



CHILDE HASSAM

In the Garden (Celia Thaxter in Her Garden), 1892

CHILDE HASSAM (1859–1935)

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oil on canvas, 22 ¼ × 18 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of John Gellatly

Background Information for Teachers

Childe Hassam spent many summers on Appledore Island off the coast of Maine, drawing artistic inspiration from the rocky coast and brilliant wildflowers that grew there. Every year, he and a group of musicians, writers, and artists made an informal colony based at the home of the poet Celia Thaxter. Among this prominent circle of friends were novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, poets Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and artist William Morris Hunt. Art, music, gardening, poetry readings, and intellectual banter were part of Thaxter's everyday life on Appledore, where she and her family operated a hotel, the Appledore House.

Hassam's painting shows Thaxter strolling through her garden, pausing to admire the many beautiful wildflowers that have flourished thanks to her care. She spent several hours each day tending to her garden, renowned for its beauty. It provided inspiration for her 1894 memoir, *An Island Garden*, which Hassam illustrated. The myriad of flowers Thaxter walks through seem to mimic the undulating waves of the ocean in the distance, the summer sea breeze gently swaying the flowers and grasses side to side. Of her flowers, Thaxter wrote, "Ever since I could remember anything, flowers have been like dear friends to me, comforters, inspirers, powers to uplift and to cheer. A lonely child, living on the lighthouse island... every blade of grass that sprang out of the ground, every humblest weed, was precious in my sight."

Sailboats glide across the water in the background, their white sails unfurled with the ocean breeze. A rustic split-rail fence is barely visible under the weight of numerous blooms, which creep up the sides of the composition, creating a framing device for the figure of Celia Thaxter. In Thaxter's gardens and on the rocky beaches, Hassam used the flickering brushwork and brilliant colors of impressionist art he had acquired in France to capture the spangled light of Appledore's brief summer. The painting evokes the leisurely, seasonal rhythms of America's privileged families in the years before World War I, known as the Gilded Age. Situated on an island, this scene seems far removed from the larger issues Americans faced at the time, such as income inequality and mass immigration.

Guided Looking Questions for Students

- What is Celia Thaxter's relationship to her garden? How does the artist visually convey that relationship?
- How would this landscape, situated on a remote island in Maine, change seasonally throughout the year? How might these environmental changes impact Thaxter's life and writing? Ask students to find examples of her writing to support this.

Primary Source Connection

Pair this artwork with an 1898 flyer promoting the Isles of Shoals as a vacation destination. The islands, situated on the maritime boundary between Maine and New Hampshire, were a welcome respite from the summer heat and America's crowded northern cities, especially New York—the main port of entry for new immigrants. In the late nineteenth century, the shift from an agricultural to an industrial economy, combined with increased immigration, caused overcrowding in cities. This problem fundamentally contributed to technological innovations and developments in housing and transportation, such as the elevator, high-rise buildings, and the subway system, allowing more people to live, work, and travel with ease through the urban landscape than ever before.

ISLES OF SHOALS

off

Portsmouth, N.H.

*An Ideal Summer Resort of the Highest Class
and full of historic associations.*

Pre-eminently the place for the tired worker.

*No Noise. No Dust. No Trolleys. A rest cure in these Isles
is a thing of joy.*

The climate is perfect. The sunsets glorious.

Highest shade temperature 75; Average 65 at noon.

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Suggested Questions

- Considering the historical context, how does this promotional flyer present Appledore as an antidote to urbanization? To industrialization?
- Does the painting convey the same message to the viewer, or a differing view?
- Is the audience for the painting the same as the one for the flyer? How do you know?

Literary Connection

Pair this artwork with the following excerpt from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature," published in 1836, nearly 60 years before Hassam painted his work. Emerson was not only a houseguest of Celia Thaxter's but a founding father of American Transcendentalism. Along with Henry David Thoreau, Emerson described the American landscape, particularly its eastern wildernesses, as havens to reflect and find personal and spiritual meaning. As a preacher, Emerson especially explored nature as a direct line to the divine:

All natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood. When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet.

Suggested Questions

- Based on this text, what purpose did Emerson believe nature should serve in the lives of Americans?
- Compare Emerson's vision of nature with that of Hassam's painting. Do these accounts of nature differ?

To read the full text of extended quotes, visit:

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