

## *American Art from the Permanent Collection*, May 1, 2010

In the early decades of the 20th century, the Museum's distinguished collection of American art was presented to visitors in elegantly proportioned galleries made possible by a gift from Jesse Metcalf in memory of his wife, Helen. Inaugurated in 1897, the Beaux Arts-style Waterman Galleries now link visitors to the Daphne Farago Wing, to Pendleton House by way of the Porcelain Gallery, and to the 1926 Radeke Building. The rooms also offer a direct sightline through the Museum's new 20th-century galleries, and beyond that to The Chace Center. Two of the Waterman galleries are now reinstalled with highlights of American art from the permanent collection. On view are landscapes acquired in the Museum's early years of collecting, including Thomas Cole's sublime *Landscape* (1828), Winslow Homer's magnificent *On a Lee Shore* (1900), and George Bellows's *Rain on the River* (1908). John Singer Sargent's *A Boating Party* (ca. 1889), Theodore Robinson's *Afternoon Shadows* (1891), and Frank W. Benson's *Summer* (1909) are among the selections from the Museum's renowned collection of American Impressionist paintings.

### CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Winslow Homer, American, 1836-1910  
*On a Lee Shore*, 1900  
Oil on canvas  
Jesse Metcalf Fund 01.003

In this view of crashing surf and a sailing vessel "on a lee shore," Winslow Homer conjures man's vulnerability in the face of nature. The somber palette and broad brushstrokes of his aggressive style characterized a shift away from inhabited landscapes to wilder, unpopulated scenes near his home at Prout's Neck, Maine. The painting was acquired by the Museum within a year of its creation, but only after it had been returned to the artist's dealer by a collector whose interests had suddenly changed. Happy that it had found a permanent home, Homer wrote that he considered *On a Lee Shore* "a very excellent painting." It became an important first purchase from a fund established in honor of one of RISD's founders, Jesse Metcalf.



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Julian Alden Weir, American, 1852-1919

*Face Reflected in a Mirror*, 1896

Oil on canvas

Jesse Metcalf Fund 03.004

In this unusual mirrored portrait, Julian Alden Weir draws the viewer into an intricate puzzle of flat and decorative passages. Against a palette of blacks and drab greens, the painting comes alive in the warm tones of the model's face and hair and in the exuberant detail of her blouse. The fine stripes of her leg-o-mutton sleeve join various textiles and carved ornaments as counterpoints to the composition's insistent geometry. A rhythmic progression of verticals is formed by the curtains, the mirror's edge, the bedposts, and the full-length figure. In contrast, horizontal crossbars rise from the floor and float attention upward to the illuminated motif of the model's reflection. Weir's style reflects his admiration for James Whistler (whose work hangs to the right). His aesthetic interiors, subtle tonal harmonies, and asymmetrical arrangement of forms contribute to the vocabulary of this striking image.



John White Alexander, American, 1856-1915

*The Blue Bowl*, 1898

Oil on canvas

Jesse Metcalf Fund 04.141.1

John White Alexander launched his career as an illustrator for Harper's Weekly, but like other young artists of his generation he advanced his training in Paris. By 1904, when this painting appeared at RISD's annual Autumn Exhibition, his style combined fluid technique with a keen understanding of the asymmetric spatial principles of Japanese art. More than the Delft bowl of the title, the painting's true subject is the back of the model's gown, spread out as she bends to observe a fallen bloom. Its sinuous curves and subtle patterning represent the height of Art Nouveau costume, transformed by the artist into an example of daring pictorial design. The composition is further enhanced by the flattened, rhythmic decoration of the painting's custom-designed frame.



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Frank Weston Benson, American, 1862-1951

*Lady Trying on a Hat (The Black Hat)*, 1904

Oil on canvas

Gift of Walter Callender, Henry D. Sharpe, Howard L. Clark, William Gammell and Isaac C. Bates 06.002

In this painting, Frank W. Benson chose the private act of dressing as a premise for exploring female elegance in a sophisticated setting. Interested in "artistic interiors," the artist collected both American antiques and Japanese decorative arts. He often incorporated these objects into his motifs, here surrounding his sitter with a Japanese storage chest, a blue and white porcelain vase, and small silver items arrayed on a nearby table. The model, Mary Sullivan, a favorite of Benson and his Boston contemporaries, wears a gauzy white daytime dress decorated by a wide pink satin ribbon. As she lifts her arms to set the hat at a fetching angle, she appears to admire herself in an unseen mirror. Her face is partially obscured by the broad brim of the elaborate black hat, deflecting attention to her active pose and to the artist's dazzling surface effects.



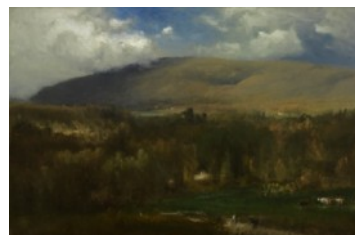
George Inness, American, 1825-1894

*In the Berkshire Hills*, ca. 1877-1878

Oil on canvas

Jesse Metcalf Fund 09.085

Throughout his long career, George Inness embraced a belief in the interconnectedness of nature and spirituality. Although skilled as a draftsman, he eventually crafted a style in which topographical precision was supplanted by landscape effects that echoed human moods and sentiments. By the 1860s, Inness had become attracted to the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, an 18th-century Swedish scientist and theologian who preached that God was present throughout nature. In views such as this one, Inness blurs the details of the landscape, suggesting the Swedenborgian tenet that all material objects were spiritually charged. He objected strenuously when his methods were compared with the broken brushstrokes of the French Impressionists, calling that style a materialistic system that denied "the reality of the unseen."



Frank Weston Benson, American, 1862-1951

*Summer*, 1909

Oil on canvas

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.912

The subjects of this painting were Benson's daughters and niece, gathered on the cliffs near the family's vacation home on North Haven Island, Maine. Their vibrant beauty personifies a perfect



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summer day and represents an idealized view of modern young womanhood. The artist was a leading member of the group of American artists known as "The Ten," whose advanced ideas about painting were instilled during study abroad. The brilliant palette and broken brushstrokes of French Impressionism characterize *Summer*, demonstrating Benson's skill at capturing the fleeting effects of sunlight. In preparation, he sketched his models out-of-doors, seized their poses in photographs, and later used these studies to create the finished painting in his studio. The composition's visual impact is further enhanced by a handsome hand-carved and gilded frame, designed specifically for its subject by Foster Brothers, Boston.

Winslow Homer, American, 1836-1910

*Fishin'*, 1879

Oil on canvas

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.935

In the summer of 1879, Winslow Homer spent time on Houghton Farm in Hurley, New York, where he created a series of watercolors and oil paintings depicting figures in sunlight. In this small picture of a girl and boy fishing, he captures streaks of light along their slender poles and registers the sun's effects on their rose, blue, and yellow garments. American writer and critic Henry James observed the popular appeal of these "freckled, straight-haired Yankee urchins" with their "calico sunbonnets and flannel shirts." Of Homer's transformative facility, he noted, "He has taken the least pictorial features of the least pictorial range of scenery and civilization ... [and] resolutely treated them as if they were pictorial ... and he has uncontestedly succeeded."



James Abbott McNeill Whistler, American, 1834-1903

*Harmony in Blue: The Duet*, ca. 1874

Oil on panel

Jesse Metcalf Fund 14.083

During the 1860s James Abbott McNeill Whistler established a personal style that was often expressed in musical terms. Restricting his palette to carefully selected tonal ranges, he often titled his works "harmonies," "symphonies," and "arrangements." In *Harmony in Blue: The Duet*, three characters from a traditional Italian Commedia dell'Arte troupe enact a dreamlike musical performance on stage: Harlequin at left, a Pierrot-type singer in white, and a character known as the Doctor in blue. Whistler's compositional inventions, scrimps of color, and distinctive correlation of music and painting were key components of the Aesthetic style, in which art, furniture, wallpapers, and textiles were all designed to create a harmonious interior environment. Although he settled in England, Whistler had





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far-reaching influence on younger American painters, including William Merritt Chase, Julian Alden Weir, and John White Alexander, whose works may also be seen in this gallery.

George Wesley Bellows, American, 1882-1925

*Rain on the River*, 1908

Oil on canvas

Jesse Metcalf Fund 15.063

Ohio native George Bellows was critically acclaimed for the frank technique in which he rendered urban landscapes in the early years of the 20th century. In this view from a rocky ledge above Riverside Park, he surveys a freight train making its way along the New York Central's famous Water Level Route. The string of train cars reinforces a rushing diagonal that skirts the banks of the Hudson and culminates in a great puff of white steam. Aggressive brushstrokes provide a reflective surface that is animated by graphic observations. Against the fog-shrouded backdrop of the river and Palisades, a lone pedestrian scurries across a rain-slicked path and a horse-drawn cart awaits delivery of scavenged coal. Bellows called *Rain on the River* "one of my most beautiful things" in a letter he wrote to RISD President Eliza Radeke the year it was acquired for the Museum's collection.



William Bradford, American, 1823-1892

*Arctic Sunset*, 1874

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. George H. Davenport 18.192

A practicing Quaker, New Bedford native William Bradford believed in a Creator and was attracted to the sublime in nature. His two visits to the Arctic demonstrated the extent to which he would go to study nature in its glorious extremes. Dressed in "the sealskin suits of the Eskimeaux," he braved the freezing Arctic temperatures to make color sketches in his notebooks. Accompanying him were professional photographers equipped with a large-format camera and crates of glass plate negatives. Bradford referred to these sources back home in his studio to help recreate such natural phenomena as the rosy brilliance of the Arctic skies and the effects of light reflected on vast sheets of ice. In this view, his ship appears at a distance, dwarfed by icebergs. In the lower right corner, a solitary seal serves as a quiet observer.



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John Frederick Kensett, American, 1816-1872

*Lake George, Black Mountain*, ca. 1869

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf 20.029

John Frederick Kensett, trained in the art of engraving by his father, became an exceptional draftsman who could also render fine modulations of tone. During seven years of study in Germany, he applied these abilities to landscape paintings that were praised by American critics for their clarity of detail and atmospheric purity. Back on native soil, Kensett traveled up the Hudson River and as far west as Colorado in search of unspoiled vistas. In *Lake George, Tongue Mountain*, his meticulous drawing is balanced by an absence of extraneous distractions, offering viewers a personal, tranquil encounter with nature.



Theodore Robinson, American, 1852-1896

*Afternoon Shadows*, 1891

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.206

Theodore Robinson was one of the few Americans to study painting techniques at the side of Impressionist painter Claude Monet. In 1888, he settled near Monet's home and studio in Giverny, remaining there for the next five years. *Afternoon Shadows* was one of a series of paintings he made to show the lengthening shadows on a solitary stack of grain at various seasons and times of day. His technique relied on subtle transitions of color, rendered with small, tight, broken brushstrokes. As he wrote in his journal, his aim was to combine Impressionism's "brilliance and light of real outdoors" with "the austerity, the sobriety, that has always characterized good painting."



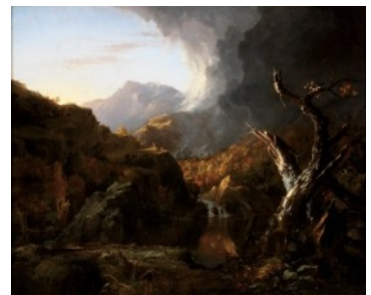
Thomas Cole, American, 1801-1848

*Landscape (Landscape with Tree Trunks)*, 1828

Oil on canvas

Walter H. Kimball Fund 30.063

During his trips to the Catskills and to the White Mountains of New Hampshire, Thomas Cole explored the theme of unspoiled nature in America, a land ripe with promise. His early compositions cited specific aspects of these locations, combining topographical accuracy with acute observation. In his *Landscape* of 1828, nature's drama unfolds as storm clouds part to reveal a mountaintop bathed in sunlight. A blasted tree mediates between heaven and earth, representing the vulnerability of living things and the cycle of life and



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death. A Native American figure at the top of the waterfall animates the scene and represents physical and spiritual kinship with the landscape.

Thomas Cole, American, 1801-1848  
*Genesee Scenery (Mountain Landscape with Waterfall)*, 1847  
Oil on canvas  
Jesse Metcalf Fund 38.054

Thomas Cole was the first professional painter to depict this section of the Genesee River, which flows north through New York State from its source just south of the Pennsylvania line. In comparison with the dramatic effects of his earlier *Landscape, hung nearby*, *Genesee Scenery* offers viewers a sense of calm in a setting whose summer sky Cole described as “pure blue” and “the highest sublime.” From a viewpoint set high above the footbridge and mill, Cole personalized his subject by including closely observed details of trees and rocks. His vertical format emphasized some of the site’s compelling features while remaining true to the spirit of the relatively gentle Genesee falls. The peacefulness of the composition presented an alternative to images of the region’s renowned but overpowering Niagara Falls.



Fitz Henry Lane, American, 1804-1865  
*View from Kettle Cove, Manchester-by-the-Sea*, 1847  
Oil on canvas  
Jesse Metcalf Fund 38.068

Fitz Henry Lane grew up around Gloucester, Massachusetts, and worked as a lithographer in Boston. Moving back to the North Shore in the late 1840s, he applied his skill as a draftsman to depictions of maritime life. The location of this view has been identified as Kettle Cove, showing Coolidge Point with Egg Rock beyond, at left, and Crow Island with Little Egg Rock, at right. Two lighthouses identify Baker’s Island in the distance. With a nearly brushless stroke, Lane emphasized the bright stillness of the sea and sky, contrasting it with the activities of working people in the shaded foreground. His combination of precise drawing and luminous color conveys a reverence for nature that was a constant theme in 19th-century American landscape painting.



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William Holbrook Beard, American, 1824-1900

*Santa Claus*, ca. 1862

Oil on canvas

Jesse Metcalf Fund 42.265

In 1823, an anonymous poem appeared in the *Troy Sentinel*, a newspaper in industrial upstate New York. It was later credited to Clement Clarke Moore, a New Yorker of distinguished lineage who was a biblical scholar at Columbia College. Clarke acknowledged that he had composed *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* as a Christmas gift for his children, spinning a tale in which the sober Dutch bishop Saint Nicholas was now “chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf.” More engaging by far was his means of transportation: “a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer.” From the moment of its publication, the poem became an American favorite, conjuring a Santa Claus who slid down chimneys with a sack full of toys for good children. In an unbroken sequence of publications, illustrators have depicted the elfin benefactor “dressed all in fur from his head to his foot” or at the very least wearing a fur-trimmed hat. William Holbrook Beard, an animal painter and sculptor who later depicted *Wall Street Bears and Bulls* dancing together, seized the Christmas tale and reset it in a rarely depicted urban landscape. Efficiently tossing toys into chimneys, Santa rides in a delicate swan boat drawn by reindeer whose harnesses are decorated with silver bells. The magical event is viewed from a rooftop below skies that are clouded with dense coal smoke. The choking pollution of 19th-century American cities seems only to heighten the theatrical quality of this remarkable illustration, adding a veil of darkness to the mystery of Christmas Eve.



Asher Brown Durand, American, 1796-1886

*Chocorua Peak*, 1855

Oil on canvas

Gift of Rhode Island Art Association 52.104

Asher B. Durand spent the summer of 1855 in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, staying at North Conway, near Mount Chocorua. It was the first return to the region in many years for this senior and most admired painter of the American landscape. The stark view of Mount Chocorua, a summit known for its sheer precipices, was unusual for Durand, who often enlivened his landscapes with small figures. He also avoided the dramatic potential of weather, concentrating instead on the mountain's harsh profile. Conscious of the uniqueness of the American landscape, Durand published advice to younger painters that same year. In his “*Letters on Landscape Painting*,” he urged them to work directly from nature and to “go not





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abroad” but concentrate instead on indigenous resources and the scenery of their native land.

Martin Johnson Heade, American, 1819-1904

*Brazilian Forest*, 1864

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. C. Richard Steedman 68.052

In late 1863 Martin Johnson Heade traveled to Brazil on a joint scientific and artistic mission. Seeking local species of hummingbirds to depict in oil paintings and chromolithographs, he also indulged his botanical interests by making carefully annotated sketches of the flora of Brazil's dense forests, and relied on these the following year when he painted this picture in his London studio. The painting's featured specimen, a tall fern that springs from the right foreground, is bathed in a soft light that distinguishes the structure of each frond. As a narrative touch, Heade added a figure in a straw hat and a tiny dog who discover the sparkling waterfall at the center of the composition.



John Singer Sargent, American, 1856-1925

*A Boating Party*, ca. 1889

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. Houghton P. Metcalf in memory of her husband,  
Houghton P. Metcalf 78.086

In the late 1880s, John Singer Sargent settled in England and established a reputation as a society portraitist. In contrast, this painting provides a glimpse of the artist's private life, depicting his sister Violet and his friends Paul and Alice Helleu vacationing in Worcestershire on the river Avon. The theme of carefree idleness, a favorite motif of Sargent's holiday works, lent itself to experimentation with Impressionist composition and technique. The unfinished background at upper right shows that he had not yet mastered the use of broken brushstrokes, but his confidence is apparent in the placement of figures, reflections in the water, and in the asymmetric organization of the boats. In his own amusing twist on dramatic cropping, Sargent keeps the flat red punt from slipping out of the picture plane by anchoring it with Helleu's lanky right leg.



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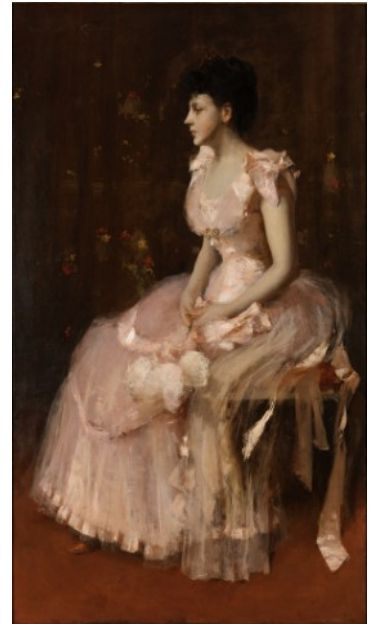
William Merritt Chase, American, 1849-1916

*Portrait of a Lady in Pink*, ca. 1888–1889

Oil on canvas

Gift of Isaac C. Bates 94.010

The model for this painting was one of Chase's students, Mariette "Pansy" Benedict Cotton. Her portrait showcases the artist's academic training as well as his grasp of French realist techniques, rendered with a confident style that opposes the fine modeling of her face and arms with the bravura brushstrokes of her frothy gown. It also demonstrates his appreciation of Whistler in the pink tonal motif and in the decorative Japanesque scrim that forms a unifying backdrop. Chase considered this one of his best portraits and submitted it to the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893. Subsequently purchased by Providence collector Isaac C. Bates, it became the first work by a living American artist to enter the Museum's collection.



Martin Johnson Heade, American, 1819-1904

*Newburyport Marshes, Sunset*, ca. 1875-1880

Oil on canvas

Collection of James G. Mumford EL002.80

Martin Johnson Heade created more than one hundred paintings of marshes and meadowlands near the New England coast. In this scene of dusk at Newburyport, Massachusetts, his style is characteristically meticulous and restrained. The horizontal format is common to Heade's marsh compositions, as is the use of a tonal palette to express mood and to indicate time of day. He bathes his landscapes in clear light, picking out shapes and reflections to animate a still and limited composition. As was common in these personal, localized views of nature, Heade avoids dramatic effects, preferring his landscapes to be intimately scaled and contemplative.

