‘Painting Your Own Country’:
The American Impressionists at Home

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Recent scholarship on French Impressionism has revised long-standing formalist notions that Claude Monet and his contemporaries responded to motifs only as visual stimuli. With the help of writers such as Robert Herbert, Richard Brettell, and Paul Hayes Tucker, we have come to appreciate the significance of French Impressionist subject choice and to understand the reciprocal relationship between the sites that the Impressionists chose to paint in the “new” Second Empire and Third Republic Paris and its environs and the new style in which they painted them.¹ We have come to understand that these paintings are saturated not just with light and color but with meaning. Monet’s images of grainstacks, for example, encode French pride in prosperity. His portrayals of Rouen Cathedral express an appreciation of French tradition.

Taking writers such as Herbert, Brettell, and Tucker as mentors, some Americanists have begun to examine American Impressionist paintings in cultural context. A major exhibition that adopted this approach was American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885-1915, which I co-curated with Doreen Bolger and David Park Curry. The exhibition was co-organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, and was shown at both museums and at the Denver Art Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1994-95.

I invite you to consider or reconsider the methodology that informed that exhibition. This paper concentrates on the repatriated American Impressionists, “the American Impressionists at home.” In the exhibition’s terms, the American Impressionists were essentially northeastern Impressionists, artists who based themselves in Boston or New York and painted that region. They adopted the style in the mid and late 1880s and flourished in the 1890s. We will then briefly consider Western Reserve Impressionist works and the potential of our methodology for discussing them.

Two great expatriates, John Singer Sargent and Mary Cassatt, cast their lot in with the French Impressionists in the late 1870s. Sargent celebrated the public park as an archetypal modern space in such paintings as Luxembourg Gardens at Twilight (1879; Philadelphia Museum of Art). Cassatt remarked on the archetypal new woman in At the Opera (1878; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).
The leading American Impressionists who repatriated—Theodore Robinson, J. Alden Weir, John Henry Twachtman, and Childe Hassam, for example—were trained first in the United States in academies that had been re-fashioned according to the European academic system and then in European ateliers: Munich in the 1870s and Paris in the 1880s. Upon their return home, these artists found an America in the throes of revolutionary transformation from a conservative agrarian society to a dynamic, urban, industrialized nation.

Manufacturing and trade vastly increased the national wealth and stimulated urban development, but the gap between rich and poor Americans widened; by 1890, one percent of the population held more wealth than the rest combined. An unfamiliar mingling of classes led the wealthy to wonder “how the other half lives” and simultaneously to withdraw into restricted society devoted to fashion and social extravagance. Meanwhile a self-conscious middle class continued to define its values, shape its image, and enjoy new comforts. Between the Civil War and the first World War, twelve new states were admitted, doubling the territory of the United States. Agents in Europe sought settlers for the areas opened up by the 200,000 miles of rail in operation by 1900. Immigration increased, especially from southern and eastern Europe. The migration of growing numbers of African Americans to northern cities also altered urban demographics and magnified awareness of ethnic, racial, and class differences.

Industrialization created a consumer culture that separated the new America from the old. Battles against chronic scarcity gave way to relative abundance. There was a new and bewildering variety of goods and services and more leisure time in which to enjoy them. There was tension between the sense of loss of the simpler rural past and the heady excitement of the new: telegraphs and telephones, automobiles, typewriters and adding machines, apartments, elevators, electric light bulbs, water closets, phonographs, flying machines, fountain pens, wireless radios, Bakelite, safety razors, zippers, moving pictures, Kodak’s pocket cameras, linotypes and mimeographs, and mass-circulation journals.

After careful review of hundreds of American Impressionist paintings, we felt secure in hypothesizing that the American Impressionists seem to have responded to this modern, bewildering America by choosing subjects that were specifically, self-consciously American, saturated with optimism about what was new, nostalgia for what was being eclipsed by profound social change, and euphemism about contemporary problems. We wished to consider these subjects not just as motifs but as encoders of the spirit of their time, as the French works that inspired them seem to have done.

The American Impressionists echoed in their nationalistic, optimistic, nostalgic, euphemistic works other cultural manifestations of the 1890s, including such diverse events as the centennial celebration of George Washington’s inauguration and the founding of the
Daughters of the American Revolution. Even American music offers parallels: the 1890s witnessed increased approbation of American composers such as Victor Herbert, Edward MacDowell and Scott Joplin and the birth of ragtime; immensely popular were “On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away” (1897) and hundreds of other new songs that expressed yearning for the American past, and patriotic songs such as John Philip Sousa’s rousing “The Stars and Stripes Forever” (1897). We would not consider these simple songs as mere successions of notes, but would want to understand them as responding to cultural desires. Likewise, we wanted to understand apparently “simple” paintings such as those of the American Impressionists and relate them to cultural context.

In trying to decode American Impressionist paintings, we tried to rely primarily on the works of art to lead us to the most appropriate means of interpretation. We were interested in the accounts suggested by texts, but the paintings themselves always guided us to the sources in social commentary and history that might verify or refute our hypotheses. For example, in Edward E. Simmons’s Boston Public Garden (1893; Daniel J. Terra Collection) and Childe Hassam’s Charles River and Beacon Hill (ca. 1892; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), we queried the dialogue that the artists had proposed between newly-created Back Bay Boston spaces and the old State House that appears in both scenes as a surrogate for times past.

About the time that both Simmons and Hassam painted their Boston views, Impressionism—European and American—made an important debut to a huge national audience at Chicago’s 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. There were not many Impressionist works shown at the Chicago fair. However, their high key was so startling that they called substantial attention to themselves. Among the most prominent American Impressionist paintings were Hassam’s On the Way to the Grand Prix (1888; New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut), Edmund Tarbell’s In the Orchard (1891; Daniel J. Terra Collection), Theodore Robinson’s The Layette (ca. 1892; Corcoran Gallery of Art), and Robert Vonnoh’s November (1890; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts). The official French display and the Loan Collection of Foreign Works from Private Galleries in the United States were dominated by academic artists. But some French Impressionist works appeared in the Loan Collection, including loans from pioneer collectors: the Havemeyers of New York, Alexander Cassatt of Philadelphia, and the Potter Palmers of Chicago. These included two marines by Manet and his Dead Toreador (1864; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.); canvases by Degas, including The Dance Class (1881; Philadelphia Museum of Art) and a racetrack scene; landscapes by Pissarro and Sisley; and four paintings by Monet which were cited by an American critic for their “extraordinarily vivid color” and truthful hue.

At least one perceptive writer, Hamlin Garland, heard in the new Impressionist language national accents that echoed his own pursuit of regional authenticity in American
literature. In February 1894 Garland presented a lecture on Impressionism that was published later that year as *Crumbling Idols*. Although many of the American Impressionist works shown at the Chicago fair depicted foreign subjects, Garland noted that Impressionism was appropriate to making a national statement and hinted that it might be just the right style for recording the wonders of American nature: “As I write this,” he said, “I have just come in from a bee-hunt over Wisconsin hills, amid splendors which would make Monet seem low-keyed.”

Garland’s associate, Charles Francis Browne, reviewed a Chicago exhibition of October 1894 in a pamphlet entitled *Impressions on Impressionism*, and he, too, urged national statements: “American art must be developed by the artists in happy sympathy with American surroundings, and supported by a public loving the home things more than imported foreign sentiment.”

Possibly under these writers’ influence, as well as independently, many of the repatriated American Impressionists appear to have turned increasing attention to subjects that were specifically American, possibly parallels to, but not merely imitations of, French Impressionist subjects. Stimulated by our awareness of Garland’s recommendations and his “reading” of Impressionism, my co-curators and I tried to read American Impressionist paintings in relation to the resonance of their sites, not only as Herbert, Brettell, and Tucker have been teaching us to read French Impressionist paintings, but as we customarily have read Hudson River School paintings.

Here are a few examples of our approach:

After much traditional training, Theodore Robinson was converted to Impressionism by Monet at Giverny and worked there for months at a time in Monet’s company from 1888 to 1892. In canvases such as *Bird’s Eye View, Giverny* (1889; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and *Road by the Mill* (1892; Cincinnati Art Museum), Robinson chose characteristically French scenes emphasizing quaint stone houses and walls, cultivated fields, and moisture rising from the rivers that bathed the valley around Giverny.

When Robinson returned to the United States in 1892, he brought with him the fullest understanding of the French Impressionist style of any repatriated artist. Entries in his diaries suggest a difficult adjustment:

May 25, 1893: “Am trying to get interested in things here but am not enough.”

June 17, 1893: “Miss [Cecilia] Waern [a cosmopolitan critic] writes from Paris…’I am quite curious to see what you are going to see in America.”

Robinson spent the summer and early autumn of 1893 teaching a class at Napanoch, in Ulster County, New York, in the heart of the Catskills, territory that had been explored by the Hudson River School. His series based on the Delaware and Hudson Canal at Port Benjamin,
north of Napanoch, suggests an interest in specifically American topography and light. The Catskills were notable not only for natural, but for artificial waterways, including reservoirs and canals. The earliest of these was the Delaware and Hudson Canal, a wonder of New York State when it opened in 1829. It had been superseded by the railroad (which could operate year-round) by the time Robinson painted it.

In Robinson’s paintings of the Delaware and Hudson Canal, there is always a finely-articulated quietude about the scene. The foreground planes are insistently empty and call our attention to the absence of activity. Time has left the land and its unseen inhabitants behind. While the site may simply have given Robinson “something to paint”—shapes and colors—it may also have had some further significance for him. His paintings may have expressed wistfulness at the passing of time or the character of a special region as, in his own words, he tried to “get interested in things here.” The works, saturated with light and color, are perhaps saturated with meaning.

The American-ness of the Napanoch paintings was apparent to the cosmopolitan critic, Cecilia Waern. As Robinson noted in his diary on December 2, 1893: “Call from Miss Waern. She thought my summer’s work very American, the nice American atmosphere, but I don’t think they had much charm for her.” Robinson ignored Waern’s reservations about his American-ness and became increasing close to Hamlin Garland in nationalistic spirit, as well as personally. In turn, Garland admired Robinson and sent him a copy of Impressionism, which Robinson told his diary was “witty and sensible and suggestive—the sort of thing that ought to do good.”

Robinson continued his commentary on the changing American scene in a series of works that he painted in the summer of 1894 in Cos Cob, Connecticut, near Greenwich, then less than forty minutes from New York by commuter train. As at Napanoch, Robinson’s stay at Cos Cob suggests his pursuit of American roots. He took rooms at the Holley House, the oldest house in the village, “built in 1664,” as Robinson noted in his diary. (The house actually seems to date from the 1730s.) The guests at the house appreciated its ties to history, and the antique furnishings and family heirlooms that were proudly displayed. Aside from Robinson, the Holley House attracted and inspired Weir, Twachtman, Hassam, and some of their New York art school students such as Elmer MacRae. In his painting, View from the Holley House, Winter (c. 1901; Hevrdejs Collection of American Art), Twachtman recorded—as if it were a ghost—the Palmer and Duff Shipyard, a vestige of Cos Cob’s waning fishing industry.

Robinson’s views of the Riverside Yacht Club, including Low Tide, Riverside Yacht Club (1894; Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz) and Low Tide (1894; Manoogian Collection), also acknowledge that the fishing industry was in decline and that summer visitors were creating a suburban resort centered on recreational boating. Painting from the
railroad bridge over the Mianus River, Robinson faced away from the shipyard that built and repaired fishing boats to portray pleasure yachts with the new Riverside Yacht Club in the distance. Remarkings on these paintings by Robinson, earlier scholars have called attention to the artist’s bright palette and his tendency to paint in series as legacies of Monet. In *American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885-1915* we called attention to Robinson’s more profound emulation of the French painter, highlighting the American’s expressions of the spirit of place.

Like Robinson, J. Alden Weir found in New England nourishing echoes of the old American spirit. For Weir, the hills, woods, and wetlands in Branchville, Connecticut, defined a classic New England setting. Weir acquired almost 240 acres in 1882. Here in a Federal period farmhouse, barns, and studio, he played host to fellow American Impressionists such as Twachtman, Hassam, and Robinson. Many of Weir’s Branchville works are landscapes that celebrate intimate New England nature. These include *Early Spring at Branchville* (1888-90; private collection) and *The Laundry, Branchville* (c. 1894; private collection).

Between 1893 and 1897 Weir executed a fascinating series of images of the Willimantic Linen Company that echo Robinson’s industrial Catskill and Cos Cob landscapes. Weir undertook these paintings without a commission. He seems to have wished to capture and aggrandize a typical New England phenomenon—picturesque river valley industry. *Willimantic Thread Factory* (1894; Brooklyn Museum of Art), for example, situates the mill and the town in the distance across a large green field, as if it were a grand structure in a rolling countryside portrayed by John Constable—Salisbury Cathedral, perhaps. In *The Factory Village* (1897; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), industry and nature are linked by the echoes between smoke from the stack and clouds in the sky; the painting’s very title evokes cozy New England values.

Cincinnati-born Twachtman also flourished in Connecticut and made the characteristic scenes around Greenwich his own in numerous portrayals of picturesque meadows, cascading waterfalls, snowy landscapes, and icy streambeds on or near the farm he purchased in 1890. Hassam celebrated many aspects of the new United States after his return from study in Paris. Much can be said about the relationship of some of his New York scenes of the 1890s to the issue of nationalistic imagery. Hassam’s later flag paintings suggest an even more obvious patriotic agenda. His portrayals of New England, especially his images of the Isles of Shoals, parallel Robinson’s, Weir’s, and Twachtman’s records of personally and nationally resonant sites. These paintings are the Impressionist counterparts of Winslow Homer’s concurrent—and resolutely national—responses to the coast of Maine.

Hassam spent summers in other New England resorts, including Old Lyme, Cos Cob, Provincetown, and Gloucester. Many of his finest works depict churches that were landmarks
of these colonial towns. These paintings have been construed simply as convenient counterparts of Monet’s Rouen cathedral facades. William H. Gerdts, for example, has remarked on Hassam’s work at Old Lyme:

Hassam . . . painted many landscapes in and around the town, but none as often as the Old Congregational Church. Most known versions, painted between 1903 and 1906, are in a reduced color range of brilliant, reflective white, with golden foliage sparkling in the sunlight and a plane of clear blue sky. Hassam also painted the church in moonlight, softly glowing in the darkening night air, the most formal and symmetrical of these representations. The church at Old Lyme is Hassam’s Rouen Cathedral.5

It is more rewarding, we believe, to consider Hassam’s Church at Old Lyme (1905; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo) or Church at Gloucester (1918; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) as meaningful counterparts of Monet’s nationalism in portraying Rouen Cathedral, not just as analogous motifs.

Prompted by the iconic quality of The Church at Gloucester, we decided to dig rather than just to describe. Hassam painted The Church at Gloucester during the summer of 1918, in one of the most distinctive New England towns—one that had attracted such devoutly “American” painters as Fitz Hugh Lane in the 1850s and Winslow Homer in the 1870s. Among the last of Hassam’s church paintings, it follows immediately upon the flag series and upon the close of the first World War. Like the flag paintings, the Church at Gloucester probably reflects Hassam’s pride in his American heritage. The Universalist church that Hassam depicted housed a congregation that was associated with struggles for religious rights in the Federal period. Its building, dedicated in 1806, was hailed as one of Cape Ann’s finest structures and celebrated for its bell, cast at the Paul Revere foundry. Even the approach was quite essentially American: along an avenue of elms.

These clues suggest Hassam’s wish to present a symbol of American religious freedom and tranquil New England tradition, a celebration of the national spirit, not just an American Rouen Cathedral. Hassam’s editing of reality supports this hypothesis. If we compare the painting of the Universalist church at Gloucester with a photograph, we see that Hassam edited the only jarring aspect of the church—its disproportionately tall spire. Perfected by Hassam, the church is an icon of American values and the American scene.

Hamlin Garland’s enthusiasm for Impressionism at the Chicago fair had provided a mandate for American painters to adopt the style as a national expression. As we have noted, a number of eastern artists were sympathetic with Garland’s prescription, including Robinson, who can be associated directly with his agenda. But artists who were closer to Garland and to Chicago would respond most fully to Garland’s reformative efforts, perhaps none so devotedly as Indiana’s Hoosier Group of Impressionists—Theodore Steele, Otto Stark, John Ottis Adams, and William Forsyth.
What of the artists of Ohio, especially the area around Cleveland? We have, of course, already discussed one of the leading Ohio Impressionists: John Henry Twachtman, born in Cincinnati, trained there and then in Munich, New York, and Paris, before he moved back to the United States in 1885, settling in Greenwich.

Twachtman embodies the tendency of many turn-of-the-century American painters to find their home cities insufficiently stimulating or receptive to art after their return from Europe. These artists often migrated to New York and its vicinity, as in the case of Twachtman (or Cincinnati-born Edward Potthast), or to Boston, as in the case of the Cincinnati-born Joseph DeCamp. These artists discovered their sense of place in new places, often being susceptible to New England, which was practical (in encompassing or being near Boston and New York) and was philosophically satisfying. Twachtman, for example, realized his “America” in Connecticut and later in Gloucester, and found his livelihood in New York City.

In his diary entry for December 4, 1895, a few months before his death, Theodore Robinson noted: “Parkhurst called—was glad to hear him say that he is a firm believer in painting your own country—not on principle, but because you are drawn there by ties of race, and should love it and paint it better than another country. By ‘country’ he meant the section, more or less circumscribed, where lived one’s forebears, as for me, Windham Co., Vt.”

In proposing that the search for an expression of “country” was important to the American Impressionists, my colleagues and I have claimed that they emulated the core of the French Impressionist spirit—the expression of place—not just surface effects. Can we echo the approach in the Western Reserve? Were not Impressionists in this region just as inclined to seek the pulse of their own country?

What an investigator needs in order to test the hypothesis that the Cleveland Impressionists were concerned with a sense of place, and were expressing its spirit in their works, either consciously or unconsciously, are the works of art themselves; willingness to analyze the formal choices that the artists made in selecting and depicting the subjects; information, generic and specific, on the identity of the subjects depicted; insight into what those subjects might have meant to the artists and their audience; and, if possible, documentation on departures from objective reality.

It is, perhaps, best for us as art historians to follow the pattern of those whose works we seek to understand and to investigate our own countries. By the nature of our backgrounds and professional situations, Bolger, Curry and I were most at ease in our treatment of New York City and New England. If I had the resources at your disposal in this “country”—the Western Reserve—I would want to ask questions about the sites and their meanings, and the possible interpretations of the sites such as those we asked concerning Weir’s Factory Village or
Hassam’s *Church at Gloucester*: What and where are you and what might that mean? How are you depicted and what might that mean?

At least two articles in the compilation, *Cleveland as a Center of Regional American Art*, based on the Cleveland Artists Foundation November 1993 symposium, suggest some thinking along these lines; these are articles by Gladys Haddad and Rotraud Sackerlotzky. Let me call your attention first to Haddad’s article, “Interpreters of the Western Reserve: William Sommer, Henry Keller, Frank Wilcox.” Were we to have opened a branch office of our American Impressionist project here in Cleveland, we might have asked Professor Haddad to manage it on the basis of her desire to explore “what the Western Reserve is and *where* it is and *why* three artists whose lives were centered here were drawn to it and *how* they interpreted it.”

According to Professor Haddad, one of those three artists William Sommer, wrote:

> The glorious state of Ohio gives all it has to the artist—even rolling hills, miniature valleys, old farm houses, cattle grazing around great barns with splendid towers that do away with the straight line, towers that simply must be put on paper—they are not high but beautiful in form, and eternal in simplicity.

I would wonder whether Sommer’s interest in and commitment to place were motivated by philosophical—not just formalist—considerations. Did Sommer put “splendid towers . . . on paper” merely because he was interested in elegant formal motifs or because he could encode considerations of pride, nostalgia, even conflict in response to the changing face of the glorious state of Ohio?

Sommer’s oil, *Lake Erie Cliff, Lakewood* (1911; Joseph M. Erdelac, Cleveland), for example, may be described simply as a chromatic tapestry of activated brushstrokes. But might his composition have proposed an analogy with more exotic and isolated sites? I think of Henry Roderick Newman’s formula for views of Italian villas, for example. Could such an analogy—conscious or unconscious—suggest Sommer’s desire to celebrate the pristine beauties in Lakewood and/or his euphemistic denial of encroaching development?

When Bolger, Curry and I investigated the portrayal of similarly poetic patterns, we proposed such agendas. For example, Dennis Miller Bunker spent the summers of 1889 and 1890 in Medfield, a Massachusetts town in the Charles River valley about fifteen miles southwest of Boston. By limiting his view in canvases such as *The Pool, Medfield* (1889; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), Bunker diminished the element of human intervention, which is suggested only by the white structure in the background. In works such as *Gray Day on the Charles* (1894; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond), John Leslie Breck also emphasized the same river’s natural beauty, giving no hint of the farmland, factories and mills, and urban sprawl that punctuated its banks.

In his paintings, Sommer often acknowledges the incursions into nature of industrial
forms such as viaducts or power lines. I would like to know more about Sommer’s responses and those of his contemporaries to these developments. I doubt that provocative industrial elements should be read merely as forms that “do away with the straight line” and “must be put on paper” simply as motifs.

Stimulated by Sackerlotzky’s article “F.C. Gottwald and The Old Bohemians” in Cleveland as a Center of Regional American Art, I would ask whether Gottwald’s Main Street, Chagrin Falls (c. 1899; William McCoy) could be read in terms that seemed appropriate to Weir’s Factory Village, which, we felt, had celebrated picturesque—and regionally significant—New England river valley industry. The large tree spreads its protective canopy over the smokestack of the Willimantic Linen Company’s factory, its spool shop’s tower, and the telegraph pole. Weir showed these spires of the secular monuments of capitalist enterprise in complete harmony with nature and gave no hint of the labor and financial problems that the company faced at this time. Could Gottwald’s image be read similarly, to suggest a dialogue between the traditional tower and the modern telegraph poles? How does the image relate to contemporary events in this place?

We may not be certain what Gottwald had in mind or what his contemporaries might have decoded—either consciously or unconsciously—from such a scene. But I think it is a fair assumption that there is more here than meets the eye and that a reading of the painting as merely an occasion to portray light and color does not begin to tell its story. Sackerlotzky notes that “the public reacted with great surprise when new light paintings such as…Main Street, Chagrin Falls, c. 1899, were shown for the first time” and explains how Gottwald knew of Impressionism. She adds that Gottwald defined Impressionism as “a method which ‘transmits direct impressions received from nature in outdoor work.’” I do not dispute Gottwald’s definition, which concentrates on how the Impressionists painted and suggests that Gottwald imitated how they painted. I would urge some consideration of the questions of what the Impressionists painted and why, and what Gottwald painted and why.

We have just begun to explore the issue of what was meaningful in the subject choices of the American Impressionists. When we examine those subject choices in relation to the artists’ interest in their own country and in relation to other concerns of their time, we will see these artists as mindful of the spirit of their time rather than mindless motif chasers and we will better understand the spirit of their time.
Endnotes


3. [Charles Francis Browne, Hamlin Garland, Lorado Taft], *Impressions on Impressionism: Being a Discussion of the American Art Exhibition at the Art Institute, Chicago, by a Critical Triumvirate* (Chicago, 1894), 23.

4. This and subsequent quotations are taken from *Theodore Robinson Diaries, 1892-96*, Frick Art Reference Library, New York.