

Activity: Observe and Interpret

Artists make choices in communicating ideas. What can we learn from this painting about life in the rapidly changing city at the turn of the 20th century? What clues does Child Hassam give the viewer? Observing details and analyzing components of the painting, then putting them in historical context, enables the viewer to interpret the overall message of the work of art.

Observation: What do you see?

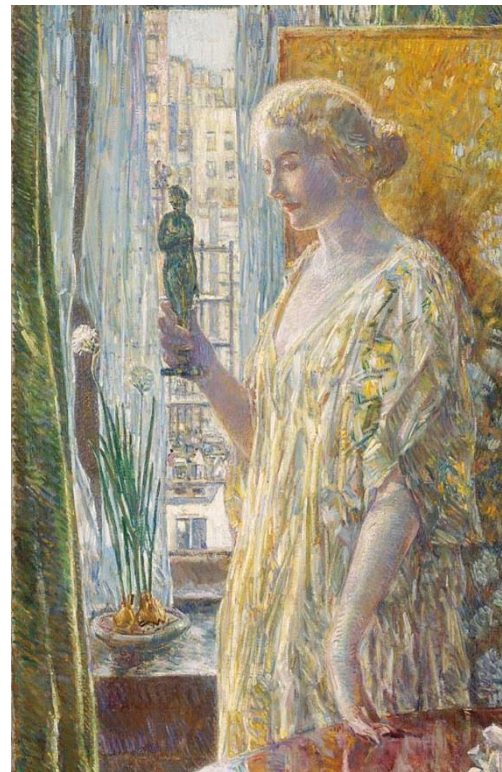
A woman with pale ivory skin wears a delicate, flowing gown and calmly stands in a richly decorated interior. The same colors, textured brushstroke, and pattern used to portray the woman and her dress are repeated throughout the room, closely connecting her with her surroundings. She is in no rush as she languidly grazes her hand across the finely polished table. Rather than gaze out the window at the progress rising in the streets, she casts her gaze inward, lost in thought.

What is she holding?

The woman holds a Tanagra figurine, an ancient Greek statuette of a fashionable woman. These small terracotta figures, which were excavated in great numbers from sites in Greece during the late 19th century, were used as decoration in wealthy homes around the turn of the century. They relate ideas of femininity and female culture in ancient times.

What's going on outside the window?

Looking outside the window, we see the growth of Manhattan. Tall buildings reach several stories high. While in the foreground, workers on a scaffolding construct a new building.





[Tanaora, The Builders, New York](#), 1918, Childe Hassam, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Interpretation: What does it mean?

The artist created two contrasting worlds: an ordered interior and a rapidly changing exterior cityscape. The woman in the painting is a contemporary version of the decorative statue she holds. Appropriately for a wealthy woman in her day and age, she is not at work. Instead she appears idle and a thing of beauty; her home, an extension of herself. Outside the window, the beauty and comfort of the interior gives way to industry. In 1918 the United States was changing rapidly: cities were growing, skyscrapers were rising, and urban populations were increasing. Women were beginning to work outside the home; and the country faced fighting in

Europe as it neared the end of World War I. The same immigrants who flooded the cities and provided the cheap labor that fueled American industry were sometimes feared by established Americans. What changes would these new immigrants, some very different in their manner, class, and wealth, bring to the cultivated way of life of the moneyed upper-class? How would the changing roles of women impact the woman depicted in Hassam's scene? Will her beauty and her way of life, like the cut roses on the table, soon wilt and fade?