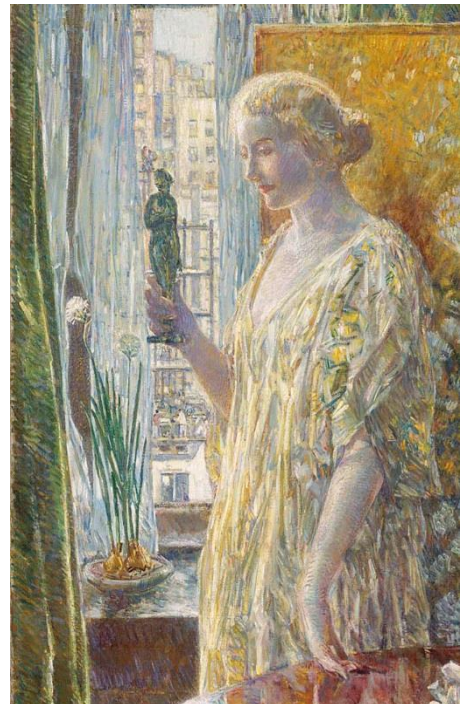


New York City through the Eyes of Its Artists

In the nineteenth century, American **Impressionist** artist Childe Hassam described New York City as “the most wonderful and most beautiful city in the world. All life is in it . . . No street, no section of Paris or any other city I have seen equal to New York.” His artwork was inspired by parks, pristine residential districts and genteel strolling pedestrians. Yet the dawn of the twentieth century would bring a deluge of European immigrants to the shores of New York City and a plethora of rapidly advancing technology, creating a new modern metropolis unlike anything that had been seen before. Gone was the picturesque city of the nineteenth century Hassam adored; a city made of brick and timber, its streets filled with horse drawn carriages. These remnants of a by-gone century had been replaced with soaring towers of glass and steel, streets teeming with noisy streetcars, electrified subways and elevated railroads, motor buses and electric streetlights. Advances in technology had revolutionized the look and feel of the city. The skyscraper towered above it all, its verticality an emblem for urban innovation.

For Hassam, a stalwart proponent of the picturesque nineteenth century New York, these new tall buildings were, “wildly formed architectural freak[s]” and not “marvel[s] of art.” The more progressive looking the building, the less appealing it was for Hassam to represent it in his artwork. When he did include modern buildings in his artwork, they were often anonymous and generic, blending in with the older buildings he favored. Hassam’s preference for unspecified skyscrapers coupled with the older brick and timber buildings suggests a wish to cling to bygone days, desirous to slow the pace of the city’s rapid modernization.

Other artists working in New York City at the time, such as American photographer **Alfred Stieglitz**, viewed the skyscrapers as symbolic of the progression of American civilization; patriotic symbols which could rival the great castles of Europe. Hassam seems to have reconciled these advances by associating American progress with the continuation of traditional and classical ideals into the modern twentieth century world. Every element in *Tanagra*, from the objects in the room to the woman’s classically inspired clothing, is evocative of embodiments of classical civilizations and can be equated to the modern American skyscraper seen through



Tanagra (The Builders, New York) detail, 1918,
Childe Hassam, oil on canvas, Smithsonian
American Art Museum

the window. Great bygone civilizations are evoked through the Greek Tanagra figurine, the Chinese lilies on the windowsill, and the golden Oriental screen.

Hassam's depictions of urban America illustrated a city that was refined and elite, while purposely minimizing workaday figures such as street sweepers and cab drivers. Hassam was class-aware, so when these types of people were included in his artwork they were shown as service employees who, while lower class, were essential to his view of society that was sharply divided along class lines. Art critic Eliot Clark remarked that Hassam did not "indulge in the sentimental aspect of squalor, or look with sympathetic gaze upon the picturesque life of the



[Cumulus Clouds, East River](#), 1901-02, Robert Henri, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

humble." Hassam's paintings ignored the problems caused by mass immigration and urban poverty.

There were, however, artists that chose to depict the more unpleasant, yet all-too-real views of city life and the class of people who occupied it. This younger generation of progressive American artists became dissatisfied with the work produced by the American Impressionists and the art extolled by the National Academy of Visual Arts, which they viewed as idealized and removed. These radical young artists preferred to depict the reality of urban

life; particularly the less than ideal lives led by the majority of urban inhabitants – the impoverished immigrants. These artists believed that art was not to be idealized and set upon a pedestal, solely reserved for the consumption of the elite. This new generation painted for and about the common man. Their gritty works depicted the harsh reality of life in Lower Manhattan; the tenement slums, the refuse filled streets, the shoeless children, the dock workers (see *Cumulus Clouds* above). Their radical, unvarnished views of city life challenged the accepted vision of the city as beautiful and genteel. These artists would become known by their collective name, the **Ashcan School**.

The Ashcan School's approach to painting challenged the conventions of American art. Artists like Childe Hassam devoted their canvases to the depiction of the refined features of urban living, more specifically the lives of the Anglo-Saxon middle and upper-classes. These artists equated beauty with sophistication and civilization, whereas the Ashcan School artists found a

certain beauty in the everyday lives of the downtown poor. Their interest lay in the energy and drama produced by the bustling crowds, shouting push cart peddlers, and hurried newspaper boys – scenes that on that canvas portrayed a churning whirlwind of human activity. A reviewer of Shinn’s artwork wrote that, “Beauty rarely tempts Mr. Shinn’s fancy. . . . He is distinctly of the world. Humanity, yes, even sordid humanity, interests him. Reality, not romance or poetry, appeals to him. . . . Lovers of the merely “pretty” will find little in common with Mr. Shinn; students of modern life, its workaday people, the bustle and movement of its streets, will find in his pictures an endless fund of interest.”

Glossary

Alfred Stieglitz: (1864-1946) American photographer and modern art exhibitions organizer.

Ashcan School: an artistic movement born in the early twentieth century which sought to depict urban life as it was, gritty and unrefined. Their artworks focused on the segments of society ignored by the American Impressionists: immigrants, nightclub performers, dockworkers, street peddlers, and other types of lower-class urban workers.

Impressionist: an artist who is associated with the art movement, Impressionism. This style of painting was developed in the late nineteenth century in France and is characterized by short brushstrokes of color to show the effects of different types of light and the immediate visual impression of the moment; seeks to capture feeling and experience, rather than accuracy or detail. In general, this style of art depicted a genteel, refined view of life, opposite of the Ashcan School.