

American Realists of the Early 1900s

With forty percent of the United States' population living in urban environments by 1900, the city began to replace the countryside as an intriguing subject for American writers and painters. Also, these city dwellers' demands for illustrated newspapers and magazines meant that many artists in the early twentieth century trained as sketch reporters who could quickly capture the action at fires or strikes, sports events or theater premieres.

A leading realist, Robert Henri was an influential teacher to many young graphic artists and painters. In 1908, Henri joined seven of his students and friends to form The Eight and to stage a group exhibition in New York City. Several of The Eight—by painting scenes of daily life in back alleys and barrooms, on dockyards and tenement rooftops—soon became known popularly as the Ashcan School.



Robert Henri

American, 1865–1929

Snow in New York, dated 1902

Robert Henri urged his students in Philadelphia and New York to reject idealism and to focus instead on reality, whether it be banal or harsh. “Draw your material from the life around you, from all of it. There is beauty in everything if it looks beautiful to your eyes. You can find it anywhere, everywhere.”

Henri's *Snow in New York* depicts ordinary brownstone apartments hemmed in by city blocks of humdrum office buildings. This calm, stable geometry adds to the hush of new-fallen snow. The exact date inscribed—March 5, 1902—implies the canvas was painted in a single session. Its on-the-spot observations and spontaneous sketchiness reveal gray slush in the traffic ruts and yellow mud on the horsecart's wheels.

Oil on canvas, .813 x .655 m (32 x 25 ¾ in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1954.4.3



George Bellows

American, 1882–1925

Both Members of This Club, 1909

A robust and vigorous man, George Bellows played semiprofessional baseball before moving to New York City to study art under Robert Henri. There, Bellows found that corruption had made public boxing illegal. Private sport clubs managed to circumvent the law, but they also barred the fighters, who were deemed socially unacceptable, from joining. The title of *Both Members of This Club* refers to the practice of granting “membership” to boxers only for the duration of their bouts. Bellows indicated his low opinion of the elitist crowd by converting them into grotesque caricatures roaring approval of the bloodshed. Creating a sense of immediacy, three rows of spectators block off our view, and the ringside ropes loom overhead.

The location is Tom Sharkey's Athletic Club. (Sharkey's is also the setting for Bellows' *Club Night* of 1907 in the National Gallery, the first of his six oil paintings of boxing matches.) The black contestant is Joe Gans, lightweight champion for eight years. Gans' famous “right punch after blocking a lead” may have led Bellows to record that maneuver for its own sake.

Oil on canvas, 1.150 x 1.605 m (45 ¼ x 63 ⅞ in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1944.13.1



George Bellows

The Lone Tenement, 1909

The Lone Tenement generates both a powerful image of urban dislocation and a poignant allegory of time's passage. The last remaining building underneath the approaches to the new Queensboro Bridge stands alone, everything else in the neighborhood having long since been razed. The oppressive roadway crushes down from the top of the picture, and its span's dark shadow against the red brick tenement seems to foretell the apartment building's doom.

The whole composition directs attention to the bridge's architectural mass. Pointed up toward the black roadway from below, a system of vertical elements marches left to right. A factory smokestack, two lifeless tree trunks, the masts of a moored ship, the slender tenement itself, and smoke from a ship on the East River all lead across the canvas to the bridge's heavy pier. The powerful design and the superb handling of earthy umbers, ochers, and siennas make it difficult to believe that George Bellows had moved to New York and begun painting only five years before.

Oil on canvas, .918 x 1.223 m (36 ⅞ x 48 ⅞ in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.83



John Sloan

American, 1871–1951

The City from Greenwich Village, 1922

John Sloan, once a newspaper illustrator in Philadelphia, became a painter at the urging of Robert Henri and moved to New York. The apparent spontaneity in Sloan's *City from Greenwich Village* is deceptive. Noting it was “painted from memory,” Sloan made more preparatory studies for this canvas than for any of his other pictures.

One pencil sketch shows the elevated train tracks at the slight angle they would create from a sixth-story rooftop. In the final oil painting, the railway is pushed down at a steeper perspective, opening the foreground into a vast space of reflections off wet pavement. The soaring Woolworth Building dominates the distant skyscrapers. Since that shimmering vision actually would not have been visible from this low level, the skyline derives from other studies done at higher elevations.

Sloan described the personally meaningful site: “Looking south over lower Sixth Avenue from the roof of my Washington Place studio, on a winter evening. The distant lights of the great office buildings downtown are seen in the gathering darkness. The triangular loft building on the right had contained my studio for three years before.”

Oil on canvas, .660 x .857 m (26 x 33 ¾ in.)
Gift of Helen Farr Sloan 1970.1.1

Independent Art Exhibitions in the United States and France

By the mid-1800s, many institutional or state-sponsored art exhibitions had become repressively conservative. Governing committees of older artists, anxious to maintain their established status, frequently refused to display any submissions that failed to meet their conventional standards. The more innovative artists, thus being denied permission to show their work, had difficulty reaching critics or collectors through accepted channels.

In frustration, a few younger painters eventually boycotted the admission juries of the official shows and, defying custom, organized their own one-man or group exhibitions. The only requirements for participation might be entry fees to cover the costs of renting rooms and publishing catalogues.

These independent shows, often mounted in cooperation with art dealers, would develop into an important strategy for introducing new movements during the twentieth century. Some of the more famous, earlier avant-garde exhibitions are listed here, specifying the American and French entries that now are in the National Gallery of Art.

1855 The entrance committee for the World's Fair, Paris, rejects the realist depictions of peasants and laborers submitted by Gustave Courbet. A political activist, Courbet boldly erects his own pavilion just outside the fair grounds. Courbet's one-man show, which includes *The Stream*, sets a daring precedent for later independent exhibitions by groups of artists.

James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, 1862
Harris Whittemore Collection 1943.6.2



1863 The jury for the 1863 Paris Salon exhibition refuses so many entries that Emperor Napoleon III permits a parallel show of the rejected works. This

Salon des Refusés—an event never repeated by any government—allows the public to compare official tastes to the avant-garde attitudes.

The regular Salon loses money due to its poor gate receipts and reduced catalogue sales because most visitors choose to go next door to be shocked or amused by the sensational *Salon des Refusés*. *The White Girl*, by the American expatriate James McNeill Whistler, is singled out for violent abuse as well as “fits of helpless mirth.” One sympathetic critic praises its musical color harmonies, inspiring Whistler to retitle the painting *Symphony in White, No. 1*.

1867 Following Gustave Courbet's example from 1855, Edouard Manet builds a private pavilion outside the 1867 World's Fair, Paris. Manet's retrospective of his own realist works includes *The Old Musician*, *A King Charles Spaniel*, and *Still Life with Melon and Peaches*.

Camille Pissarro, *Orchard in Bloom, Louveciennes*, 1872
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.51



1874 In Paris, the *Société Anonyme des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs, etc.* gives its first group exhibition. This

momentous show includes Camille Pissarro's *Orchard in Bloom, Louveciennes*, Auguste Renoir's *Dancer*, and Berthe Morisot's *Harbor at Lorient* and *Mother and Sister of the Artist*.

Ridiculing the title of a landscape by Claude Monet, a newspaper reviewer sarcastically coins the term “impressionism.” Monet accepts being identified as an impressionist. The name annoys Edgar Degas, who prefers to call himself an “independent” artist.

1876 Second impressionist show includes Edgar Degas' *Madame Camus*, Berthe Morisot's *Hang-*

ing the Laundry Out to Dry, and Claude Monet's *Woman with a Parasol—Madame Monet and Her Son*.

1877 Third impressionist show includes *Flowers in a Rococo Vase* by Paul Cézanne.

1879 Fourth impressionist show includes *Skiffs* by Gustave Caillebotte. Entries by the American expatriate Mary Cassatt and by an Italian painter begin to lend an international scope to the exhibitions.



Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen—plaster statuette*, model 1879–1881, cast c. 1922
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1985.64.62

1881 Sixth impressionist show includes Edgar Degas' sculpture of a fourteen-year-old ballerina, which he had withdrawn at the last minute from the fifth exhibition in 1880. The wax statuette wears a real hair wig, tulle skirt, and satin slippers. Outraged critics decry Degas' “terrible realism” and his choice of “so horrible, so repulsive a model.”

1882 Seventh impressionist show includes Claude Monet's *Vase of Chrysanthemums* and Camille Pissarro's *Peasant Girl with Straw Hat*.

1883 The Parisian art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel sends fifty-seven realist and impressionist canvases, among them Edouard Manet's *Tragic Actor (Rouvière as Hamlet)*, to a commercial trade fair in Boston. This “Foreign Exhibition” offers the first opportunity to purchase avant-garde French art in the United States.



Mary Cassatt, *Girl Arranging Her Hair*, 1886
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.97

1886 The eighth, and last, impressionist exhibition

in Paris includes Berthe Morisot's *In the Dining Room* and Mary Cassatt's *Children Playing on the Beach*. Upon seeing Cassatt's *Girl Arranging Her Hair*, Edgar Degas purchases it, declaring, “What design, what style!”

Of the fifty-five painters who contribute to the various impressionist group shows, half participate merely one time each. The only artist to enter all eight exhibitions is Camille Pissarro.

1897 In New York City, ten artists join in a fellowship called *The Ten American Painters*. Holding annual exhibitions from 1898 to 1906, they are united only by having studied in Europe. Most portray a world of refined gentility; several are impressionists.

The Ten's members—many are represented in nearby American rooms—are Frank Benson, Joseph de Camp, Thomas Dewing, Childe Hassam, Willard Metcalf, Robert Reid, Edward Simmons, Edmund C. Tarbell, John Twachtman, and J. Alden Weir. After Twachtman's death in 1902, William Merritt Chase takes his place.

1908 Exhibiting a total of sixty-three pictures at a sales gallery in New York City, eight American painters call themselves The Eight. Robert Henri leads the group in defying the “fossilized ideas” of the National Academy of Design. Modified versions of the show travel to Philadelphia and Chicago this same year.

Critics nickname them the “Black Gang” and, later, the “Ashcan School” because of their candid scenes of modern urban life. The Eight's realists, all of whom have been sketch illustrators for newspapers as well as Henri's students, are William Glackens, George Luks, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan. The lyrical works of Arthur B. Davies, Ernest Lawson, and Maurice Prendergast reveal French impressionist influences. This room and adjacent galleries display many paintings by The Eight.



Installation of the Armory Show in New York City, 1913 (Photographic Archives, National Gallery of Art)

1913 New York City's *International Exposition of Modern Art* is dubbed the “Armory Show” for its location in a huge arena rented from a regimental armory. About 300 artists—living and dead—are represented by nearly 1,300 paintings, sculpture, and graphics crowded together. (For comparison, this main floor of the National Gallery displays around 1,000 works of art, very widely spaced.) Organized by the American painters Arthur B. Davies and Walt Kuhn, the Armory Show travels in reduced form this same spring to Chicago and Boston.

Among the American participants are James McNeill Whistler, Mary Cassatt, Albert Pinkham Ryder, George Bellows, and most impressionists (The Ten) and realists (The Eight or Ashcan School). William Glackens, who chairs the committee for American entries, shows his large, vividly colored *Family Group* portraying his wife, son, sister-in-law, and a neighbor conversing in his fashionable Fifth Avenue apartment.

European artists include Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Georges Seurat, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Constantin Brancusi, Wassily Kandinsky, and Marcel Duchamp. The nudity in *Parau na te Varua ino (Words of the Devil)* by Paul Gauguin is declared “profanely suggestive.”

Such hostile derision marks the general reaction to this massive introduction of modern art to the United States. Yet for the American artists who participate and for adventurous collectors, patrons, and critics, the Armory Show opens a gateway to the avant-garde.