



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

Long-Awaited Catalogue Raisonné of Childe Hassam Makes Great Progress

Pandemic self-quarantine has been a boon for data entry



ONE OF THE MOST PROLIFIC and creative exponents of American Impressionism, Childe Hassam (1859–1935) applied his distinctive vision to a range of themes, including landscapes, figural subjects, and gardens. Hassam was among the first American impressionists to focus his attention on the urban environment, depicting aspects of modern life in Paris, Boston, and New York, as well as in other cities abroad. Hassam’s aesthetic versatility was also manifested through his choice of media, which ranged from oil and watercolor to pastel, etching, and lithography.

In retrospect it is rather surprising that an artist of Hassam’s stature was not already the subject of in-depth scholarly study or treated to the ultimate acknowledgement of a significant artistic legacy, the catalogue raisonné. But in the early 1970s traditional American art, from Colonial and Federal to Hudson River School and Impressionism, was only beginning to experience a resurgence of interest. In 1976, the year of the American Bicentennial, art dealer Stuart Feld of Hirschl & Adler Galleries chose to devote his attention to Hassam and compile a complete directory of the artist’s known works in oil, watercolor, pastel, ink, and graphite. “In 1976,” Feld recalls, “I had been to the doctor for a back issue and he prescribed staying off my feet for a couple of weeks. I needed a project to occupy my time and compiling a catalogue raisonné of Childe Hassam seemed like the perfect choice. Who could have imagined that it would grow to become so huge?”



Woman at the Door, c. 1889. Watercolor on paper, 14 3/4 x 10 in.

Hirschl & Adler provided a good foundation for Feld’s study of Hassam. In the 1950s and ’60s it had already handled scores of pictures by him, and in 1964 had staged an ambitious gallery show of his work with museum loans at a time when “Hassam” was not yet a household name among art collectors. The catalogue raisonné project was now underway.

The Hassam catalogue project grew to such an extent that help was desperately needed. In 1978, Kathleen Burnside interned at



Seascape: Appledore, Isles of Shoals, 1902. Oil on canvas, 14 1/4 x 19 1/2 in.

Hirschl & Adler and started cataloguing works by the artist. She joined the firm full time after college in 1979. Burnside remembers that these early years were strictly “manual entry”—type-scripts, handwritten notes on scraps of paper, and thick loose-leaf binders with document sheets, photographs, and color transparencies of works of art organized by date, and occasionally, by location. With the advent of computers in the 1980s the growing Hassam database was digitized. This presented a new set of

challenges, as accumulated records of well over a thousand pictures now had to be re-entered—more than once, as it turned out, as the first digital database was not “Y2K compliant.”

Burnside took a break from working full time on the Hassam project in the late 1980s and '90s to raise three daughters. She notes that her “Rip van Winkle” hiatus worked to the project’s advantage: “In the interim, American art scholarship had advanced by leaps and bounds, database technology had



Feeding the Pigeons in the Piazza, c. 1890–91. Watercolor on paper, 20 7/8 x 12 in.

matured, and research resources had been placed online.” Feld puts it in further perspective: “When we first started the project, certain bits of information were impossible to find, but now with a wealth of online resources, information is much easier to come by. But first you need to know what you are looking for! Our

legwork at the beginning of this project put us on the right path.”

Fast forward to 2020. Even before the coronavirus pandemic put day-to-day life on hold around the world, Feld and Burnside had ramped up their work on the Hassam catalogue project. In the 44 years since the project began, the catalogue now includes between three and four thousand entries, spanning Hassam’s active years from 1880 until 1934. “Like many artists working in an impressionist idiom, Hassam was very prolific,” Burnside said. “Our cataloguing includes paintings, watercolors, pastels, and drawings—everything except for Hassam’s prints, which were catalogued and published in the mid-1920s.” Feld further notes that if a drawing served as a preliminary study for an etching or lithograph, then the final print will be illustrated in the entry for the drawing. “In a couple of instances, a lost drawing is known to have inspired a particular print,” Feld said. “In such cases the print will be illustrated in our catalogue as a place holder for the lost drawing.”

The global pandemic’s weeks of self-quarantine has had unintended consequences for Feld and Burnside: ample time to enter data, and plenty of hours in the day in which to write. According to Burnside, “Self-quarantine has been a boon for data entry!” The team has uncovered a wealth of new information, much of which has never been published, and certainly never so thoroughly organized and accessible. “Every single work in the catalogue will get an essay,” Feld said. “Some are only

two or three sentences, but the essays for Hassam's most important pictures will be pages long."

After over four decades of joint work on the Hassam project, it should come as no surprise that Feld and Burnside have not only an appreciation of the full spectrum of work by this pivotal figure in American Impressionism, but also a special affection for one period or subject type. And in this, the two scholars are in lock step. "I think Hassam's street scenes done in Paris, Boston, and New York between 1887 and the 1890s are absolutely spectacular," Feld notes. Burnside agrees that his urban street scenes are remarkable. "Hassam was a man of his time. His works from the 1890s seem intent on recording the dawn of the modern era: the first trolley in Gloucester, electric street lighting, and even the smog and smoke that impart atmosphere to city skylines." Hassam would in all probability agree with their assessment. He once remarked that a city's asphalt-paved streets were "very pretty when [they were] wet and shining and caught the reflections of passing people and vehicles." In 1893, one critic suggested that Hassam was "much happier with a wet sidewalk than with a mass of flowers." Hassam relished urban life; he considered New York "the most beautiful city in the world."

In the course of her work on the project Burnside also has developed a special passion for Hassam's pastels. "Hassam rode the surging wave of interest in pastel in America in the 1890s," she said. "He was really proficient at this demanding medium and did many



Four-in-Hand at the Grand Prix, Paris, 1889.
Pastel on brown paper, 14 x 10 in.

Executed during Hassam's second visit to Paris, this pastel was exhibited in the 1890 Society of American Painters in Pastel show at Wunderlich Gallery, New York.

beautiful pastels in the Boston area in the autumn of 1891. In my opinion, Hassam was at the apex of his career at the time." Hassam began working in pastel during his second visit to Paris in the mid-1880s. He was no doubt attracted to pastel's wide array of hues, its easy portability, and its dry, velvety quality, which allowed him to manipulate it according to the spontaneous effects he wished to achieve.



A Wet Day on Broadway, 1891. Pastel on fine-weave canvas, 18 x 21 7/8 in.

The storefront of A. A. Vantine & Co. at 877–879 Broadway is visible across Broadway at the far right.

Hassam continued to use pastel after moving to New York, joining the short-lived Society of American Painters in Pastel in 1890. He subsequently exhibited in the Society's fourth and final show, held that same year. Hassam's virtuosity as a "painter in pastel" soon evolved to the extent that, on the occasion of an exhibition of his oils, watercolors, and pastels at a New York art gallery in December 1891, a

writer for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* observed: "In whatever medium he chooses to work Mr. Hassam is vivid and eccentric, though he lets himself out with rather more of a swing in pastel than in anything else."

Nowhere is Hassam's virtuosity in pastel better demonstrated than in *A Wet Day on Broadway* from 1891. The picture looks south on Broadway at 18th Street toward Union

Square. The domed silhouette of the Domestic Sewing Machine Building at Broadway and 14th Street looms in the background through the smoky mist of a rainy day in the great metropolis. In the foreground, pedestrians rush along rain-soaked sidewalks and hansom cabs queue up at curbside to convey shoppers to and from the carriage-trade shops that made this section of Broadway the heart of the city's fashionable shopping district. On the far side of Broadway, the sign for A. A. Vantine & Co. peeks through the rain. Vantine's was a popular wholesale and retail importing house that specialized in East Asian art and artifacts, particularly those from Japan. Its vast inventory was legendary; shortly after it opened, the *New York Times* breathlessly proclaimed, "Nowhere, that we know of, are there so many little wonders, in so little space, as at Vantine's."

Business prospered at Vantine's during the Aesthetic era, and the store outgrew its home no fewer than four times in two decades. In 1883, Vantine's "Oriental Store" moved to the Hoyt Building at 877–879 Broadway, the storefront depicted by Hassam in his pastel masterpiece.

"Catalogues raisonnés are generational projects," Burnside notes. If this is true, then the long-awaited Childe Hassam catalogue raisonné, begun by Stuart Feld as a project to fill his time as he recuperated from a bad back in 1976, put into high gear in 1995, and anticipated for over three decades, is right on schedule.