

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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WILLIAM MERRITT CHASE EXHIBITION AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

EXHIBITION TITLE: William Merritt Chase: Summers at Shinnecock, 1891-1902

WASHINGTON, June 16, 1987 - The National Gallery of Art will present the first exhibition devoted exclusively to the Shinnecock paintings of the American artist, William Merritt Chase (1849-1916). William Merritt Chase: Summers at Shinnecock 1891-1902 will show a selection of what are widely considered to be Chase's finest works, the paintings and pastels he executed during his summers at Shinnecock, Long Island, New York. The exhibition will be on view at the National Gallery's East Building, Sept. 6 through Nov. 29, 1987. It is supported by Bell Atlantic.

"Perhaps the most masterful of all of William Merritt Chase's works are the interior and landscape paintings and pastels he did during the summers he spent at Shinnecock, Long Island," said J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art. "They record the cool interiors of his home and studio, the sun-filled landscapes of the grassy dunes, and the comings and goings of Chase's family. Together, they capture the feeling of lush summer contentment that one draws from these turn-of-the-century settings."

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Shinnecock is located at the eastern end of Long Island, nearly 100 miles from New York City and a few miles west of Southampton. Chase came to Long Island in 1891 to direct the Shinnecock Summer School of Art, the first important school of open-air painting in America. With Chase's reputation as one of America's foremost artists and teachers, the school was an immediate success, attracting more than 100 students each summer, including the famous artists Rockwell Kent, Joseph Stella, Arthur B. Frost and Charles W. Hawthorne.

While he devoted extraordinary time and energy to teaching, Chase's main work at Shinnecock was his own painting. "The Shinnecock years were the climax of Chase's artistic life," said Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., curator of American Art at the National Gallery of Art. "During his summers there he painted with more freshness, feeling, and with greater powers of observation, inspiration and conviction, than at any other time in his career."

William Merritt Chase: Summers at Shinnecock 1891-1902 is organized by Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., curator of American painting at the National Gallery of Art, and D. Scott Atkinson, curator of the Terra Museum of American Art. Nicolai Cikovsky and Scott Atkinson are also the co-authors of the catalogue which will accompany the exhibition. After leaving Washington, the exhibition will be on view at the Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago, Dec. 11 through Feb. 28, 1988.

This is the first in a series of three closely focused exhibitions of masters and masterpieces of American impressionism. The series, supported over the next three years by Bell Atlantic, will celebrate the artistic achievements of William Merritt Chase (1987), Childe Hassam (1988) and John Twachtman (1989).

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EXHIBITION BACKGROUNDER

William Merritt Chase: Summers at Shinnecock, 1891-1902
(National Gallery of Art: Sept. 6 through Nov. 29, 1987)

William Merritt Chase was born Nov. 1, 1849, in Williamsburg (later renamed Nineveh), Indiana, where his early years were spent in comfortable middle-class surroundings. As a child he was said to have displayed great ability in drawing and painting. In his teens this talent was nurtured under the tutelage of local artists in Indianapolis, where the family had resettled in 1861. At age 20, in 1869, Chase moved to New York where he studied with the portrait artist, Joseph O. Eaton, and took classes at the National Academy of Design. After a brief stay in St. Louis, where his family was then living, he went to Munich to study at the Royal Academy.

The six years Chase spent in Munich (1872-1878) represented his coming-of-age as an artist. The recognition he achieved at the Royal Academy was accompanied by growing acclaim for his work back home in America. His painting Keying Up - The Court Jester (1875) was exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876. The portrait Ready for the Ride (1877) was purchased by the prominent American art collector Samuel P. Avery, who donated it to Union League in New York.

When Chase returned to New York in 1878 he did so determined to succeed as a serious artist. He launched his teaching career as an instructor at the newly established Art Students League of New York and then in a masterful stroke, secured a studio in the well-known Tenth Street Studio Building.

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An avid collector of bric-a-brac and assorted objects, Chase filled in his studio with all sorts of exotic items he had begun collecting during his student days in Europe: brass pots, Turkish carpets, Oriental carvings, decorative screens, brocade wall hangings, and stuffed birds. It is said that later in life, when beset with financial problems, Chase would occasionally sell his collection of bric-a-brac, only to buy it all back - and more - when his monetary situation improved.

The Tenth Street Studio was the perfect complement to Chase's own artistic and social temperament. In addition to serving the practical needs of a working artist, the studio soon became a celebrated salon frequented by the progressive artistic figures of the day. Much to his satisfaction, the richly ornamented quarters attracted more attention and publicity than any other artist's studio in the country, and in doing so placed William Merritt Chase firmly in the public eye.

Over the next decade or so Chase conducted a relentless campaign in the cause of art, according to Nicolai Cikovsky. "The impeccable elegance of his manner, his careful dress, precisely trimmed beard, top hat, spats, cane, and boutonniere, proclaimed his belief in the nobility and special dignity of the artistic profession. His lavishly decorated studio was a shrine to Art and a manifesto of Chase's ruling belief that art was nourished by other art and could only be made in its atmosphere."

For the period in which he lived, Chase epitomized the artist. "Chase was a self-made example of his generation's ideal of art," said Cikovsky. "In his ability to keep himself before the public and attract the notice of the press, he was his own chief publicist."

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Indeed Chase's recognition as both a teacher and public spokesman for artistic ideals sometimes rivaled his prominence as an artist. His students, in particular, revered him. Georgia O'Keeffe, one of his pupils at the Art Students League in New York, recalled: "When he entered the building a rustle seemed to flow from the ground floor to the top that 'Chase had arrived'."

In 1886 Chase presented his first one-man show, which was held at the Boston Art Club. The comprehensive exhibition of 133 works (including 25 pastels) attracted much attention and helped solidify his reputation in critical circles. By the end of the decade Chase was highly regarded for his versatile technique and wide range of subject matter: landscapes, still lifes, portraits, figure studies and interiors.

The paintings and pastels of the Shinnecock years are far removed from the old master style of Chase's Munich period or the transitional work of the 1880s. At Shinnecock he painted his wife and children in sunny, cloud-filled landscapes, strolling, reading, sunning, playing games, gathering flowers and picking berries on the sloping hills, or collecting shells at the beach.

"The landscapes Chase painted at Shinnecock are as a group the best paintings he ever made. He caught the spirit of the place and the season so perfectly that we seem to feel the warmth of the sun and the breezes that move the clouds and stir the grass, hear the lapping of waves on the beach, smell the salt air and the aroma of flowers, and squint at the brightness of the light reflected from white dresses," said Cikovsky.

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Chase's new house and studio, designed by his friend, the architect Stanford White, also provided the setting for many of the Shinnecock paintings. "Chase's interiors, the paintings in oil and pastel of his house and studio at Shinnecock, are every bit as beautiful as his landscapes, and in certain ways deeper and more complex as art, more layered in meaning, richer in reference, and more revealing of Chase himself," Cikovsky continued.

Some of the interiors are openly reminiscent of the work of other artists. Hall at Shinnecock (about 1893) and A Friendly Call (about 1895), one of Chase's most beloved works and part of the National Gallery's own collection, both recall Velazquez' Las Meninas. The references to Velazquez are no mere coincidence. Chase saw him as an example among earlier artists of what he himself was trying to do. If there was a ruling artistic presence at Shinnecock, it was that of Velazquez. In Hall at Shinnecock Chase himself is reflected in the mirrored door of the armoire, as the king and queen are reflected in Las Meninas, though in a pose that mimics in reverse the pose of Velazquez at his easel.

In many respects, Chase's final years were spent reaping the benefits of all that he worked for during the previous years. There were numerous awards, both at home and abroad, and occasional bursts of the old creativity. But as Cikovsky has said, "Never before and never after did Chase sustain the same consistent level of achievement of the Shinnecock years."

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Bell Atlantic™

Bell Atlantic is honored to join with the National Gallery of Art in sponsoring Masters and Masterpieces of American Impressionism: Three Exhibitions. The series will feature three of America's greatest Impressionist painters, beginning with an exhibition of the work of William Merritt Chase in September, 1987. The other artists featured will be Childe Hassam in the Spring of 1988 and John Twachtman in the Winter of 1989.

With the opening of the first exhibition, Bell Atlantic and the National Gallery are embarking on a new joint venture. This is the first time Bell Atlantic has sponsored an art exhibition; it is also the first time the National Gallery has planned a series of related exhibitions. Each of the exhibitions will be small and intimate -- none will comprise more than 25 paintings -- in order to focus on American Impressionism at its most beautiful and impressive moments.

For Bell Atlantic, this exhibition demonstrates our traditional commitment to support the communities where we operate and where our employees and customers live. The National Gallery of Art is an institution of national and worldwide prominence. Located in our region, it provides art and educational experience for the residents of those communities we and the National Gallery have the privilege to serve.

We also are pleased to be able to offer visitors from all over the world the opportunity to learn more about great American artists and their work. Bell Atlantic is engaged principally in the field of communications -- and what greater, more direct communication can there be than the magic an artist creates.

Thomas E. Bolger
Chairman and
Chief Executive Officer

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