

## CHAPTER ONE

# AND LIKE THAT . . . THEY'RE GONE

THE ASHCAN ARTISTS DREW A PART OF THE CITY NOT PREVIOUSLY THE SUBJECT OF GREAT ART, capturing the laundry lines, the crowded quarters, the smokestacks, and yes, the ashcans of the urban working class.

Befitting an analysis of such iconoclastic work, this study also takes a different approach. This is not a work of art history; there will be no attempt to analyze the aesthetics of the Ashcan painters, the brushstrokes they employed to tell their stories. Rather, this is explicitly a work of history—not art history—and should be understood within that discipline.

Instead, the vantage point will be that of a social historian; it is content that concerns us here. What did the Ashcan artists contribute to our understanding of the city during its boom era in American history? And what do these answers tell us about the development of American society when it was being transformed by the great forces of urbanization and industrialization? The answers to these powerful questions lie in the study of artists of ashcans.

Ashcan artists recognized that the city was the most exciting place to be in America at the start of a new century; their art has since lasted because that vision remains true amid the current vibrancy of places like New York City. By depicting the immense power and the allure of the metropolis, these artists captured an eternal truth. They created paintings of glorious yet gritty moments in time, construction sites and ferry boats, tenement apartments and newsboys and working women and men. They also bestowed on these urban players a respect that other artists had overlooked.

Another unique aspect of the Ashcan painters was their class perspective. Conventional artists at the time saw either the genteel upper bourgeois or the sad, despairing, downtrodden. The Ashcan school rejected both these impressions and instead focused on the broad middle, painting the working-class people that made up most of the city's population.

Ashcan artists understood that while city life was tough, it was also quite livable. You could find romance and a lover, join a neighborhood community, play games on the street, or watch illegal boxing matches. No artistic genre ever understood these features of city life with the same sensitivity and insight, one of the key points that made the Ashcan school unique.

By so doing, the Ashcan painters helped the rest of America understand these new places, these dense, novel, and frightening cities. This was at the height, the golden age, of the great American city and of the Progressive Era in art and literature and reform politics. Ashcan artists' unique renderings of this epic moment became a kind of guidebook for Americans in so many

other kinds of locales, teaching them that decent people lived decent lives, even in Gotham. By instilling new, gritty subject matter with beauty, these painters made the urban scene part of the American experience.

The Ashcan artists painted the city as no school of art had ever done before. They understood the excitement of the metropolis and respected the working people who lived there, endowing these people with agency, the power to control the terms of their existence. Not surprisingly, art like this began in protest against the established order.

If you were a part of the American art scene as the clock struck in the new century on January 1, 1900, you knew exactly what the establishment was, and who presided over it. Bennard Perlman, who wrote several books on the art movements of this new era, summed up the status quo of that time: “Throughout the 19th and early 20th century the National Academy of Design dictated the course of American art, promoting the restrictive style that favored classical subjects and techniques.” “Dictate” is a strong and tyrannical word, yet it seems chillingly accurate: “The annual juried exhibitions sponsored by the Academy were the artists’ primary entrée to patrons and subsequent sales. Acceptance to the Academy’s shows offered painters credibility and marketability; rejection could signal the opposite.” This was immense power, the ability to make or starve a painter. Yet it was all in service to faded themes; Perlman reported, “Original subject matter or technique often guaranteed a painter that rejection.”<sup>1</sup>

Not that everyone approved of this structure. Theodore Dreiser, in his critique of the art world, *The “Genius,”* observed of the school his protagonist attended, “The class instructors must be of considerable significance in the American art world . . . or they were N.A.s, and that meant National Academicians. He little knew with what contempt this honor was received in some quarters, or he would not have attached so much significance to it.”<sup>2</sup>

This rigid, outdated approach created problems, blocking new schools, new works. John Baur, in his study of modern American art, pointed out: “Aside from his art itself, the knottiest problem for the American modernist in the early years of the century was where to exhibit. The annual exhibitions of the National Academy of Design were still the principal medium; in how many biographies one reads sentences like Lloyd Goodrich’s concerning Weber: ‘He submitted work to a National Academy exhibition and was of course rejected, and never tried again.’” Many artists considered the Academy “the repository of an outworn and deadening system . . . an oversized, lumbering relic of the aesthetic age of dinosaurs, spiritually extinct but inexplicably still moving.” John Sloan described it as “a place where you checked your brain at the door.”<sup>3</sup>

Rebellion was inevitable. It began in 1906, when at their winter exhibition the Academy hung Sloan’s submissions high above eye level, making them difficult to see and sure to be ignored. Robert Henri, the philosopher and leader of the Ashcan school, managed to include three of his own works, but William Glackens, George Luks, and Everett Shinn—other Ashcan artists—were completely excluded.<sup>4</sup>

Tempers flared the following year. Henri himself had been appointed to the jury for the 1907 show, but the honor was shallow. His recommendations were largely ignored: Sloan’s submission went up high once again, and others were rejected entirely. Even more demeaning, Henri faced personal rejection; he had submitted three paintings, and on the first balloting, two of these received a rating of 1 (unanimous approval), the other only a 2 (approval by a majority required). On a second vote, one of the works in the first category was downgraded to a 2.<sup>5</sup>

Henri walked out, pulled his paintings, and contacted the press. Long known as a good source for a quote, Henri had reporters’ ears. In quick time, the story, to use a modern term, went viral. The *American Art News* revealed, “Robert Henri’s withdrawal . . . has caused a stir in art circles. At a meeting of the jury, of which Mr. Henri was a member, some spirited remarks were made by him . . . that . . . a majority of the judges were not inclined to yield to

any innovations in art." The final denouement was a feature article in *Harper's Weekly*, which bemoaned the "penalization of originality."

Instead, it extolled the "school of Robert Henri," whose "painters convince us of their democratic outlook. They seek what is significant, what is real."<sup>6</sup>

The maître gathered his partners to revolt against the Art Establishment. "After dinner I went to a meeting at Henri's to talk over a possible exhibition of the 'crowd's' work next year," John Sloan wrote in his diary on April 4, 1907, "The spirit to push the thing through seems strong." Besides Henri and Sloan, other charter members included George Luks, Arthur Davies, William Glackens, and Ernest Lawson. Decades later, Everett Shinn, one of the first to join them, recalled, "Not one of us had a program . . . sure, we were against the monocle pictures at the Academy, but that was all."<sup>7</sup>

So they wanted to put on a show; now they had to find a hall. William Macbeth provided the venue. The entrepreneur landed in America in 1871, emigrating from his native Ireland; seeking employment, he obtained a position with the print sellers Frederick Keppel and Co., and within a decade he was a full partner.<sup>8</sup>

In 1892 he branched out on his own, opening a gallery at 237 Fifth Avenue, near Twenty-Seventh Street, not far from the Flatiron Building, by 1908 relocating to Fortieth Street and Fifth Avenue. What made this venture unique was that, bucking prevailing tastes for European art, Macbeth opened the first gallery in the city dedicated to American works. He told the marketplace, "The work of American artists has never received the full share of appreciation that it deserves and the time has come when an effort should be made to gain for it the favor of those who have hitherto purchased foreign pictures exclusively."<sup>9</sup>

Macbeth was an innovator in other ways as well, as he set out with passion to make his experiment work. New shows appeared regularly, often within a few weeks of each other, guaranteeing a steady stream of press notices. To reach out to buyers, he created his own periodical, *Art Notes*, part house organ and part commentary on the art world, and edited it personally until his death in 1917. As a result, according to one scholar, Macbeth soon "stood at the center of . . . contemporary American painting. He was at this time the most active, knowledgeable, and powerful dealer in American art."<sup>10</sup>

For the Ashcan artists, introductions were easy; Macbeth already knew most of the group. In 1902 he had hosted Henri's first one-man show in Gotham; the two had enjoyed a correspondence as early as 1899. The gallery owner soon worked with the others as well.

A deal was struck. Various accounts list Henri as the go-between, but all agree on the arrangements. Sloan visited Macbeth, who requested a guarantee of \$500, later reduced to \$400 (Sloan felt him, "a decent man if ever was one"), and paid in sums of \$50 apiece by eight artists on May 2.<sup>11</sup>

Details began to solidify. Sloan organized specifics, handled funds, worked on the catalog, read proofs, and prepared mailing lists. One tricky decision involved whom to include. Of course, there were the Ashcan stalwarts—Robert Henri, John Sloan, George Luks, Everett Shinn, William Glackens. Boosting their numbers were Boston artist Maurice Prendergast, impressionist Ernest Lawson, and Arthur Davies. The group quickly dubbed itself "The Eight Independent Artists." Critics and later scholars shortened this to "The Eight" and immortalized them for this pioneering showcase; they would never exhibit together again. While the last three were not Ashcan artists by any stretch, others who worked in this style were turned down. According to one account, "Davies was the strangest member of the group in that his painting, in their subject and style, suggest no affinity whatsoever" with the others. Lawson, on the other hand, "seems to have been invited . . . simply because everyone liked him and accepted that he was a very gifted painter." Sloan later debated whether they should have dropped Shinn and instead added Jerome Myers (who was hurt by his exclusion). George Wesley Bellows, whom everyone

recognized as a prodigy, was deemed to be too young. Each artist had twenty-five running feet of wall space, could choose which paintings to display and hang them himself. By December 19, 1907, a *New York Herald* article commented that “these painters believe they can reveal an art more forceful and individual” than any seen in New York.<sup>12</sup>

Opening day drew near. Publicity was assured; most of the artists had launched their careers by doing illustrations for the print media and so had plenty of contacts in the newspaper and magazine world. Two days prior to the event, the *Evening Post* crowed, “The principal art event of next week will be the opening . . . at the Macbeth galleries.” Twenty-five hundred announcements were dropped in the mail, and papers started running announcements as early as two weeks before opening day. “The pictures left for Macbeth’s in the morning,” Sloan noted in his diary on February 1, 1908. “Now the time that we have all waited and worked for months past is here.”<sup>13</sup>

February 3, 1908, was a cold New York day (*fig. 1.1*). Snow had fallen a week prior, and ice and slush lingered on the city’s streets. The *Tribune*’s weather page that morning recorded the previous day’s high as twenty-five degrees, the trough at fifteen.<sup>14</sup>

No matter; as long as Macbeth’s stayed open—from 9 am to 6 pm—the gallery would be packed. His upper space had two rooms, the paintings to be divided evenly between them. Visitors braved a small, crowded elevator to get there. Upon exiting, they moved to their right, exploring the works of Shinn, Lawson, Sloan, and Prendergast, then moved through an archway to view those by Luks, Henri, Glackens, and Davies. Every hour, three hundred people crammed into the small gallery, and Henri, who had feared a low turnout, gleefully told the press, “The show . . . is creating a sensation. It was packed like an Academy reception.” Of course, not everybody approved; Macbeth’s nephew claimed his uncle “received threatening letters, phone calls and visits, mostly to the effect that, ‘if this is the kind of art you are going to sponsor, cross us off as clients.’”<sup>15</sup>

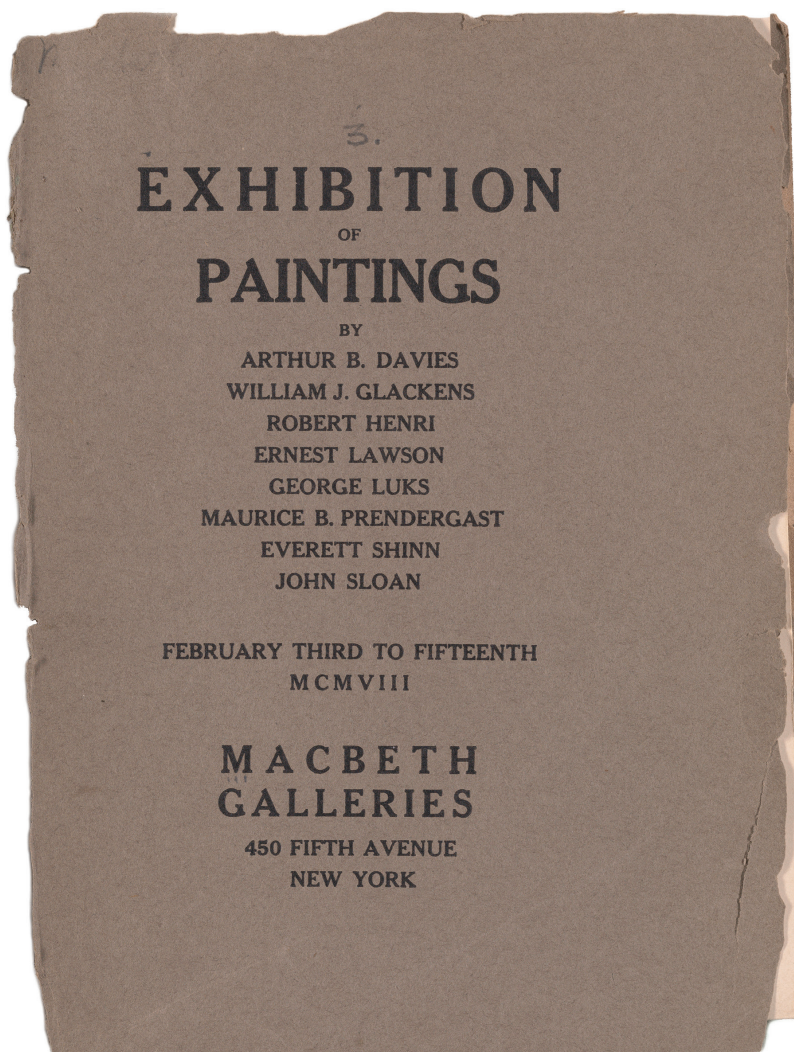
All the same, sales were solid, although only to a narrow group of customers. Three buyers purchased the seven paintings sold for \$4,000, four of which went to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Macbeth estimated that if the effects of the Panic of 1907 had not lingered, it would have gone even better. Henri and Davies each sold two paintings, Shinn, Luks, and Lawson one apiece. Sloan recorded, “We’ve made a success. . . . Macbeth is ‘pleased as Punch.’”<sup>16</sup>

Local press covered the exhibit, within limits. The *American* opened with: “Never at an art exhibition in this city has there been such an attendance as gathered to view the pictures shown by ‘the eight.’ . . . Only with the greatest of difficulty, by stretching of necks, crowding and other strenuous methods, were spectators enabled to see the paintings.” The *Sun* spoke of “a group of eight painters who have been expressing their ideas of life as they see it in quite their own manner.” Best of all, Charles De Kay, writing in the *Evening Post*, admonished readers to “join the throng that fills the elevator to the Macbethan sky parlors, and if you don’t remain to pray, you will surely learn not to curse.” Clearly not everyone approved of paintings of ashcans—or of art that was revolutionary.<sup>17</sup>

This is not to imply that the Eight changed the art world overnight or singlehandedly. Most of the press responded either by ignoring or condemning this new wave. Though the *Sun* had announced the show as early as the previous May, no mention was made on the day after, nor was there any coverage of the opening. The paper did find space, however, for such terribly important stories as “Y.W.C.A. Girl’s Dress Afire,” and how Newark’s automobile club had selected a color scheme for their annual show.<sup>18</sup>

Even more telling was what failed to appear in the arts sections of various New York papers. In fact, there was frequently no mention of the show at the Macbeth whatsoever, although the *Tribune* did find space to run a more traditional piece entitled “Berthe Morisot: A Note on a Charming Figure in French Impressionism.” An even better indication of how conservative





1.1 Front page of the exhibition catalog, *Exhibition of Paintings by Arthur B. Davies, William J. Glackens, Robert Henri, Ernest Lawson, George Luks, Maurice B. Prendergast, Everett Shinn, John Sloan*, February 3–15, 1908. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Thomas J. Watson Library (118 R19). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, New York.

the art world remained was the entire front cover of the magazine section in the *New York American*, which boldly proclaimed, “The Latest Fad in Portraiture,” the most traditional of genres.<sup>19</sup>

Critics’ responses eventually ran the gamut. The most important art critic in America at the time was James Huneker. Born in Philadelphia in 1857 to a cultured family—his father was an organist and composer—James took to the arts early in life and by 1875 was reviewing concerts

for newspapers in the City of Brotherly Love. In December 1906, he moved north to become the art critic for the *New York Sun*, producing three to four articles a week.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike many critics of high repute, Huneker sought out young and unknown painters. He discovered Jerome Myers and gave John Sloan the painter's first positive review. Sloan felt that Huneker was "different from the average critic," folks "who usually think they are sent by God to shield mankind from what they don't care for themselves."<sup>21</sup>

Huneker began his review of the Ashcan exhibit with an intimate, positive tone: "At the exhibition of the Eight Painters at the Macbeth Galleries Henri's lifelike 'Laughing Child' faces you as you enter. It is superb paint. . . . Power is there." As for Glackens: "Here is mastery." Sloan "can see to the core of ugliness. His street scenes are full of rude animation. He is in a way a philosopher. . . . In the matter of pigment he grows every year." "These young men," the critic concluded, "have the courage to be natural with more or less success."<sup>22</sup>

Other journals sided with Huneker. In an unsigned article in the April 1908 issue of *Current Literature*, the author claimed that the Eight were "united in their impulse to escape mere 'prettiness' in art, and to express themselves in strong, individual, whole-hearted fashion"; indeed, all were "dominantly concerned with the portrayal of American life here and now." Sloan displayed "a phase of sordid existence painted with that sort of fine art which Rembrandt knew long years ago."<sup>23</sup>

Huneker's greatest competitor was Royal Cortissoz, an extreme conservative who had been the *New York Tribune's* art critic since 1891.<sup>24</sup>

It was unlikely that Cortissoz would share Huneker's perspective. Two days after the opening, he described the works as "empty mannerisms . . . it is precisely the element of nature, of truth accurately seen and sensitively painted, that is lacking from this show." In a critique two years later, he claimed of the new art, "There is nothing . . . very startling about it . . . it has served no obviously fruitful purpose." "If this is the best that the Independent Artists can do," he declared, "we are quite well enough off as we are."<sup>25</sup>

Cortissoz' criticism was soft mush compared to what came next. No one had ever painted work sites or working-class people before, and to art critics these were ugly subjects, canvases filled with filth. Charles De Kay, writing in *Town Topics*, exclaimed, "Vulgarity smites one in the face at this exhibition, and I defy you to find anyone in a healthy frame of mind who" wants such paintings in his home, who will not "get disgusted two days later. Is it fine art to exhibit our sores—Bah!!" The *New York Commercial Advertiser*, a business paper, felt it had just seen a show "where joyousness never enters . . . and where unhealthiness prevails to an alarming extent." A recent scholar, in describing the clash, summed up the view of the National Academicians: "They knew very well what art was; art was beauty, and what Henri's friends were painting was just ugliness." Two days after the show opened, John Sloan wrote in his diary, "It is regrettable that these art writers, armed with little knowledge (which is granted a dangerous thing) can command attention in the newspapers. I'd rather have the opinion of a newsboy."<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, something had happened in the art world, something big. Ira Glackens, William's son, wrote that the show did not just live up to expectations, it "far outdid them." Walter Pach felt "they gave a show in 1908 that aroused New York as no other work by Americans had ever done." As one later scholar put it, "When the Eight closed their famous show at Macbeth's . . . they thought they had made a revolution."<sup>27</sup>

In terms of both its positives and its negatives, the Ashcan school had become the hot topic in American art and had risen to the forefront of what was then *en vogue*. They had introduced something new: a native art form that dealt powerfully with an America that was emerging, and the urban landscape and the working people who inhabited it.

The future only looked brighter. Yet, it was not to be. The heyday of this approach to art would last a bare five years and then be swept away even more suddenly and totally than it had just blown in.

The single most important art exhibit in American art history opened at the Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory at Lexington Avenue and Twenty-Fifth Street on February 17, 1913. Nothing has been the same in the art world since.<sup>28</sup>

In December 1911, a few American painters—ironically, realists, it would turn out—got together to discuss “the possibilities of organizing a society for the purpose of exhibiting the works of progressive and live painters, both American and foreign; favoring such work usually neglected by current shows and especially interesting and instructive to the public.” Among their numbers was Jerome Myers, an Ashcan stalwart.

In one sense, they were pursuing one of the broad aims of Henri and Sloan, to challenge the art world as it existed just then. According to Walt Kuhn, one of their leaders, “Two things produced the Armory Show: a burning desire . . . to be informed of the slightly known activities abroad and the need of breaking down the stifling and smug condition of the local art affairs.” The result, however, took a different direction, more powerful than many had envisioned—one writer called it “an act of cultural sabotage”—and wound up reducing the Ashcan school to a subordinate position in the catalog of American art.<sup>29</sup>

On the fourteenth of that month the group formally organized as the American Association of American Painters and Sculptors (AAPS). In quick form they invited others to join, including Luks, Glackens, and Bellows, as well as a number of Academicians. The goal was more to introduce new modes of art, not to denigrate other forms. In his memoir, Kuhn noted how “at this time most of the younger American artists, especially the progressive ones, had no place to show their wares. No dealer’s gallery was open to them, the press . . . was apathetic.”<sup>30</sup>

Soon, however, their goal took on a different cast. Arthur Davies, one of the non-Ashcan artists in the earlier Macbeth show, was now president of the Association. With Walter Kuhn, he journeyed to Europe in search of artists they could potentially invite. Instead, the two returned overwhelmed by the modernist movement in art, and they determined to use their exhibition to introduce America to the new wave, while still highlighting local works. Davies told Myers, “You will weep when you see what we’ve brought over.” The artist of the Lower East Side explained in his memoir, “And when I did see the pictures for the first time, my mind was more troubled than my eyes, for Davies had unlocked the door to foreign art and thrown the key away. Our land of opportunity was thrown wide open to foreign art, unrestricted and triumphant; more than ever before, our great country had become a colony; more than ever before, we had become provincials.” Glackens remarked, “I am afraid that the American section of this exhibition will seem very tame beside the foreign section.”<sup>31</sup>

Opening night became a big event in the New York artistic calendar. At 8:00 pm on February 17, the doors opened for a formal, invitation-only reception. Soon the large room filled with animated talk, while the music of Bayne’s Sixty-Ninth Regiment Band played in the background.<sup>32</sup>

The next morning the public spectacle began; for an admission of \$1 for adults and 25¢ for children, anyone could walk in between the hours of 10:00 am and 10:00 pm. Ushers helped move the crowds along, and a temporary post office by the entrance handled Armory Show postcards. Walt Kuhn told a friend, “Every afternoon Lexington Avenue and the side streets are jammed with private automobiles, old-fashioned horse equipages, taxi cabs and what not.” In his memoir he simply concluded, “everybody came.”<sup>33</sup>



What drew them was the novelty of the first show to introduce modern art, rather than the works of domestic painters, to an American audience on a large scale. In particular, cubism became a sensation, and the celebrity piece of the show emerged as Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*; at times the crowd became so thick a waiting line developed just to see this one painting (fig. 1.2). Newspapers carried jokes about this art and offered prizes to anyone who could actually find anything that looked like a nude in the painting. Even the *American*



1.2 Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), reproduction of *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Dated 1912. Collotype with hand additions, sheet: 13¼ × 7⅞ inches. Kay Sage Tanguy Bequest. (SC421.1974). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. © 2016 Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York.



*Art News* offered \$10 to anyone who could figure it out. When the show opened in the Windy City, a cartoonist for the *Chicago Evening Sun* rendered a satire entitled "The nude descending a staircase (Rush hour at the subway)."<sup>34</sup>

Modernism now became a national phenomenon, and scams both small and large followed. One of the most frequently asked question at the information desk was what was the most expensive picture at the show? Staffed by young artists, they would kindly escort the rich patrons to their own works and suggest a royal price that was, they claimed, a real bargain. Paris artists produced fakes for sale in New York, and an article in *The American Magazine of Art* later claimed "that a New York art student, impatient with his clay model, whacked it out of shape and exhibited it at a much talked of show."<sup>35</sup>

By any form of accounting the show broke records wide open. Estimates of attendance range from seventy-five thousand to a quarter million. Even more amazing, the art sold. Including the Chicago and Boston tours as well as the Lexington Avenue venue, 174 works were purchased, of which 51 were bought by Americans and 123 by foreigners. Dollar amounts totaled \$44,148.75, which were broken down into \$30,491.25 and \$13,657.50, respectively, based on residency of buyer. One artist who made the first sale of his career was Edward Hopper. The Duchamp nude sold for \$324 to Frederick C. Vorrey, an art dealer in San Francisco, and was later resold in 1927 to Walter Arnsberg. Recent research, including the discovery of the show's account books, "confirm," according to a *New York Times* report, "that American art was priced much higher than European art, but also show that . . . the majority of the sales were of European work." Much to the regret of the young hucksters, top financial return went to Cezanne's *Colline des pauvres*, sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for \$6,700, the first work by that artist to become part of an American museum collection.<sup>36</sup>

While reactions to the show ran the gamut, most were of outrage. Given how novel this style of painting truly was, this came as no surprise. The *New York Sun* stood out as the leading defender among the dailies, declaring the show "sensational," that its creators had accomplished "something very like a miracle." Not so for the *New York Times*, which after identifying the dangers of these radical works asserted that the show would "disrupt, degrade, if not destroy, not only art but literature and society too." Royal Cortissoz rose to the bait, declaring of postimpressionism, "This is not a movement, it is unadulterated cheek," destined for "the rubbish heap." A New York group affiliated with the Academy put on an exhibition of fake European modernist paintings, then held it in the dining room of the Lighthouse for the Blind. When the show hit Chicago, one paper warned readers that the best way to prepare for a visit was to indulge in drugs ("smoke two pipefuls of 'hop' and sniff cocaine"). Even at the Art Institute, until Kuhn protested, teachers insisted on walking students through while denouncing the works on display. Maurice Prendergast, one of the Eight, felt that there was "too much Oh-my-God art here."<sup>37</sup>

The most famous commentator of the time was Teddy Roosevelt. Next to his cousin Franklin, the greatest showman in presidential history, he chose March 4, the day of Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, to attend. Escorted by Davies and Kuhn, he appeared "gracious, though noncommittal." In a follow-up article for *Outlook*, however, he was not nearly so polite. The second paragraph concluded with the observation that there were "thousands of people who will pay small sums to look at a faked mermaid; and now and then one of this kind with enough money will buy a Cubist picture, or a picture of a misshapen nude woman, repellent from every angle." He later declared, "In my bath-room is a really good Navajo rug, which . . . is a far more satisfactory and decorative picture."<sup>38</sup>

Roosevelt and the other critics were wrong about modernism and the Armory Show. Art historian Meyer Schapiro claimed that the exhibit "lifted people out of the narrowness of a

complacent provincial taste and compelled them to judge American art by a world standard.” Or as Walter Pach put it, “the lid was blown off of America’s isolationism.” A great deal changed, and in so many ways. While before American modernists found few galleries willing to accept their works, now the floodgates were opened. New magazines appeared to cover new art, and older publications began to publish critical reviews and discussions. Kuhn highlighted the decorative tumult that ensued, noting, “Drabness and awkwardness began to disappear from American life and color and grace stepped in. . . . The decorative side of Brancusi went into everything from milliners’ dummies to streamliner trains. The exhibition affected every phase of American life.” Modern art was now at the top of the art heap, the *nouveau* thing; realism was out.<sup>39</sup>

Compounding the damage, other new media forms had been stealing the Ashcan artists’ originality. An American who wanted to visualize urban life could now go to the cinema. In 1911, two years before the Armory Show, audiences viewed *Martyr to His Cause*, the nation’s first film made by a working-class organization.<sup>40</sup>

Even more, modernism created an entirely new mode for interpreting the city. Realism was out. Urban life would still be tackled, but with abstract images rather than straightforward depictions of the city. This shift would affect all forms of art, not only visual images but literature as well.

Thus, in a moment of deep irony, this new wave initiated the demise of the Ashcan school. Suddenly, the realists, last week’s rebels, looked old-fashioned. Timing played a role, too; realistic urban art bloomed in a pre-WWI era of optimism, when progressivism was possible and a celebration of life—now extended to the kind on city streets—seemed relevant. One year after the Armory Show, a war to end all wars broke loose, and in its wake an era of cynicism and distrust of the human experience arose. By 1917 a writer in *Forum* stated bluntly, “Realism is dead, and so is subject painting.” A 2007 review of an Ashcan exhibit in the *New York Times* carried this obituary: “In 1913 disaster struck the Ashcan School in the form of the Armory Show, which, by introducing European avant-gardists . . . to America, caused the near-total eclipse of native realism.” On the evening after the Armory Show closed, organizers broke open champagne, amid celebratory calls. One of them, John Quinn, stood up and recited, “Don’t you remember Captain John Philip of the *Texas*? When his guns sank a Spanish ship at Santiago, he said, ‘Don’t cheer, boys, the poor devils are dying!’” He might as well have been talking about the Ashcan school. The heyday of the urban artists had lasted a slim five years.<sup>41</sup>

The Ashcan artists did not do well with this shift. A critic who toured the gallery with George Wesley Bellows reported, “if Bellows’ faith in himself could have been shaken it would have been shaken then.” John Loughery, in an article on George Luks, commented how, “after the Armory Show, Luks and those urban realists . . . began to look increasingly old-fashioned to the younger generation and to more modernist-minded writers. To be viewed as radical one moment and old hat the next; this must have been difficult for Luks to accept, as it was for Henri and so many others.”<sup>42</sup>

As the leader of a now-diminished school of art, Henri took it hardest. From the start, any attempts he made to influence the show were brusquely rebuffed. Davies ignored him altogether when setting up the show and went out of his way to let Henri know that the grand leader of the Ashcan school was being deliberately excluded in favor of the modernists. In a typical incident, Henri suggested shifting the height of one painting, but nothing happened. When he nostalgically told Walter Pach that he hoped for every European work sold that an American item would find a buyer too, Pach rattled back, “That isn’t the proportion of merit,” and he stalked off.<sup>43</sup>

Henri’s leadership waned, not just over the Ashcan school, but in American art; as Mahonri Sharp Young put it in his classic study of the Eight, “his ascendancy . . . over the fighting edge of American art was now broken.” Stuart Davis, one of Henri’s legion of former pupils, walked

away from the Armory Show and noted, "Talks with the other students about it left me with the realization that the Henri school . . . this American free naturalism wasn't the answer, that all kinds of new areas were opened up." After he heard about such remarks, Henri feebly told Davis, "I didn't know you were interested in this type of thing." There are no diary entries from Henri in 1913; scholars do not know if he decided against keeping one at that time, or if he destroyed the pages chronicling that year.<sup>44</sup>

There are few major art genres whose time in the spotlight blazed for such a brief but epochal moment. The Ashcan school stayed at the heights of artistic acclaim for a scant few years and then fell from grace in critical and art history circles, evermore a curiosity, never a showstopper. Yet its art and artists are still studied, perennially the subject of popular shows and scholarly articles. The public came to see their works, but they were no longer progressive, no longer the vanguard. Instead they became seen as old-fashioned and nostalgic.

This state of affairs raises a host of questions. Not just how, but *why* are the Ashcan artists remembered? What makes them so compelling, even to present-day audiences? Why are they still controversial? Art historians and critics debate whether they were foolishly sentimental, if they just painted pretty pictures of the city, or if there was something more at work here.

They deserve better.

They deserve a new interpretation.

The Ashcan artists represented a revolution in subject matter, not in style. What they did was change art from a subject for art critics and thrust it into one of the great social and industrial narratives of the age, the rise of the city. The new, robust, city was their focus, with its powerful machines and its issues of class, ethnicity, and gender. Ashcan art captured the power and the players of a new era, the headline of a booming city and its industrial populations. As one writer pointed out, their revolution was "social rather than artistic." Over time, their urban sensibility, their unique understanding of and empathy for city life, remain their greatest contribution.<sup>45</sup>

This was unprecedented. Like many of their countrymen, these artists saw the metropolis as a challenge, recognized that this was where modern America would begin. For a culture that prided itself on its rural heritage, that realization was disturbing, since the dynamic force was now the city.

But uniquely, these artists posed questions that no one, not even the great American painters and the critics who wrote about them, had ever considered before. In this world of turmoil, of reinvention, how were the city and its peoples—*all* of its peoples—thought about and depicted visually? This had been a subject for elites and reformers alike, but both had failed, both had missed the bulk of what Gotham was becoming. The Ashcan school instead offered the unique belief that the working-class city was a fit subject for great art, without being either condescending or pitying. They gloried in the drama of el trains and ferry boats, of all classes, genders, and ethnicities. Above all, they understood that their subjects were complete, nuanced human beings, not caricatures but men and women and children capable of deciding the terms of and holding agency over their lives. In today's increasingly urban globe, these concepts still merit our attention.

This approach was unique and differed in crucial ways from progressivism, the leading reform movement of the era. True, they shared many qualities. Progressive reformers were trying to interpret the new to middle-class America. They were living in the poorest of the poor sections, and they were interested in the lives of urban residents.

Yet there were also crucial differences. Unlike these workers, Ashcan artists were not trying to reform their subjects, instead celebrating urban, working-class life. Jane Addams, for example, one

of the greatest and best of the settlement house workers, often talked of giving the immigrants the gift of the ballot, handed down from above, or about how “the blessings which we associate with a life of refinement and cultivation can be made universal and must be made universal.”<sup>46</sup> Ashcan practitioners were not didactic, nor did they aim to teach new values or change these sections.

Instead, they saw urban working-class life as sources of beauty, worthy of artistic treatment. In this they shared the vision of the best of the activists. Lillian Wald described a blazing hot night shortly after she arrived at the Henry Street Settlement. Sleepless from the heat, she looked out over the Lower East Side: “Life was in full course there. Some of the push-cart peddlers still sold their wares. Sitting on the curb directly under my window, with her feet in the gutter, was a woman, drooping from exhaustion, with a baby at her breast. The fire-escapes, considered the most desirable sleeping places, were crowded with the youngest and the oldest.”<sup>47</sup> Life in the city could still command compelling interest.

It is time to enter the dawn of the metropolitan age in America, and to examine the prevailing art forms before the Ashcan artists challenged, and then overcame, these genres.