The First Thirty Years

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The exhibition Three Centuries of American Painting, which opens on April 9 and will run through October 17, provides an appropriate occasion for a review of some of the forgotten aspects of the Metropolitan Museum's collection. One of the most interesting phases of this development is the growth of the collection in the three decades before 1900, when the Museum depended almost entirely on the generosity of donors of works of art, for lack of sufficient funds to buy pictures. Many important American paintings were acquired in this period, however, and these formed the nucleus about which the present collection, acquired for the most part in the twentieth century, was gathered.

At the time of the foundation of the Museum many of the most prominent artists of New York were active participants in forwarding the project. When the Metropolitan was chartered in 1870 some of these men were listed among the founders, notably the

1. The Wages of War, 1849, by Henry Peters Gray (1819-1877). Oil on canvas, 48½ x 76½ inches. Gift of Several Gentlemen, 73.5

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landscape painter John F. Kensett, the portrait painters Daniel Huntington and Eastman Johnson, the sculptor John Q. A. Ward, and Samuel P. Avery, who, although trained as an engraver, was then one of the most prominent art dealers in the city. The presence of these professionals naturally oriented the institution to the acquisition and display of the work of American artists, and of study materials for the instruction and inspiration of American art students. Thus, although one of the first actions of the Trustees was the purchase of a collection of old masters (mostly Flemish and Dutch), it was in response to the longstanding plea of American artists for European paintings to study. Before this collection was opened to the public it was shown to the artists of New York at a special reception and preview.
2. *Polyhymnia*: Mrs. Francis C. Barlow, 1869, by Joseph Fagnani (1819-1873). Oil on canvas, 43\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 33\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Gift of an Association of Gentlemen, 74.45

3. Alexander Hamilton, about 1804, by John Trumbull (1756-1843). Oil on canvas, 30\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 24\(\frac{3}{8}\) inches. Gift of Henry J. Marquand, 81.11


5. George Washington, 1803, by Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828). Oil on canvas, 29\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 24\(\frac{3}{8}\) inches. Gift of H. O. Havemeyer, 88.18

6. Scene from Orlando Furioso, about 1793, by Benjamin West (1738-1820). Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 inches. Deposited by Mrs. Arthur Seguin, 1881. Purchase, Maria DeWitt Jesup Fund, 95.22.1


OPPOSITE:
9. The American School, 1765, by Matthew Pratt (1734-1805). Oil on canvas, 36 x 50 1/4 inches. Gift of Samuel P. Avery, 97.29.3
The domination of European traditions and European taste is strongly evident in the first painting by an American artist to come to the Museum, The Wages of War (Figure 1) by Henry Peters Gray, presented in 1873. It is a curious picture, by a New York painter now more or less forgotten, yet it records a significant moment in the history of American painting. It was painted in 1849, after the artist had been in Italy, and in it one finds echoes of his study of Giorgione and Titian. In buying the picture and presenting it to the Museum the donors were honoring the artist not so much for his art as for his extraordinary success in managing a fund-raising campaign in 1865 that resulted in putting the National Academy of Design on a sound financial basis. Thus the picture has a peculiar local historical significance to add to its awkward charms as a relic of an age of artistic innocence. Perhaps this strange canvas should be considered an academic "primitive," since it has a dangerously close relationship to the allegorical panels that used to adorn steamboats, fire engines, and circus wagons.

In the 1870s the Museum’s progress in making a permanent collection of paintings was greatly hampered by the financial panic of 1873 and the following five or six years of depression. Fifty-three American paintings were acquired by gift, but of these thirty-eight were unfinished landscape studies by John F. Kensett. When the contents of Kensett’s studio were put up at auction after his death these pictures were considered unsuitable for sale because of their unfinished state, and were presented to the Museum in 1874. At first they were exhibited as a group called The Last Summer’s Work, but as better examples of Kensett’s work were acquired these pictures were retired to the reserve collection. Nine of the others, moreover, formed a group of portraits of contemporary belles by Joseph Fagnani, which was presented by “an association of gentlemen” in the same year as the Kensett gift. This quaint suite of pictures was known as American Beauty Personified as the Nine Muses. “I think,” said one of the misses (Figure 2) later, “they all look like ladies on prune boxes.” At any rate, they joined the unfinished Kensets in the reserve early in the twentieth century.

The Museum’s first director, General Luigi Palma di Cesnola, suggested in 1879 that the
Museum should collect pictures by early American painters, a suggestion conscientiously pursued during his long directorate (1879-1904). In the eighties, twenty-nine American pictures were added to the collection, and in general their quality and interest show a decided improvement over the pictures received in the previous decade. In 1881 a serious beginning to the collection of early American pictures was made when Henry Marquand presented a portrait of Alexander Hamilton (Figure 3) by John Trumbull, and the Trustees subscribed to a fund for the purchase of a portrait of David Sears by Gilbert Stuart. In the same year Robert Hoe gave the portrait of Alexander Anderson (Figure 4) by John Wesley Jarvis, a beautiful and lively sketch that is perhaps as good a demonstration of Jarvis’s technical skill as can be found. When the picture was received in 1881 some later hand had “finished” it by filling in the background and smoothing over the dashing strokes in the face, reducing it to a commonplace, run-of-the-mill effigy, but the recent removal of the later repaint and heavy brown varnish have freed Jarvis’s work and reveal the attractive features of the subject. Anderson was known in the later years of the nineteenth century as “the father of American wood-engraving,” for he worked as an engraver in New York from boyhood, in 1787, until 1868, when he was ninety-three years old.

Among the other early pictures received in the 1880s was a Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington (Figure 5), known as the “Carroll Washington” to differentiate it from Stuart’s many other replicas of his famous Athenæum portrait. This was the first of many important gifts received from H. O. Havemeyer. (His famous collection of paintings and other works of art was given to the Museum in 1929 as the bequest of Mrs. Havemeyer.) Another interesting early American picture received in the eighties was the James Peale portrait of Washington at Yorktown, from the collection of William Henry Huntington.

The collection of paintings by Benjamin West has a long and curious history. A group of nine paintings by (or attributed to) him was lent to the Museum in 1881 by Mrs. Arthur Seguin and remained as a loan from her heirs until 1923, when they were purchased for a modest sum to settle the estate of her daughter-in-law. Mr. and Mrs. Seguin had both been noted opera singers, who came from London to settle in this country about 1838. They are said to have received their collection of Wests in England as collateral for a loan. At least three of the pictures, including a spirited scene from Orlando Furioso (Figure 6), are known to have been painted by West to hang in his own gallery and studio in Newman Street, London, and to have been sold at auction by his sons in 1829.

A number of interesting modern pictures were also added to the collection in the eighties. Perhaps the most important of them were The
Chess Players (Figure 7) by Thomas Eakins, presented by the artist, and the group of paintings by George Fuller and George Inness presented by George I. Seney in 1887. However, the painting that aroused the greatest interest then was The Spanish Quartette (Figure 8) by William Dammat, a huge tour de force that established the reputation of the painter when it was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1884. At least one French critic, Albert Wolf, claimed that it was the best piece of painting in the Salon. In the Paris Exposition of 1889 this picture occupied the place of honor in the American section. Today it stands as a monument to the French academic influence that had such a profound effect on American painting of the time.

In the 1890s several very important early American pictures were given. The large retrospective exhibition of American paintings in the winter of 1895-1896 helped lay the groundwork for the acquisition of several pictures received many years later. For example, two Dering family portraits by Joseph Blackburn that were borrowed for the exhibition were presented to the Museum twenty years later. A number of other pictures in the exhibition were also given to the Museum, the most notable of these being the now famous conversation group The American School (Figure 9) by Matthew Pratt. It is an important document in American art history, showing Benjamin West in his London studio surrounded by some of his American pupils. The picture was painted in 1765, and its historic significance somewhat overshadows its artistic shortcomings. It was bought by Samuel Avery from the artist’s daughters and given to the Museum in 1897. In the same year Collis P. Huntington presented the Charles Willson Peale full-length portrait of George Washington (Figure 11). This is a replica of the portrait painted in 1779, with minor changes in costume and background.

Two landscapes were received in 1895 from the collection of Jonathan Sturges, who had been one of the most liberal patrons of American painters in the 1840s: Thomas Cole’s View on the Catskill—Early Autumn, and Asher B. Durand’s In the Woods (Figure 10). View on the Catskill was painted in 1837 and is considered one of Cole’s best works. Durand’s romantic vision of the American wilderness, painted in 1855, won similar praise from the time it was first shown at the National Academy of Design. Another picture of note in the history of American painting is the humorous genre scene Raffling for the Goose (Figure 14) by William Sidney Mount. Some critics complained that Mount should apply his talents to subjects of a more genteel character. His preoccupation with rural barnyard scenes was not in keeping with their romantic
ideal of an artist "seeking the Beautiful." Fortunately, Mount paid these refined gentlemen little heed. Among the early portraits acquired in the 1890s were Charles Elliott's portrait of the famous Civil War photographer Mathew Brady, a self-portrait by Thomas Sully (Figure 13), and Henry Inman's portrait of President Martin Van Buren.

In the 1890s over thirty contemporary American pictures were added to the collection, among them some that have remained continuously popular. One of them is George Inness's Peace and Plenty, given in 1894 by George A. Hearn. Two additional paintings by Inness were also acquired, The Pine Grove of the Villa Barberini and a landscape of the Delaware Valley. Another popular landscape was Homer Martin's Harp of the Winds. Among the portraits acquired in this decade were Sargent's masterly rendering of Henry Marquand, then president of the Museum (Figure 12); Eastman Johnson's large double portrait (Figure 15) called The Funding Bill (because the two subjects were discussing this hot political issue when Johnson painted them); and John Alexander's idealized portrait of Walt Whitman.

Not to be forgotten is Emmanuel Leutze's colossal Washington Crossing the Delaware, which is now deposited on loan at the Wash-
This picture, in spite of its historical inaccuracy and theatrical Germanic style, has become, by repeated publication in schoolbooks, one of the most widely known paintings in America. It is one of the permanent monuments in the folklore of history, regardless of its position as a work of art.

Shortly after the turn of the century, purchase funds became available and a new generation of trustees, administrators, and curators took over, bringing to a close the first phase of the history of the Museum. Fortunately, the well-established custom of giving pictures to the Museum has continued to the present, and the gifts have been supplemented with pictures the Museum was able to purchase, so that the collection of American paintings now numbers over 1250 and forms a panorama from colonial times to the present. It illustrates every phase of American painting and reflects every artistic influence that affected American painters over the last three hundred years. It also reflects the changes in taste among patrons and collectors, and gives sound evidence of the American tradition of generosity and concern with the welfare of artists and the arts.

15. The Funding Bill, 1881, by Eastman Johnson (1824-1906). Oil on canvas, 60½ x 78¼ inches. Gift of Robert Gordon, 98.14