Les Vingt (The Twenty). European critics extolled high praise on Chase for his bold rendering of *The Young Orphan*, firmly establishing his place within the international artistic avant-garde.

During the 1880s, Chase became active in New York's artistic avant-garde through his affiliation with two progressive arts organizations:



Society of American Artists (president 1880-81; 1885-1895) and the Society of American Painters in Pastel (co-founder, 1883). A natural-born orator and marketer, Chase led the charge of a younger generation of American artists determined to transform their country's provincial cultural landscape by introducing a new modern spirit in American art. While continuing to work from his Tenth Street studio, the artist increasingly turned his eye and brush to capturing nature's passing beauties. Regular visits to Europe between 1881 and 1885 inspired him to investigate the varying effects of natural light and atmosphere

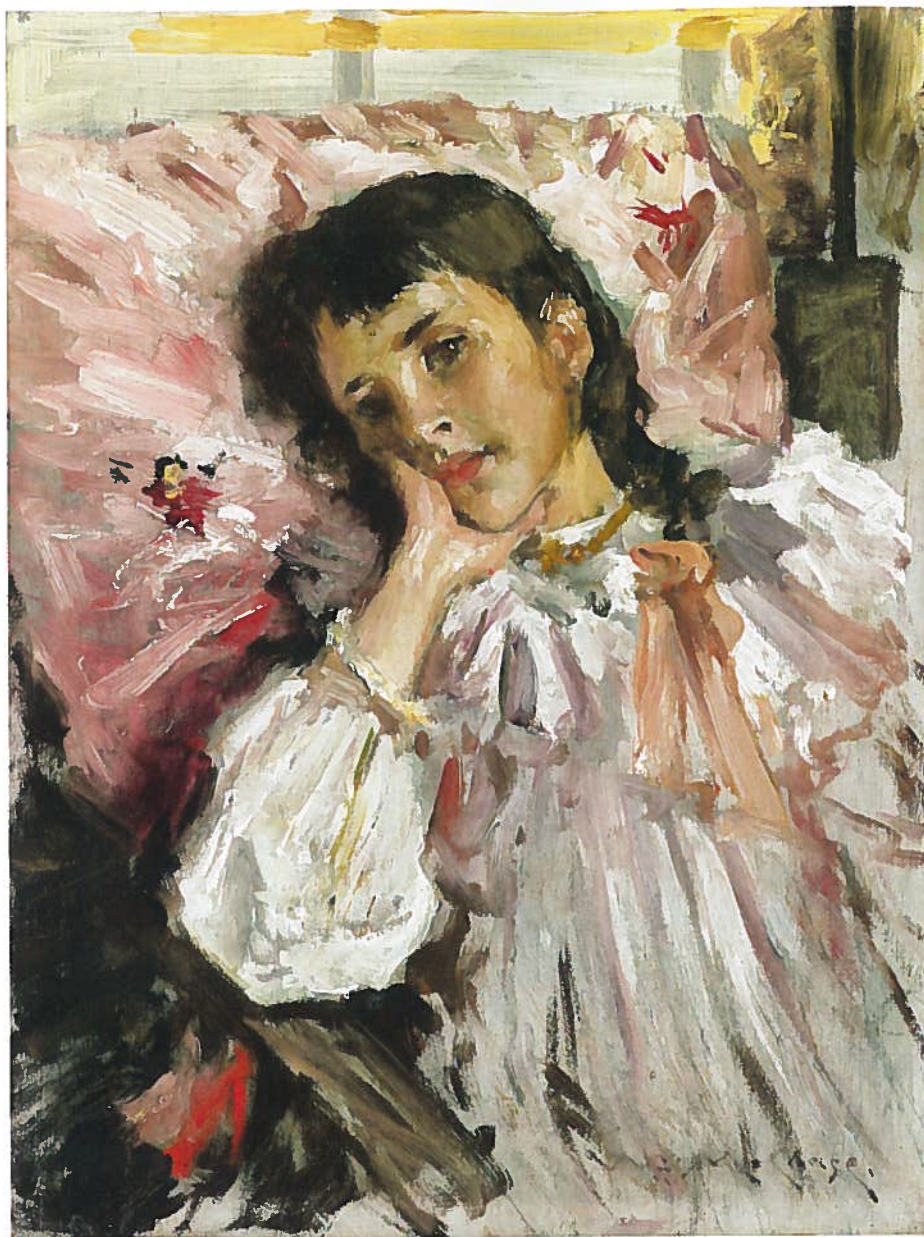
in plein-air paintings in oil and pastel.

In the Netherlands during the summers of 1883 and 1884, Chase produced several works that capture the region's cool, moist light cast upon its coastline or grassy terrain. To translate the brilliant effects he observed, the artist lightened his palette and loosened his brushwork, turning away from the loaded brush and dark colors of the Munich style. A devoted pastel painter, Chase began to exploit the possibilities of the pastel medium to further expand his technical and expressive range.

By 1887, after several summers abroad, Chase settled in Brooklyn with his new

wife, Alice Gerson, where he discovered new aesthetic possibilities in the urban parks and coastline in and around Brooklyn and Manhattan. Carrying small panels and a portable easel, Chase worked with ease to capture the immediacy of his surroundings in dazzling strokes of color. These small jewel-like pictures of Tompkins, Prospect, and Central Parks marked a dramatic turn in Chase's development of his own distinctly American Impressionist style. Boldly executed, the compositions prefigured the light-filled Shinnecock landscapes that defined his work in the following decade.

From the time of his marriage in 1887



ABOVE: *An Artist's Wife*, 1892, o/c, 20 x 16, private collection.

LEFT: *Tired*, c. 1894, o/panel, 13 x 9 1/2, private collection.

RIGHT: *The Big Bayberry Bush*, c. 1895, o/c, 25 1/2 x 33 1/8, Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York, Littlejohn Collection.

BELOW RIGHT: *Washing Day—A Backyard Reminiscence of Brooklyn*, c. 1887, o/wood panel, 15 1/4 x 18 5/8, collection of Lilly Endowment, Inc.

and through the years that his family rapidly expanded to eight, Chase filled his canvases with his wife and children in artfully arranged domestic settings that show how his art and life had become closely intertwined. Like a choreographer on a stage, Chase orchestrated form, color, and space into vibrant scenes full of expression. Adding further to their poetry and sophistication, the interiors evoke a world outside the frame through the use of mirrors, reflections, and views into other rooms. In many of his exquisite interiors, Chase turned to pastel, a modern, anti-academic medium that was enjoying a revival in the late nineteenth century through the Impressionists. Chase's bold, brightly-hued *Spring Flowers (Peonies)* and *Hall at Shin-*

necock rank among his finest of the over 100 pastels in the artist's oeuvre. As innovative in pastel as in oil, he achieved an extraordinary vibrancy of color and texture from the velvety quality of dry pigment.

Beginning in the late 1880s and continuing into the 1890s, Chase produced numerous works, including a series of women dressed in kimono, that reveal the important role Japanese art and culture played in his developing aesthetic vision. Moreover, charming scenes of children at play reveal Chase's exploration of the flat, compressed space and asymmetrical spatial arrangements characteristic of Japanese art. Although Chase never traveled to Asia, Japan's rich artistic and cultural heritage was then widely accessible in New York

with the opening of trade between Japan and the West in the 1850s. Chase was inspired by the formal language of Japanese art, including the beauty and harmony of color and form in their textiles, decorative arts, and furnishings. In bringing together sources from the East and West, from past and present, Chase saw his art as part of a universal tradition that transcended national boundaries: "Art has become international. Art belongs to all countries combined," the artist proclaimed as the end of the twentieth century drew near.

The 1890s was a prolific period for Chase, resulting in major works in oil and pastel that earned him widespread acclaim in exhibitions in the United States and Europe. It was also a period in which his art flourished in a new setting: the peaceful former Puritan town known as Shinnecock Hills on the south fork of eastern Long Island. From 1891 to 1902, Chase spent summers there to direct the Shinnecock Summer School of Art, the celebrated plein-air school in America.



The bustling life of children and students centered on the Art Village and his new home and studio became a welcome diversion from the city, nurturing Chase's art and growing family for the next two decades. In addition to teaching over 100 students each season, Chase devoted time to painting, seeking to distill beauty from what locals considered endless acres of non-descript sand dunes surrounded by grasslands and brush. From his Stanford White-designed home perched on a hill with views to the north of Peconic Bay and to the south of Shinnecock Bay, Chase created dazzling scenes that evoke an ideal of blissful leisure cultivated by America's growing middle class. Sweeping landscapes enrobed in sunshine and blue skies such as *Idle Hours* and *The Big Bayberry Bush* bear the hallmarks of Chase's mature impressionist style in their high-keyed color,

(continued on page 111)



Chase (continued from page 55)

greater chromatic range, and more delicate paint handling.

During the winter months, Chase returned to the city, where he continued to work across subjects, with a particular focus on portraiture. Several large-scale portraits such as *Lydia Field Emmet* and *Portrait of Mrs. C. (Lady with a White Shawl)* reveal Chase's flair for drawing on the legacy of the old masters to capture the personality of the new modern woman through gesture, striking color contrasts, and dynamic brushwork.

Although Chase maintained contact with Europe in the 1890s, his regular summer commitment to teaching in Shinnecock, combined with his posts at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and at his newly founded Chase School of Art, left little time for international travel. The close of the Shinnecock Summer School of Art in 1902 heralded the next and final chapter in Chase's career.

As Chase turned the corner into the twentieth century, he was met with one of the art world's great honors: the coveted gold medal in the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle. Three years later, Chase strengthened his international ties abroad by spending the first of ten consecutive summers in Europe, where he conducted classes for American students in Haarlem, London, Madrid, Bruges, Florence, and Venice. In each city Chase immersed himself and his students in the old masterworks on view in major museums and galleries as well as in the latest contemporary art lining the walls of artists' studios. During these years it was the Tuscan countryside that held special appeal for Chase, prompting him to purchase a villa in Florence to which he returned every year from 1907 to 1911. In the intervening months back in his studios in New York or Philadelphia, Chase balanced producing large numbers of portrait commissions with his lifelong pursuit of still life painting. He created more than 100 still lifes in the last decade of his life.

On January 15, 1916, in one of his last lectures to students before his death, Chase reflected on his life's journey: "One always remains a student; and every new canvas I have had was the rarest opportunity to make that the best I have ever done. I have just made a portrait of myself standing with a blank canvas in front of me [*Self-Portrait in 4th Avenue Studio*]. This is to be my

masterpiece. The ideal and the aim of it all I believe is that you can remain young all the time to the end; always be a fresh fighter, ambitious to the end."

Moro (continued from page 75)

and 1951; his representations of Italy therefore essentially span the course of his career, albeit with large periods of interruption. He also found subjects of interest to paint on board ship during the crossings—his wife Josephine on deck, the lifeboats, and various shipboard activities bathed in the reflected light carefully observed and replicated in dynamic yet balanced compositions, often achieved by using a strong geometric framework and a superb painterly technique.

While in Italy, Moro created charming pictorial scenes of Italian country life in his wife's hometown of Piverone, a small hill town located in northern Italy, about fifty miles northeast of Turin. In this rural setting, Moro again found much inspiration in images of daily life—Josephine and her mother sewing in the garden amid the chickens; the family farm; town streets; gardens; and mountains. These brilliant, sun-dappled scenes are represented in a range of rich, resonant color. Due to a heavy work schedule, Moro ceased painting in 1939 for an extended period, but returned to his adored avocation on a 1948 trip, prolifically turning out bucolic scenes of his homeland.

Among Moro's late Italian scenes are two works from 1948, each depicting different vantage points of the well-known geological wonder, I Faraglioni, a rock formation created by oceanic erosion located near Capri in the Bay of Naples. These stone stacks are composed of three parts: the Stella ("star") that is connected to land, the Faraglione di Mezzo ("in between"), and the Scopolo. One of his compositions focuses on the water and figures bathing at the foot of the rocky outcropping, and the other faces the Faraglione di Mezzo straight on toward a vertical headland.

Moro's latest work, *Garden Hydrangea, Italy*, was also painted while in Italy, during his last trip there in 1951, and it depicts abundant pink and blue hydrangeas from the Roman garden of his sister Bianca. As a painter of flowers, Moro painted hydrangeas on a number of occasions, although this late work is among his most freely conceived and expressive, as evident

in the exuberant paint handling, bold rhythmic strokes of blue and green in the foreground, foliage, and the varicolored streaks in the background that energize the canvas. This work is likely the artist's final painting, and it demonstrates the manner in which Moro creatively stretched himself using progressive ideas that he probably absorbed from the art to which he was exposed at work as well as from the artistic milieu of the New York art world.

Creative and active throughout much of his life, Paul Moro left behind a painting oeuvre of substance and consequence, while reaping little public recognition for his efforts during his lifetime. His paintings clearly suggest that there was potential for greater acknowledgment of his artistic talents, as indicated by the work itself, his acceptances at National Academy of Design annuals, and a posthumous enthusiastic, though short-lived reception to his works by critics and collectors. However, because of the absence of correspondence, diaries, records, and exhibition histories, some important context is lacking regarding Moro's career, and there are inevitable gaps in our knowledge about his intentions, what informed his process, and to what degree he mingled in the society of other artists or in the broader New York art world. His works, however, suggest that he was well acquainted with many of the artistic trends of his day. Other details about his life story are also scarce, including whether he pursued an artistic reputation or sought commercial success. He was to a large degree necessarily consumed with his daily obligations as a professional art restorer and with attending to his family, which were his primary responsibilities. However, Moro's passion for and pure joy in painting is abundantly evident in his works, which are an affirmation of the breadth of his talents and artistry. The paintings also demonstrate his artistic range in terms of subject matter as well as style, extending from an impressionistic approach to bold realism to moments where they seem to embrace a modernist influence.

It is hoped that this first true retrospective of the paintings of Paul Moro will reveal his dedication, originality, and independence of spirit and garner some deserved recognition for this too long overlooked artist whose work is defined by a love of painting and by his very personal representations of intimate views of his life