



Smithsonian
***Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture***
Smithsonian American Art Museum

News

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Media Preview: Tuesday, Oct. 31; 9:30 – 11: 30 a.m.

Smithsonian American Art Museum Presents an Outstanding Private Collection of American Impressionist Paintings

“An Impressionist Sensibility: The Halff Collection,” on view from Nov. 3 through Feb. 4, 2007, presents iconic works by some of America’s most talented and cherished artists. These selected paintings are from Marie and Hugh Halff’s collection, one of the finest private collections of late 19th- and early 20th-century American art. The exhibition is the first time this remarkable collection has been on display in Washington, D.C.

“An Impressionist Sensibility” features 26 paintings by William Merritt Chase, Childe Hassam, Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent and John Twachtman, among other internationally known artists. Marie and Hugh Halff, who live in San Antonio, acquired these masterpieces during the past 20 years. In addition to reflecting the Halff’s keen eye for the finest artworks from this period, the collection also is noteworthy for illustrating the consistency of their vision. The paintings in the collection are linked through a shared sensibility about American cultural aspirations at the turn of the century.

“The Halff collection is an exceptional portrait of America during a cosmopolitan age, when the impressionists opened our borders to new ideas about life and art,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

“An Impressionist Sensibility” charts the development of a generation of artists, how they helped shape the aesthetic taste of the nation and how they responded to the beginnings of modernist impulses in art and society. The exhibition showcases the artists’ distinctly American interpretations of impressionism, which began in France in the early 1870s. Every one of the artists in the Halffs’ collection studied in France between the 1870s and the 1920s. Chase, Sargent and others crossed paths in Paris, London and Venice, drawn by a shared desire to learn from both old and new masters.

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“The Halffs’ collection focuses on a generation of artists who looked to France for crucial training, not so much for the subjects or themes, but for the modern impulses found in impressionism,” said Eleanor Jones Harvey, chief curator at the museum and curator of the exhibition. “Each artist in the exhibition represents a variation on the theme of making American art something truly extraordinary at the turn of the 20th century.”

Impressionism as part of a modernist strategy is exemplified in “The New York Bouquet” by Childe Hassam. He was fascinated with modern transportation, skyscrapers and a sense of innovation. This painting presents the modern face of a city embracing its new position in international commerce. Similarly, Hassam’s “Clearing Sunset (Corner of Berkeley Street and Columbus Avenue)” shows a city under construction, bustling with new growth and full of promise.

John Singer Sargent’s Venetian paintings, such as “The Sulfur Match” and “Sortie de l’église,” also touch upon these new modernist tendencies, both in the subject matter he paints and in his technique. Sargent explores the working-class street life of Venice in scenes that he captures with rapid brushstrokes that have the immediacy of plein-air paintings.

Other paintings in the Halffs’ collection embrace the late 19th-century fascination with Japanese art and culture. A wave of Japanese influence swept across America and Europe in the 1860s with the rising popularity of mass-marketed decorative goods and exhibitions of prints in London, Paris and Boston. The impact of these works on American artists was fueled by James McNeill Whistler’s revolutionary approach to painting with his Asian-inspired subjects and compositions. Paintings by William McGregor Paxton, Charles Sprague Pearce and Edmund C. Tarbell embody this blending of elements from the East and the West often referred to as “japonisme.”

Works in the Halff collection were painted during a period of great change when American artists strove to create works that would be considered worthy of what would come to be called the “American Century.” These artists engaged in a conversation between old and new, tradition and innovation, and East and West, and their work served as a springboard for the next generation of American artists. The Halff collection is a powerful and intimate view into this transformative time.

Public Programs

On Saturday, Nov. 4 at 4 p.m., Eleanor Harvey will lead a discussion about collecting with Marie and Hugh Halff; they will be joined by Barbara Guggenheim, a consultant who advises private collectors, including the Halffs, and corporations about building art collections. This free public program will take place in the museum’s new McEvoy Auditorium. For information on other free programs planned in connection with this exhibition, visit reynoldscenter.org and click on calendar.

Publication

The accompanying book, written by Harvey and co-published by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and D Giles Limited (London) includes more than 75 images. The hardcover catalog is available for \$50 in the museum store and at americanart.si.edu.

Credit

“An Impressionist Sensibility: The Halff Collection” is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,000 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building, a dazzling showcase for American art and portraiture, is located at Eighth and F streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Admission is free. Metrorail station: Gallery Place/Chinatown (Red, Yellow and Green lines). Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 357-1729 (TTY). Recorded information: (202) 275-1500. Web sites: americanart.si.edu and reynoldscenter.org.

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Note to editors: Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 275-1594 for the password. Additional information about the exhibition is available from the museum’s online press room at americanart.si.edu/press.