Art of Our Time

Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art
Wichita State University

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by

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Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechan-
Robert Henri played a significant role in the American art world of the early twentieth century, when he and seven other trailblazing painters – Arthur B. Davies, William J. Glackens, Ernest Lawson, George Luks, Maurice Prendergast, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan – displayed their depictions of everyday city life, including the lives of poor people, in New York galleries. Not all viewers appreciated the efforts of this group, which was called The Eight. After one critic suggested throwing their works into an ash can, several of these artists, along with others such as George Bellows and Edward Hopper who likewise painted frank urban scenes, collectively became known as the Ashcan school.

Henri's quick, fluid painting style and proletarian subject matter – inspired by Frans Hals, Édouard Manet, and Diego Velázquez – no longer seemed radical in the wake of the Armory Show, the mammoth 1913 exhibition of works by Marcel Duchamp, Wassily Kandinsky, Pablo Picasso, and others that opened many American eyes to modernism for the first time.

In 1914, searching for new inspiration and, perhaps, for a new aesthetic direction, Henri traveled to the American West. His respect for Native Americans and Hispanics prompted him to visit the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, where the cultures of those peoples were highlighted. There he met Dr. Edgar L. Hewitt, a New Mexico ethnologist, who secured a workspace for him in Santa Fe's Palace of the Governors Museum. Over the course of three stays in New Mexico, Henri produced more than two hundred paintings, mostly portraits of Native Americans and Hispanics.

Henri painted the model who posed for Gregorita with the Santa Clara Bowl several times. The young woman sits next to a large storage jar, which she grasps with her right hand. The frontal presentation and direct gaze are typical of Henri's portraits. He hoped viewers would respond to his subjects with respect and empathy and thus recognize their shared humanity. At the same time, he wanted viewers to distance themselves from his subjects, acknowledging them as representatives of their races; this perspective is rooted in nineteenth-century social science, which advocated the acceptance of distinct races with shared identifying characteristics. Before and after spending time in New Mexico, Henri went to Spain and Ireland, producing many more portraits that displayed both the individuals' personalities and what he (and many others) considered traits that typified their ethnicities.

Henri’s musings about art, assembled in the book *The Art Spirit* (1923), brought him a stronger reputation both as a theorist and as a painter. Artists today still find inspiration in his admonition to seek beauty in everyday life.

Timothy R. Rodgers
Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vidi Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.


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