

# ***Women Make an American Impression at the Chrysler***

©2002 by Ginger Levit



The American Impressionists were obsessed with painting women. Beautiful, wistful women. Women bathed in the golden glow of sunlight or an early evening lamp. *Fin de siècle* women protected from the harsh realities of life in luxuriant surroundings. Idealized women, yet somehow on the brink of change. The current exhibition at the Chrysler Museum is titled *American Impressionism: Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art Museum*. This show is all about women and concepts of femininity in the United States around the turn of the century. Borrowing from their French predecessors, who came up with Impressionism about thirty years earlier as a violent reaction to the academic realism of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American painters took off—utilizing French technique but distinctively recognizable American subject matter. The exhibition features over 50 luminous paintings by American masters Frank W. Benson, Mary Cassatt, Thomas Dewing, Childe Hassam, William Merritt Chase, James McNeill Whistler, Robert Reid, Frederick Carl Frieseke and Theodore Robinson, just to name a few. The loan has been made available while the Smithsonian's AAM is closed for renovation.

Like the French, the Americans painted "scenes of modern life." Early 19<sup>th</sup> century realists such as David and Ingres had painted mythological and classical Roman and Greek subjects, using formal, studied compositional devices. This gave way to the unabashed realism of Courbet, which was later euphemized by the Barbizon landscapists. The Fontainebleau Barbizons were fascinated with shifting atmosphere and the vibrancy of light, especially as wind and clouds played upon the countryside. Perhaps J. Alden Weir's *Upland Pasture* of 1905 reflects these ideas.

All these influences forged the debut of the French Impressionists onto the art scene, who had been secretly peeking at the shimmering sunlight and storms and clouds of their British contemporaries Constable and Turner. The English perceived light in terms of a pervasive veil of atmosphere; look for this hazy glow in the work of the derivative American Impressionists, such as Childe Hassam's 1918 interior oil *Tanagra* and Birge Harrison's 1890 *Winter Sunset*.

The "new painting," as French Impressionism was called, was considered to be scandalous. Subject matter had come off its lofty, intellectual pedestal and *genre* scenes

became the vogue. People engaged in their daily, customary activities included Manet's scenes of café and cabaret life, Boudin and Monet's Trouville beach scenes and of course, the beautiful landscapes and cityscapes of Pissarro and Sisley.

In the 1870s Americans were completely enamoured with all things European; Yet at the same time as boundaries pushed westward, they viewed the rugged landscape with awe, as a celebration of the splendor of God. Now wilderness and landscape paintings came into vogue, culminating with the glowing golden light of Luminism, a lyrical offshoot of the Hudson River School. Specific conditions of light and atmosphere were faithfully recorded on expansive canvases glorifying the natural world.

Art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel had had bad luck in peddling Monet, Pissarro and the other big names at his Paris gallery. Taking a great risk, he brought 300 French Impressionist paintings to New York and they were a smashing success, making him a fortune. American painters seized the moment and shortly the American version of Impressionism was born.

Evidently the American artists became more focused and somewhat obsessed with notions of femininity, painting women and their *objets de toilette* in profusion. Frank W. Benson painted the elegant work titled merely *Still Life* in 1920. Alongside the lush table top bouquet and candleabra and compote of overflowing fruit are a lady's string of pearls and her fan. The feminine presence is omnipresent in at least half the paintings on view.

*Fin de siècle* American Impressionism just preceded the liberation of American women such as the Gibson Girl into sporty clothes and equal rights; at this point women became symbols of ideal beauty, still protected by their beautiful cocoon-like surroundings from a harsh external world. Yet the advent of the Industrial Revolution brought about a changing set of social, moral and cultural values.

Many Americans went to Paris to study at the Académie Julian, then on to Giverny to learn from the consummate master of broken line and merging color Claude Monet. Theodore Robinson's *Old Church at Giverny* painted in 1891 looks as if it could have been done by the master himself and the palette is certainly reminiscent of Renoir. The American expatriate John Singer Sargent comes to mind when looking at Thomas Wilmer Dewing's quietly austere *Lady in White* (1910) sitting beside a cheval mirror that has no reflection and William Merritt Chase's enigmatic *Girl in White* (1890) dramatically placed in front of a dark, contrasting background. Sargent's unforgettable white dresses with their rich folds are brimming with tonality and these paintings also emanate complex whites. Unfortunately, there are no Sargent paintings in the exhibition. Are these females trapped between traditionalism and modernism, not knowing which direction to follow? On the other hand Childe Hassam's confident, blonde Kitty Hughes happily contemplates two vases of the fragrant Maréchal Niel yellow roses.

