

Essays for Docents Project, 2007-2009
On the Occasion of UMMA's Expansion and Renovation



William Merritt Chase (1849 – 1916)

View of the Brooklyn Navy Yard

oil on panel

1886 – 1890

5 x 10 1/8 in

1961/1.170

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Norman Hirschl

Background

Operating primarily in the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century, William Merritt Chase cultivated an innovative and unique artistic style. During a time in which there was not an inherently “American” school of art, he managed to stand out against a sea of “Europeanized” painters by combining his own ideas with those of the popular European artistic movements.

Late in the nineteenth century, Europe saw an emergence of modern artistic movements, all of which aimed to adapt art to the ever-modernizing world. A departure from academic History painting, many of these movements sought to depict real life by using subjects from everyday life rather than idealized scenes and moral stories. The Impressionists aimed to represent real life through careful observation of the way light could change their subject’s appearance in addition to employing new quotidian subject matter.

Object Information

Though he studied and painted extensively in Europe, Chase’s stateside work is some of his most significant because it represents a compromise between his own ideas and established European artistic conventions. However, in 1886, a New York exhibition of oils and pastels by Parisian Impressionists and a Boston exhibition by Chase linked the American painter to this French school. Chase showed 138 works, a significant number of which displayed a new interest in Brooklyn’s parks and harbors. Some of these combined formal characteristics and urban themes in a manner parallel to the

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Impressionists. “Using avant-garde compositional features, plein-air methods, and subjects drawn from contemporary life, he arrived at an expression of modernity that was closely related to the work of Morisot.” (Gallatti, 2000B, p. 3) UMMA’s “View of Brooklyn Navy Yard,” recalls many well-known Impressionist works of scenes along the Seine—often featuring details of contemporary industrial life.

His connection to New York, particularly Brooklyn, inspired much of the work he completed later in his life. Chase painted several landscapes in Prospect Park and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, two of the most well known areas of the borough. In this piece, the dome of the Williamsburg Savings bank can be seen peeking out behind the treetops beyond the dock. Chase’s inclusion of this uniquely “Brooklyn” building reminds us that this is an indigenous scene. His own stay in the Navy may also have influenced his choice of subject in this painting.

Technique

Chase uses Impressionistic brushwork and color in this painting and employs light to form his subjects. Like the Impressionists, Chase has taken care to capture in his painting the colors he actually saw while he was painting; the variation of light and dark in the water reflects the way the bright sunlight hit the gentle waves, while the lack of detail in the section farthest away from the viewer might indicate a hazy day.

Artist

William Merritt Chase’s life typifies the American dream: his humble roots gave way to respectable reputation and creative success. Born in 1849 in a small town in Indiana, he was a self-made man with a true zeal for the art world. Chase’s father was a shopkeeper and his modest beginnings would ultimately have a great impact on his appreciation for the world in which he lived. Having trained with portraitist Barton S. Hays in Indianapolis early in his career, Chase wanted more for himself and his career. In order to get out of Indiana, the artist enlisted in the Navy in 1867 and moved to Annapolis.

After returning home for a brief year, Chase moved to New York in 1869, where he studied and exhibited at the National Academy of Design. Encouraged by his mentors at the Academy, he decided to move to Europe in 1872. He traveled in London and Paris, though he was based primarily in Munich at the prestigious Royal Academy. Chase was very open to the myriad of European styles experienced in Munich, and was influenced by the works of past Northern artists like Van Dyke and Rubens as well as by contemporary French painting. His six years of training abroad became the foundation of his distinctive style.

Upon returning to New York in 1878, Chase was invited to serve on the faculty of the Art Students League, an American school of fine arts founded in 1875 when the National Academy announced it would no longer fund its formal education system. The Art Students League was a progressive center for late nineteenth century artists, and focused on the practice and theory of fine art with an emphasis on communal learning. A board

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comprised of both students and teachers was elected annually to be the governing body of this democratic organization, overseeing all aspects of the League. Chase was very well thought of among League students and was generally considered one of its most well known teachers.

The following decade was to be a period of personal and artistic growth for the artist; he continued to spend summers in Europe through 1885, married in 1886, and had established his career as an American artist by 1887. His wealth of knowledge about European artistic styles elevated his status and he grew well respected in the New York artists' community.

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