

A Historical Review of American Impressionist Painting:  
California Plein Air Painters and The Cape Cod School of Art

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### Abstract

Impression was a seed that began to bud in France where artists such as Claude Monet, Edouard Manet, Auguste Renoir and Edgar Degas began to notice the subtle changes that natural light had on a form. These artists began painting outdoors in the natural light in order to capture the moment or impression of a scene. This excitement for color and light spread to America as artists traveled abroad and brought back their excitement to other artists and students. Many artists have played a part in carrying on the traditions of the French Impressionists. Several such artists in California were William Wendt, who started the California Art Club, Edgar Payne, who founded the Laguna Beach Art Association and Guy Rose, who spent much of his life in France painting at Giverny. Artist, William Merritt Chase started the tradition of painting and teaching impressionistic techniques which he in turn passed on to student, Charles Webster Hawthorne, who opened the Cape Cod School of Art in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He then passed on the teaching torch to master artist Henry Hensche who died in 1992. Although the Impressionist painters in France began their tradition of painting outdoors in the 1860s, even today in America, the traditions and teachings of the Impressionist painters continue to be passed on to artists today.

### Impressionism: How it Began

In 1841, the American artist and scientist, John Rand would forever change painting when he created portable tin tubes which held a pre-mixed oil paint. Before this time artists painted mainly inside because of the cumbersome materials and no good way of transporting them on site. If artists created works of art on location, they were more sketches, than finished works. With the new tubes of paint, artists were now free to paint on location where they were able to capture the natural light and impression of the moment. In the 1850s the art of realist painters such as Gustave Courbet was not accepted by the French academies because of the subject matter he portrayed in his work as well as the flat treatment of the paint. He chose to render the real life scenes of rural or working life instead of the religious or historical subjects previously represented (Kindersley). By the 1860s artist Edouard Manet began painting in a way that his brush strokes could be seen. Because of the tubes of paint Rand had invented, artists were now able to work outside to capture the atmosphere and therefore brushstrokes often became fast in order to catch the impression of the light (Kindersley). French artists had begun to notice the subtle changes created from natural light as they would capture the light in everyday views and by the middle of the 1880s American artists began to paint pleasing scenes of gardens or high society also depicting the beauty of the light as well (National Gallery of Art). Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Auguste Renoir were several of the French artists who believed that what one saw in nature was the light reflected from forms and that light could be interpreted through color. These

artists took their paint and canvas outside in order to convey the impression of the experience. Like the art of Courbet, similarly Impressionist art was also rejected from the academies. Impressionist artists would meet together in cafes to talk about their art and new techniques as they arranged exhibitions of their own (Kindersley).

After Impressionism in France came on the scene other groups of artists began challenging old ideas of art. Postimpressionism and Neo-Impressionism came on the scene in Europe in the 1880s just as American artists were catching on to Impressionism techniques in their artwork. In reaction to Realism and Impressionism, Symbolism and Expressionism emerged. Artists began exploring the edges and boundaries in art hoping to evoke a connection and emotional response from viewers. Fauvism, which also came after Impressionism, was called that because of the wild colors the artists used as well as their broken brushstrokes. Shortly after the turn of the century artists such as Henri Matisse and Andre Derain were stirring a frenzy among critics with their bright, high-keyed fauvist paintings. From these styles many others emerged such as Cubism from 1907 to the 1920s as well as Futurism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Constructivism came on the scene shortly after Cubism, alongside a resurgence of Realism in America (Kindersley). Not only was Realism still on the scene in 1950, but Impressionism in America has also managed to live on through the traditions of painters passing the techniques on to new artists.

### How Impressionism Came to America:

Several artists from the United States, including Willard Metcalf, Theodore Robinson, John Singer Sargent, Guy Rose and Frederick Frieseke, visited Giverny from the mid-1880s and on through the century. They were fascinated with the techniques used by the French Impressionists and therefore visited where Monet lived. These artists returned to the United States and shared their excitement with others thus leading to the American impressionist school which was lead by William Wendt on the west coast and Childe Hassam in the east (Plein Air Painters of America). Impressionism was also brought to America through exhibitions the French artists had such as the Impressionist exhibition featuring the work of Claude Monet which was held in 1874 (Gerdts). Some of these artists also spread Impressionism in America by learning from one another in artist groups and by teaching the techniques in Art Student Leagues, such as the ones in New York and New Jersey. Art colonies, for example, the Old Lyme Art Colony at Florence Griswold's, were instrumental in passing on the techniques Willard Metcalf and Childe Hassam learned from Impressionists in France. Whereas the Old Lyme School in Connecticut focused more on landscapes, the Boston School centered its attention more on the figure. In 1892 in order to promote Impressionism, the Cosmopolitan Art Club was formed in the Midwest. After the Columbian Exposition in Illinois in 1893, the Hoosier School was a place for Impressionism to flourish in Indiana, and in 1894, Hamlin Garland formed the Central Art Association and the Society of Western Artists came together in 1896 (Gerdts).

Ten years after several French Impressionist artists had an exhibition of painting in America in Boston in 1883, the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago exhibited works of Impressionism by American artists. Following this exposition, in 1898, several American artists formed a group called "The Ten," in order to promote and exhibit their work. These artists were Frank W. Benson, Joseph De Camp, Thomas W. Dewing, Childe Hassam, Willard L. Metcalf, Robert Reid, E.E. Simmons, Edmund C. Tarbell, John H. Twachtman, Alden Weir, and William Merritt Chase after Twachtman's death (Stern). At the turn of the century Impressionism was spreading quickly through organized art groups, classes at art student leagues and artist colonies, and would occasionally enter the college or university if a professor was well versed in the techniques. One example of this was in New Jersey where the leading Impressionist in the state at the time was Edward Dufner, who was also a major instructor at the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy and stayed until 1908 when he left to teach at the Art Students League (Gerdts).

#### The Tradition Continues in the West

From American Impressionism and the original group of artists, many other painters and groups of artists have grown. The California and western plein air painters were gathering in California at the beginning of the twentieth century which was just slightly after the time the artists from the east began organizing groups at the end of the previous century. The warmer weather and sunshine of southern California was a draw for many of the artists who painted outside. At the start of the twentieth century, plein air artists who were a part of

the California art scene were individuals such as Granville Redmond, Hanson D. Puthuff, Marion Kavanagh Wachtel, Franz A. Bischoff, William Wendt, Jack Wilkinson Smith, George Gardner Symons, Jean Mannheim, Maurice Braun, as well as Edgar Payne and Elsie Palmer Payne who made visits to California from Chicago. In 1909 Wendt, who was mainly a self-taught artist who had taken several art courses, became the founding member of the California Art Club and became an important member of the art colony at Laguna Beach. Also mainly self-taught, was the artist Edgar Payne, who founded and became the first president of the Laguna Beach Art Association in 1918. Another prominent artist from California was Guy Rose, who studied art in New York and Paris, until 1904 when he and his wife moved to Giverny and bought Monet's home (Stern).

#### Teaching Traditions Continue in the East

On the east coast of America, American Impressionism was led by William Merritt Chase who started out more of a tonalist painter, but by the 1880s had introduced a lighter and brighter palette and adopted the short brushstrokes of the Impressionist painters in France (McBride). In 1878, Chase became the founder of Chase School of Art in New York, which is now Parsons School of Design. Several years later Chase opened a plein air art school at Shinnecock where he took the students outside to paint and modeled his instruction after the French Impressionists (McBride). Chase was not only known for his paintings, but also for his ability to teach and share with other artists about his knowledge of painting techniques. In 1893 Chase was a visiting instructor for the Art Institute of Chicago and its school. One of Chase's students was Charles Webster

Hawthorne, who enrolled at the Art Students League in 1894 as a night student while he worked during the day. In 1896 Hawthorne experienced outdoor painting during a summer session with Chase at Shinnecock. In 1898 Hawthorne spent a year abroad in Holland, which in turn inspired him to open the Cape Cod School of Art in Provincetown, Massachusetts upon his return. Here Hawthorne would not only pass-on the outdoors or plein air painting techniques he had learned from Chase, but would also carry on the tradition of strong, enthusiastic teaching that Chase had exhibited in his instruction.

Hawthorne had a simple, friendly, and humble approach to his teaching which in turn attracted many other artists to the area. By 1916 Provincetown had drawn artists such as George Ault, Gifford Beal, Reynolds Beal, Henry Demuth, Childe Hassam, Ernest Lawson, Ellen Ravenscroft, Ben Shahn, Agnes Weinrich, and William Zorach and became the largest art colony in the world. Other instructors and students such as John Noble, Richard Miller and Max Bohm came to the Cape Cod area to participate in Hawthorne's weekly talks and critiques where he would share his ideas without forcing them on his students (Lauren Rogers Museum of Art). Hawthorne would give a painting demonstration on Friday mornings and a critique on Saturday mornings. Students were encouraged to do as many studies as possible in order to focus on the fundamental relationships of color areas and color spots and to have a dozen of them for the Saturday critique (Hawthorne). Hawthorne suggested that his students use palette knives to put the paint on the canvas to help students focus on the large shapes of color (Henry Hensche Foundation). Hawthorne believed



that the job of the painter hinged on their ability to see and not much more than that mattered (Hawthorne). Hawthorne's basic teachings of Monet's impressionistic principles continued even as others moved on to other styles of art. His unpretentious teachings focused on the basic fundamentals of art (Lauren Rogers Museum of Art). Not only did he focus on the basics of color relationships, but he would also relate visual art and colors placed next to one another to music notes and how different sounds or tones enhance the others, just as they do in painting color spots. Music was another of his loves, just as painting. He played the cornet and the cello. He tended to relate music and visual art together quite often as he made analogies and drew parallel relationships during his critiques. Just as a musician is disciplined in their practice, Hawthorne would start early and get to his studio by eight o'clock each morning. From this discipline, he was able to create a large amount of artworks (Hawthorne).

Just as Hawthorne learned from Chase, Henry Hensche would learn all he could from Hawthorne. Henry Hensche was born in 1901 and came to the Cape Cod School of Art in 1919 in order to study under Hawthorne. In 1927 he became an assistant instructor at the school and from 1928 to 1930, he would teach the classes during the week as well as give critiques (Henry Hensche Foundation). In 1930 because of Hawthorne's early death, the school was closed. In order to continue the tradition Hensche reopened the doors in 1935 and his reputation developed in a way that came to outshine that of his teacher.

Hensche, however, always made sure that the students who came to Provincetown knew the history and theories of Hawthorne.

Hensche also stayed true to the Impressionistic roots from Monet with the ability to see light being the huge element that influences the colors in the paintings. Hensche also made sure to pass on Hawthorne's key to the success of painting being "seeing." Being able to see the subtle differences in color were compared to that of a musician being able to hear subtle tone differences. How one perceives light and color in nature were essential to Hensche. Hensche developed his teaching style so that students would understand not only what to paint, but how to see colors and light with a greater precision. He included color block studies in his lessons of light key, masses, and variations of masses (Lauren Rogers Museum of Art). The simplified color blocks allowed students the freedom to concentrate on color and not have to worry about painting the complex shapes found in portraits. His goal in instruction was to have the pupils refine the large shapes and break the colors down from main masses to major and minor variations within a color plane. One of Hensche's favorite quotes was from Paul Cezanne as he would repeat in class, "every form change is a color change." He, like Hawthorne, had his students paint and mix colors using palette knives. Hensche took the tone-based paintings and transitioned them into works of art that included a full spectrum of color (Henry Hensche Foundation). One of his students summed up what he learned in several key statements one of which was to "See the light, not the object. The object is the light" (Robichaux). Both

Hawthorne and Hensche believed that the ability to see and the ability to see light on an object were of essential importance in painting.

Henry Hensche carried on the tradition of master teacher at the Cape Cod School of Art in Provincetown from 1932 until 1984. In 1987 when he was 87 years old he sold the school to Lois Griffel for one dollar and when he changed his mind the next day, she would not give it back. She tried to run the school for about ten years on her own, but finally gave up and sold the land to developers (Egeli). Lois Griffel wrote the book, *Painting the Impressionistic Landscape* which was published in 1994. In her book she talks about Chase, Hawthorne and Hensche and the legacy they left as painters who focused not just on the tones and local color of an object, but she describes the importance they placed on seeing an object's colors with the influence of light and atmosphere. Griffel also talks about a color being affected by the other colors surrounding the color (Griffel). This was not only one of Hawthorne's main ideas, but also an idea from the French chemist Michel-Eugene Chevreul, who did extensive studies on color relationships after he noticed that colors, once woven into a tapestry, looked different next to other colors. Chevreul published his book, *The Law of Simultaneous Contrast of Colors*, in 1839 where he describes the effect colors have on one another. In the 1960s, artist Joseph Albers explored these theories further in many of his paintings where colors interact (Luke). Griffel devotes a section of her book to simultaneous contrast and how Hawthorne accounted for color spots in relation to one another. She also goes into detail describing how the color block studies are done in order to study light and color in different

atmospheres (Griffel). Hensche used the color blocks in order to help budding artists see the light and colors more clearly, as well as practice mixing the colors of simple colored blocks before painting still life studies and landscapes using the same principles.

Susan Sarback, the founder of The School of Light and Color in Fair Oaks California in 1986, was also a student of Henry Hensche who now passes on the tradition of painting colors in a way that show they are affected by the time of day, the season, the weather condition, and all the colors surrounding the subject as well as the way the light that is affecting the subject. She teaches courses inside and outside at her school, as well as travels around the country teaching other artists the methods used by Hawthorne and Hensche at the Cape Cod School of Art. Her book, *Capturing Radiant Light and Color in Oils and Soft Pastels*, which was published in 2007, describes the color block studies, as well as techniques and tips in seeing color that she learned from spending years studying with Hensche. She breaks down a painting into four stages, much like Hawthorne and Hensche did. Stage one is an underpainting that defines the light, value and temperature of the major masses. Stage two of the painting is to refine the major masses according to the color relationships now that they are all on the canvas. In stage three the artist begins to find variations in the major masses. During the final stage the artist adjusts the edges of objects by adding variety and interest where the masses join together (Sarback, 2007). Sarback, like Griffel, continues to teach and pass on the painting techniques from the early Impressionists. Because many of the techniques of using full spectrum color are

not taught or found in colleges and universities, Sarback is called on to teach artists from around the world including animators from Steven Spielberg's Dream Works company (Sarback, 2010).

There are other artists passing on the traditions as well. One of Hensche's students of 25 years, Sammy Britt, has taught at Delta State University in Cleveland Mississippi since 1966 where he passes on the plein air tradition of Hensche, Hawthorne, Chase, and Monet to his students. Gerald DeLoach, Richard Kelso and George T. Thurmond are three of his students who also hope to help carry Impressionism to the next generations of artists and studied under Hensche as well (Lauren Rogers Museum of Art). Artists in California also pass on the traditions started in the west through classes and groups of plein air artists that band together. The Plein Air Painters of America is an organization that was founded in 1986 and they dedicate themselves to painting outdoors in the natural light and atmosphere. These artists teach workshops around the country as well as participate in art shows and paint outs together. The California Art Club that was founded in 1909 still exists today as artists in the group participate in painting together and teaching workshops to those interested in learning the techniques of plein air artists.

The tiny seed that John Rand planted in 1841 as he invented a portable tin paint tube was the start of an outdoor painting tradition that continues in America today. The French painters from the 1860s started a technique of painting that focused on the natural light and atmosphere found outside. As they continued to make discoveries about color and color relationships to light and

season, paintings began to capture the impression of the fleeting moment. The Impressionism tradition was brought back to America by several enthusiastic artists and teachers who were able to pass the tradition on to other excited artists and teachers. The Impressionism tradition that began in France almost 150 years ago, still lives strong in America as artists from coast to coast continue to teach the essential keys to painting light using color.

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