

## MAKING AMERICANS UNDER THE MAYPOLE

William Glackens established his artistic reputation at the turn of the twentieth century with uncompromising modern depictions of New York City's middle class. Despite his well-known association with New York, William James Glackens (1870–1938) was born, raised, and for the early part of his life worked in Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> He attended Central High School, where he studied drawing in a curriculum established in the 1840s by the painter Rembrandt Peale. After graduation, Glackens continued his artistic education by enrolling in night classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, while working days as an artist-reporter for a local newspaper.<sup>2</sup> When Everett Shinn, George Luks, and John Sloan were also hired as artist-reporters for the same paper, the four men immediately became friends, forming an informal artists' club. The seriousness of their commitment to painting deepened in the early 1890s when they were introduced to Robert Henri (1865–1929), a young and charismatic American artist who had just returned from Europe and was teaching in Philadelphia. Henri quickly established himself as the group's mentor by encouraging Glackens and the others to become professional artists and, more important, to paint modern subjects in a modern style.<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Henri's inspiration, all four men today rank among America's best-known turn-of-the-century artists and, together with Henri, are identified as members of the Eight, popularly known as the Ashcan School.<sup>4</sup>

Henri taught Glackens and the others to reject the prevailing academic approach to painting, which was founded on the ability to render the human body accurately, which

in turn enabled the artist to paint traditional history, genre, and mythological subjects. Conservative academicians also held that brushstrokes should be invisible, giving a painting a smooth finish. By contrast, Henri championed a gestural painterly technique, one he felt allowed artists to respond more directly, actively, and truthfully to the ebb and flow of contemporary life. Summing up his approach in 1910, Henri said, "A thing that is finished is dead. . . . A thing that has the greatest expression of life itself, however roughly it may be expressed, is in reality the most finished work of art. A finished technique without relation to life is a piece of mechanics, it is not a work of art."<sup>5</sup>

Henri's strong personality and progressive ideas exerted a powerful influence over Glackens. The two briefly shared a painting studio in Philadelphia, and in 1895–96 Glackens accompanied Henri to Europe, where Henri encouraged him to study works by artists who painted in a "rough" painterly technique, including Frans Hals, Diego Velázquez, Edgar Degas, and Edouard Manet.<sup>6</sup> Glackens responded positively to these artistic stimuli, especially to the work of Manet, whom he emulated by painting urban parks, as had Manet more than thirty years earlier. On Glackens's return to the United States, he moved to New York City, where he became one of the nation's premier commercial illustrators, a profession that provided him the stable income that enabled him to pursue painting.<sup>7</sup>

Glackens distinguished himself from his artistic peers such as Henri, Shinn, and Sloan by specializing in scenes of middle-class leisure. Indeed, when early-twentieth-century critics appraised Glackens's work, they often



66. William Glackens (1870–1938), *May Day in Central Park*,  
ca. 1905. Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (63.8 x 76.8 cm)  
Gift of the Charles E. Merrill Trust with matching  
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Fig. 66.1. Edouard Manet (1832–1883), *Music in the Tuileries Gardens*, 1860–62. Oil on canvas, 30 × 46½ in. (76.2 × 118.1 cm). The National Gallery, London. NG 3260. The Lane Bequest

compared him to Manet, both for his brushwork and for the fact that Manet was known as a painter of the modern middle class. The art writer Walter Pach wrote in 1910, “As Edouard Manet saw the life of the Parisian café of his time, or of the French capital, represented in the ‘Music of the Tuilleries’, so William J. Glackens has given us documents of American life in his significant series of pictures, [including] the ‘May-Day.’”<sup>8</sup> The critic Margaret Anderson similarly observed, “Such things as his ‘May Day in Central Park’ are distinctly French. They might have been done by Manet. . . . These resemblances, however, only emphasize the originality of the American landscape.”<sup>9</sup> Edouard Manet (1832–1883), considered at the time, and ever since, to be the principal founder of modern art for his direct and honest representations of real people at their leisure, worked in a bold, painterly, and abstracted style.<sup>10</sup> By comparing

Glackens to Manet, these critics asserted *May Day in Central Park* (ca. 1905) was as original as Manet’s European modernism. But they also argued that it was perhaps even fresher, as both critics were careful to note that the painting was unequivocally American.

If we compare *May Day in Central Park* to Manet’s earlier *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* (fig. 66.1), we see that both paintings use a brushy, painterly visual language to evoke the transient nature of modern middle-class life in the city. In Manet’s painting, middle-class men wear black frock coats and top hats. In Glackens’s picture, the children are recognizable as from the same social stratum because they are clean, well-dressed, wear light colors, and are supervised by the nursemaids characteristically employed by middle-class New Yorkers. In both Europe and the United States, the middle class was strongly associated

with modern life after their increasing economic, political, and social power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries enabled them to displace the previous long-standing aristocratic social order. Thus the very existence of the middle class was a primary condition of modernity.

Furthermore, while Manet was himself familiar with the Tuileries, and Glackens, a New Yorker, would no doubt have witnessed May Day celebrations in Central Park, both of their paintings nonetheless lack a certain specificity. Manet's painting has no clear narrative and instead conveys the undirected bustle of men and women socializing in the Tuileries Gardens. Glackens's *May Day in Central Park*, too, is less a rendering of a specific May Day event than a colorful, sweeping, celebratory evocation of middle-class children at play following a Maypole dance (notice the pole leaning against the tree). Thin washes of green-yellow pigment for the grass—applied with broad strokes of his brush—provide a neutral backdrop for the choppy, darkly outlined foliage above and the candy-colored foreground figures below. These figures he painted with thinner-tipped brushes, varying his handwork to capture the fleeting appearance of sunlight and shadow on clothing and bodies moving rapidly through space. Using quick strokes of color Glackens effectively evokes the jerky movements and shrieks, laughs, and screams of young children at vigorous play on a warm spring afternoon.

The subject of *May Day in Central Park* is distinctly American, just as critics noted. Most obviously, Glackens's children are loud and exuberant, two qualities that were often ascribed to Americans and that distinguished them from their more genteel and cosmopolitan Parisian counterparts. More subtly, the celebration Glackens depicted was about making Americans. At the end of the nineteenth century, social reformers believed that industrialization, urbanization, and immigration were eroding the foundation of American identity.<sup>11</sup> Reformers perceived that the tens of thousands of European immigrants who settled in the United States each year posed a threat to American

values. First, immigrants who continued to practice the folk traditions associated with their home country were seen by many native-born Americans as unwilling to assimilate and thus posed a threat to the core Anglo-American values on which the country was believed to have been built. Second, most immigrants were of the working class. They thus constituted the growing number of men and women who observed May Day as an international labor holiday, established in 1886, by striking against their middle- and upper-class employers who in turn considered such activities un-American.<sup>12</sup> To combat these perceived threats to the American way of life, reformers sought to institute a new type of organized play that would instill healthy American values in young minds and bodies.

Reformers looked into the Anglo-American past for model forms of play and found in Elizabethan England a great flowering of folk traditions, among them Maypole dances.<sup>13</sup> These dances were consciously revived in an effort to provide much-needed exercise for American youth and to maintain what reformers believed to be a proper American identity.<sup>14</sup> When performed by children of Anglo-American heritage, usually of the middle class, Maypole dances were thought to bolster a sense of their own heritage. More important, when performed by immigrant children, who were usually among the urban poor, Maypole dances would help to "Americanize" them by substituting a truly American folk tradition for one that their parents may have brought from Europe. In addition, children's celebrations of May Day with Maypole dances would potentially counteract May Day labor strikes. Thus when Glackens painted this work, May Day celebrations in Central Park were associated with modern urban life in America and were understood to be part of the process of making modern citizens ever more *American*. By rendering such a modern subject in a distinctly modern style, Glackens invested his playful child subjects with an energy and vigor that seemed to ensure America's future prosperity. [KM]

16. Audubon was especially captivated by trumpeter swans. His *Ornithological Biography* included extensive discussions of their behaviors and the difficulties—and pleasures—of hunting them. The movement of the swans' necks receives particular attention. See *John James Audubon: Writings and Drawings*, 508–514. While living in Henderson, Kentucky, conducting his survey work for *Birds of America*, he kept an injured trumpeter swan for two years as a pet. Ford, *Audubon by Himself*, 72.

17. It is unclear when ownership of the painting passed to the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, but Frankenstein (*After the Hunt*, 140) suggests that it was not the original owner of the painting: "Many years later the owner of this work, tired of its sorcery, presented it to the most inappropriate institution he could find—the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals—which somewhat shamefacedly trots it out today when it is asked to do so." That the society may have been embarrassed by the painting's subject (rather than proud of its antihunting sentiment) suggests caution about imputing such a message to the work.

18. Both Banko, "Trumpeter Swan," 165–188, and Price, *Swans of the World*, 127–138, discuss the near extinction of the trumpeter swan in great detail.

19. Price, *Swans of the World*, 146–147.

20. Robinson, "American Landseer," 17.

21. For a comprehensive discussion of nineteenth-century artists' studios and of Chase's studio in particular, see Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). In one of Chase's many paintings of his studio, *The Tenth Street Studio* (begun ca. 1881, Carnegie Museum of Art), a trumpeter swan is included—to much different effect—among the many props pictured in the space.

#### 66. WILLIAM GLACKENS, *May Day in Central Park*

1. A well-illustrated and comprehensive account of Glackens's life and work is William H. Gerdtz, *William H. Glackens* (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, 1996).

2. Glackens's experience working as an artist-reporter was crucial for the development of his artistic skills. His co-worker, friend, and artistic peer Everett Shinn later recalled, "The Art department of a newspaper of 1900 was a school far more important in the initial training of the mind for quick perception than the combined instruction of the nation's art schools." Shinn, "Life on the Press," *Philadelphia Museum Bulletin* 41, no. 207 (November 1945): 9. Shinn also noted that Glackens developed an economic style of sketching, one that enabled him to make drawings "done with lightning speed and repeated many times, until he had become so familiar with his subjects he could place them in his pictures without even referring to the sketches." Shinn, "William Glackens as an Illustrator," *American Artist* 9 (November 1945): 22.

3. According to John Sloan, "Robert Henri had that magic ability as a teacher which inspires and provokes his followers into action. He was a catalyst; he was an emancipator, liberating American art from its youthful academic conformity, and liberating the individual artist from repressions that held back his natural creative ability." Sloan, quoted in William Inness Homer, *Robert Henri and His Circle* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969), 76. For a discussion of the impact of Henri's ideas on Glackens and his peers during this time, see *ibid.*, 75–79.

4. Glackens, Henri, Shinn, Luks, Sloan, Maurice Prendergast, Ernest

Lawson, and Arthur B. Davies are remembered as the Eight based on their participation in a controversial exhibition at New York's Macbeth Gallery in 1908; see Elizabeth Milroy, *Painters of a New Century: The Eight and American Art* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1991). The label "Ashcan School" was coined in the 1930s to describe the work of these artists and that of George Bellows, see *ibid.*, 15–16. Glackens's *May Day in Central Park* was included in the exhibition tour of the paintings of the Eight in 1908 and 1909; see Judith Zilczer, "The Eight on Tour, 1908–09," *American Art Journal* 26, no. 3 (Summer 1984): 44–45.

5. Robert Henri, "The New York Exhibition of Independent Artists," *Craftsman* 18 (May 1910): 167, quoted in H. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Park Curry, *American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885–1915* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 14. Henri further articulated his ideas about art in Henri, *The Art Spirit: Notes, Articles, Fragments of Letters and Talks to Students, Bearing on the Concept and Technique of Picture Making, the Study of Art Generally, and On Appreciation*, comp. Margery Ryerson (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1923).

6. For a discussion of Glackens's travels to Europe and the work he produced there, see Gerdtz, *Glackens*, 15–23.

7. Gerdtz nicely summarizes Glackens's incredibly prolific output during these years; see *ibid.*, 27–35.

8. Walter Pach, "Manet and Modern American Art," *Craftsman* 17 (February 1910): 483, quoted in *ibid.*, 68.

9. Margaret Steel Anderson, *The Study of Modern Painting* (New York: Century Co., 1914), 19, quoted in *ibid.*, 68.

10. For a brief discussion of Manet's reputation in New York art circles in the first years of the twentieth century, see Milroy, *Painters of a New Century*, 37–38.

11. See David Glassberg, "Restoring a 'Forgotten Childhood': American Play and the Progressive Era's Elizabethan Past," *American Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1980): 351–368.

12. On May Day as a workers' holiday, see Philip S. Foner, *May Day: A Short History of the International Workers' Holiday, 1886–1986* (New York: International Publishers, 1986), 56–81.

13. Reformers were forced to turn to Elizabethan England because the Puritan past was devoid of play traditions. In the early 1600s, when a settler named Thomas Morton erected a Maypole in the village of Merrymount and organized community celebrations around it, William Bradford, the Puritan governor of Plymouth Plantation, had it taken down because he felt it encouraged immoral and unchristian behavior. See William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (New York: The Modern Library, 1981), 226–232.

14. For example, see "Happy Youngsters Celebrate May Day," *World*, 2 May 1903. Maypole and other folk dances were considered especially suitable for girls and young women because they were not allowed to participate in organized athletics; see Glassberg, "Restoring a 'Forgotten Childhood,'" 358. General background information on May Day can be found in Ruth Hutchinson and Ruth Adams, *Every Day's a Holiday* (New York: Harper's Brothers Publishers, 1951), 94–97.

#### 67. MAURICE PRENDERGAST, *The Holiday*

1. Charles Hovey Pepper, "Is Drawing to Disappear in Artistic Individuality? A Sketch of the Work of Maurice Prendergast," *World Today* 19 (July 1910): 716. Pepper and Prendergast had taken part in a joint exhibi-

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