

Haverford College

Fashioning Taste:
Earl Shinn, Art Criticism, and National Identity in
Gilded Age America

A Thesis Submitted to

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25 April 2005

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Preface

Working in an archival collection is not always fun. I learned this lesson in the summer of 2004 when I was a student assistant at Haverford College's Quaker Collection. My job was to organize and catalogue with another student the Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, a manuscript collection that the college had acquired in 1998. Reading and sorting the letters, diaries, marriage licenses, wills, and financial records of these families certainly had its rewards, but I occasionally found myself bored by the seemingly never-ending stream of quotidian anecdotes and property tax receipts that I encountered each day in the archives. Despite my periodic lack of interest in the collection, however, I will be forever grateful for the opportunity it gave me of 'meeting' Earl Shinn, a nineteenth-century Quaker art critic with a penchant for writing wonderfully funny letters. I loved reading his correspondences with his siblings and laughing at his playfully sarcastic comments. Every day I looked forward to learning about his life, his experiences in Pont-Aven, his ambiguous relationship to Quakerism, his evenings with the Tile Club, and his almost religious devotion to culture and the fine arts. My curiosity about this enigmatic figure with unwieldy mutton chops grew throughout the summer. When I realized that no one had yet undertaken a serious study of Shinn, I found my thesis topic.

I could not have written this thesis without the assistance of a number of people along the way. My advisor, Lisa Jane Graham, provided me with invaluable criticisms and carefully guided me through the writing process. Her ideas and suggestions helped me understand what it was I was actually writing about in my thesis. Diana Peterson, Ann Upton, Joelle Bertolet, and Emma Lapsansky at Haverford's Quaker Collection were

infinitely helpful and kindly allowed me to rummage through the archives even when I was no longer working there. James Gulick and Professors Linda Gerstein and Gus Stadler gave me useful comments that propelled me to take my research in directions I would not have otherwise considered. Cheryl Leibold at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts was very helpful in permitting me to use the archives there and providing me with information that greatly assisted my research. Professor Saul Zalesch—the only other living person I know of who has written specifically about Shinn—aided me with his comments and encouragement. Finally, I could not have written this thesis without the love and support of my family, Mike, Betty, Rosie, and Will Lenehan, my girlfriend, Beah Burger, and too many other friends and family members to name here. Thank you all for your patience and for keeping me from taking this thing too seriously.

Introduction

“The pictures which we are beginning to put in our churches, the statues and historical pieces which our Government and our States are beginning to command, and our more elaborate easel-pictures, are still very lacking in Americanism, in solidity and vigor,” Earl Shinn lamented in 1878.¹ His criticism, that the country’s art lacked “Americanism,” reflects the identity crisis that American art experienced in the years following the Civil War. By 1870, the epic landscapes of Thomas Cole and other painters of the Hudson River School, which had stirred in the hearts of antebellum Americans a sense of pride in their country and its artistic capabilities, had lost favor among critics. However, a new ‘school,’ a distinctly American style, did not fill the void left by the Hudson River School. Instead, American art entered a phase of uncertainty and anxiety. Compared to the industrial forces unleashed during and after the war, the fine arts in the United States looked stagnant and underdeveloped, trailing behind other aspects of the blossoming national culture. A younger generation of artists and writers, many of whom studied in Europe, began to question the artistic traditions they had inherited from their predecessors. What made art ‘American?’ Was it possible for artists to thrive in a democratic society? If so, what were the conditions for a national art culture to flourish? With greater exposure to the art of Europe through travel and technology, Americans increasingly perceived their nation’s artistic productions in relation to those from across the Atlantic. The efforts to define American art and make it comparable in style and quality to the art of Europe would thus dominate the energies of artists and writers during the postwar decades.

¹ [Earl Shinn], “Eleventh Exhibition of the American Water-Color Society. I,” *Nation* 26 (14 February 1878), 120.

In this context of a budding national culture in search of an identity emerged Earl Shinn, art critic and arbiter of taste in post-Civil War America. Born in Philadelphia to Quaker parents, Shinn defied the conventions of his religion in order to pursue his passion, painting. In 1866, he traveled to France and received his formal artistic training in Paris. During his time there, however, he concluded that painting professionally was not in his future. Two years later he returned to the United States and became an art critic, working first for the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* and later for the *Nation*, *Lippincott's Magazine*, the *New York Evening Post*, *Scribner's Monthly*, and *The Art Amateur* in a career that lasted until his death in 1886. In these years, Shinn also wrote and edited a number of books, including a catalogue of the art gallery at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, several volumes about modern French art, and two enormous works on private art collections of America's wealthy elite. These books and articles trace Shinn's efforts to construct in America an art culture similar to that which he experienced in France but appropriate to the unique atmosphere and history of his own country. Shinn thus offers us a window onto the process of national artistic self-definition and self-assertion in America following the Civil War.

By reconstructing the life and career of Earl Shinn, we get a glimpse into the difficulties of constructing American art and culture in the second half of the nineteenth century. Shinn's promotion of an art culture both modeled after Europe and assertive of its independence from the Continent, simultaneously open to the masses and confined to a wealthy, educated audience, conveys the ambivalence that lay at the heart of American cultural construction in the Gilded Age. Two sets of competing and contradictory forces drove the making of American culture in this period: cosmopolitanism and nationalism

on the one hand, and elitism and populism on the other.² As artists and critics directed their energies toward creating an artistic style that would capture—and create—the national character and unite a country that remained divided, the capitalist aristocrats who forged their industrial and financial empires during the Civil War found a vehicle for the display of their sophistication and taste in European art. Lacking an appropriate example in their republican forebears, these men looked to the monarchs and noblemen of the Old World as their models. They built palaces in Manhattan and Newport and filled them with paintings, sculptures, and other cultural artifacts imported from the Continent. Critics decried the lack of patriotism in these shameless displays of wealth; even Shinn, a professed Francophile, criticized wealthy art collectors as being “distinctly unpatriotic... in preferring foreign to native art.”³ However, Shinn sought to reconcile the cosmopolitan and elitist features of art collecting with his nationalistic and populist sentiments by promoting the private collections of European art in his country as expressions of national wealth and taste and the foundations of a public art culture.

For the Vanderbilts, Astors, and other *nouveaux riches* determined to project a public image of cultivation and refinement, culture was a mode of class distinction, a barricade that separated them from the philistine masses. However, an alternate vision of culture that perceived it as a means of civilizing an uneducated citizenry gained in strength during this period. For the writers and critics who advanced this notion, it was an attempt to resolve the problem of dictating taste in a democratic society. If opened to all, culture could benefit the entire population rather than just an elite minority. In this

² Populism commonly refers to a political movement of the 1890s. I use the term here to represent a conception of culture as a democratic, public enterprise, inclusive of all citizens and defined by the participation of different segments of society.

³ [Earl Shinn], “Fiftieth Annual Exhibition of the Academy of Design, I,” *Nation* 24 (15 April 1875), 264.

context, wealthy individuals erected art museums, opera houses, and other institutions for the elevation of public taste. Despite their claims of public service, however, these institutions often extended the divide between high and popular culture, a division that, as Lawrence Levine observes, solidified in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴ Taken together, this dual function of culture as both a leveler and a divider between different segments of society propelled and problematized the fashioning of an American art culture in this period.

This thesis analyzes Shinn's attempts to reconcile these conflicting strains of American self-identity after the Civil War. The structure of the thesis is both chronological and thematic. In Chapter One, I examine Shinn's background and his two years in France, focusing on his artistic influences there, specifically the painter Jean-Léon Gérôme and the critic and philosopher Hippolyte Taine. Chapter Two traces Shinn's career as an art critic, situating him in the context of contemporary art criticism and the efforts to create an American art culture and promote the building of institutions that would facilitate it. Chapter Three discusses Shinn's work on private art collections and his efforts to mediate the cosmopolitan inclinations of art collectors and his nationalistic impulses. Through an examination of his career and criticism, Shinn emerges as a representative figure of the ambiguities in American cultural construction during the second half of the nineteenth century. In attempting to fashion a cultural identity for his country, Shinn, like many other critics, artists, and writers of the time, looked to Europe as a model while simultaneously proclaiming his country's distinction from the Continent. He envisioned an art culture inclusive of the entire population,

⁴ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), ch. 2.

designed to elevate the public taste, but controlled by educated elites. In this sense, he was both cosmopolitan and a cultural nationalist, a guardian of culture and a disseminator of it.

Several methodological points deserve note. First, I often delineate events or developments by their temporal relationship to the Civil War—whether they occur before or after the war—implying that the war was a dividing line between two distinct eras of American history. Certainly there were continuities between the societies of antebellum and postwar America. Nonetheless, the Civil War marks a turning point in the development of the United States. Aside from the real and symbolic challenge it posed to the conception of America as a political union with a national—if fragmented—culture, the war and the years that followed it witnessed a sharp rise in immigration, the massive growth of cities, and rising labor unrest, concurrent with unprecedented economic expansion in the North, technological and commercial developments and innovations, and a rise in the standard of living, not only for the so-called robber barons who made their fortunes in the railroads and banks that drove the war effort, but for an expanding middle class as well. In the years after the Civil War many Americans, with more money, education, and leisure time than before, gave greater attention to matters of art and sought to make art a larger part of their private lives as well as their national culture.⁵

Second, I use the terms “art,” “culture,” and “art culture” frequently in this thesis. Although closely related, each term has a distinct meaning. “Art” denotes artistic

⁵ For background on the Civil War and the decades that followed see James P. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Eric Foner and Olivia Mahoney, *America’s Reconstruction: People and Politics after the Civil War* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in the Late Nineteenth Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1977), and Sean Dennis Cashman, *America in the Gilded Age: From the Death of Lincoln to the Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

production: painting, sculpture, drama, musical composition, and other forms of creative expression. In this thesis, however, I use “art” to represent only visual art and almost always painting at that. “Art culture” refers to the structures and institutions that facilitate the artistic life of a community. These institutions include art schools, exhibitions, art museums, artists’ organizations, art dealers, and periodicals that discuss art. Even art critics themselves constituted an institution in America’s art culture, for they served as the organs of promoting art and its institutions during Shinn’s career. This institutional infrastructure provided the physical spaces for the display and promotion of art as well as symbolic spaces that art occupied in the national life. These intangible sites could take the form of conversations on the street, purchases of artworks from a dealer, or visits to museums and galleries; in other words, interest in art among the public was an essential component of the institutional infrastructure that comprised America’s art culture. The third term, “culture,” is perhaps the most problematic. Here I use the term in the way that Shinn and his contemporaries used it: a set of practices and values pertaining to education, refinement, leisure, and the fine arts. Culture as they understood it was the perfection of man, the dividing line between civilization and barbarism. In discussing “American culture,” I do not ascribe a blanket set of practices and values to all citizens of the United States but rather refer to the ideal space in American life that Shinn and others undertook to construct and shape by producing, promoting, and criticizing art.

Third, this thesis straddles the line between biography and cultural history. By reconstructing the life and career of Earl Shinn, I use him as a vehicle for examining the development of art criticism and the problems of defining and constructing American culture in the late nineteenth century. I omit many aspects of Shinn’s life that do not

pertain to my subject. By the same token, I ignore numerous individuals, events, movements, and other phenomena that shaped American art and culture in this period because I have chosen to focus on Shinn, a figure who never attached his name to any article or book he wrote, who was largely forgotten after his death in 1886, and who ultimately exerted less influence on the development of American art criticism than some of his peers. Nevertheless, he provides an important case study of the efforts to mediate the competing currents of cosmopolitanism and nationalism and elitism and populism in Gilded Age America.

A number of scholars have written more comprehensive studies of art criticism in late nineteenth-century America.⁶ Still, examining Shinn provides a model for understanding developments not only in American art criticism but in American culture in the late nineteenth century as well. Trained in Europe and enamored with the continent's art, he also sought to make America's art and art culture comparable to that of France, Italy, and Germany. He promoted a cosmopolitan outlook, encouraged young artists to study in Europe, and praised the country's *nouveau riche* for purchasing works of European artists. On the other hand, he was a cultural nationalist who frequently applauded the efforts of American artists and compared—often favorably—their work to that of their European counterparts. He embodied the ambiguity between emulating European styles and tastes and rejecting them, between building an art culture accessible

⁶ These studies include John P. Simoni, "Art Critics and Criticism in Nineteenth Century America" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1952), H. Wayne Morgan, *New Muses: Art in American Culture, 1865-1920* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), Linda J. Docherty, "A Search for Identity: American Art Criticism and the Concept of the 'Native School,' 1876-1893" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1985), JoAnne Marie Mancini, "Enabling Modernism: American Art Criticism, 1865-1913" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1996), David B. Dearing, Ed., *Rave Reviews: American Art and Its Critics, 1826-1925* (New York: National Academy of Design, 2000), and Margaret C. Conrads, *Winslow Homer and the Critics: Forging a National Art in the 1870s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

to all and limited to an elite few, that marked the construction of American cultural identity in the last decades of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth. By examining Shinn's attempts at mediating these conflicting currents, we can better understand the cultural patterns and tensions in this period of American history.

ONE

“That Paris was the America of art”

“We have need of the continual help of the Holy Spirit... to detect and turn from the insidious influence of things, impure or enervating in their own nature, which gain entrance into the unguarded heart under cover of their association with intellectual enjoyment or the attractions of refined taste.”¹ This passage, taken from a pamphlet issued by representatives of the Religious Society of Friends of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware in 1882 titled “An Address on Some Growing Evils of the Day Especially Demoralizing Literature and Art,” captures the dominant opinion of the arts among nineteenth-century American Quakers. Art, many of them believed, encouraged extravagance and depravity and had no place in a pious Christian’s life. Indicting materialism and the advances in the fine arts as sources of the nation’s moral and spiritual decline, the pamphlet reveals the anxiety of many late nineteenth-century Quakers over the growing impact of art and culture on an increasingly wealthy, cosmopolitan society. It also provides a glimpse at the culture out of which Earl Shinn emerged.

Shinn’s parents, Earl and Sarah, were Orthodox Quakers and members of the Monthly Meeting of Friends of Philadelphia. Despite their modest means, the bricklayer and his wife had high expectations for their children and sent all seven of them to prestigious Quaker private schools. Like many nineteenth-century Quakers, Earl and Sarah Shinn encouraged their children to lead not only pious but financially successful lives and to enter professions in business, medicine, and the like or marry men who had

¹ “An Address on Some Growing Evils of the Day Especially Demoralizing Literature and Art, From Representatives of the Religious Society of Friends, For Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware.” (Philadelphia: Friends’ Book Store, 1882), 3-4.

entered such professions. Thus Samuel and James, their oldest sons, went into pharmacy; James, who took over Samuel's pharmacy in 1855 after Samuel drowned in the Schuylkill River, achieved great success in the Philadelphia pharmaceutical community and remained a practicing Quaker throughout his life. Similarly, three of the four Shinn daughters, Elizabeth, Anna, and Lydia, married successful Quaker businessmen; Anna's husband, Samuel R. Shipley, was especially prosperous, serving as president of the Provident Life and Trust Co., a prominent Philadelphia bank and insurance company, from 1865 to 1905.²

Earl Shinn Jr., born in Philadelphia on November 8, 1838, was the youngest of Earl and Sarah's children. He attended the Friends' Select School in Philadelphia for several years during his childhood, after which he enrolled at the progressive Westtown School in nearby Chester County where he studied for the 1853-54 school year. The Shinn's expected Earl Jr. (who from now on I will refer to as Earl Shinn) to follow a similar path of piety and prosperity as his siblings. After leaving Westtown, where he served as a member of the Westtown Literary Society and an editor of its newsletter, *The Cabinet*, he returned to Philadelphia and entered the field of conveyancing, a respectable profession in his parents' eyes. He realized, however, that property title investigation was not his calling and in 1859 took the momentous step of abandoning that line of work and enrolling at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts to pursue his real interests, drawing and painting. His decision to study art in favor of pursuing financial success in a

² Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania; "Samuel R. Shipley" in *Who Was Who in America*, vol. I (Chicago: A.G. Marquis, 1943), 1130. For a discussion of Quaker attitudes toward wealth see Philip S. Benjamin, *The Philadelphia Quakers in the Industrial Age 1865-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), ch. 3.

more conventional vocation was significant on two levels: not only was his country suspicious of the fine arts, but his religion was openly hostile towards them.

Shinn remained a Quaker and a member of the Monthly Meeting of Friends of Philadelphia until his death. He believed strongly in the principles of moderation, simplicity, and selflessness that were at the center of Quakerism but objected to the rejection of art imbedded in the religion.³ His parents, like many other Quakers of the day, denounced the visual arts and music as frivolous and immoral, viewing them at best as trifling recreational activities.⁴ Shinn did have some exposure to art in his childhood; in an early letter to his brother James he writes, “I’ve been to the Academy of the fine arts once and expect to go again as I have money...” and during his time at Westtown he writes of receiving a sketch pad from his aunt.⁵ Despite the occasional visit to the Academy and his forays into drawing, his exposure to art was minimal, making his entry into the Academy a formative moment in his development as an artist. It marked his decision to pursue a career as a painter, despite the reservations of his parents.

The Pennsylvania Academy’s curriculum consisted of drawing from plaster casts of antique statues and nude models as well as classes in anatomy taught at a local medical

³ Shinn’s relationship to Quakerism, though beyond the scope of this thesis, deserves a study of its own. More than just nominally Quaker, Shinn cared deeply about his religion and viewed his work in art criticism as being in the service of Quakerism, contrary to the prevailing opinion of his fellow Friends. He perceived himself as “the only writer in this country empowered to stand as mediator between the Quakers and a world that little cares to understand them,” and viewed art criticism as “a perfectly grave profession prosecuted in the pursuit of eternal truth.” He wrote to his sister Anna in 1881, “I want to bring culture and intelligence, and wit... into the service of real religion—to serve true piety in terms not known among the tiresome terms of its traditional nomenclature.” Earl Shinn to Anna Shipley, 26 March 1881, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

⁴ For more information on Quaker opposition to the arts see Benjamin, *The Philadelphia Quakers in the Industrial Age 1865-1920*, 28-32.

⁵ Earl Shinn to James T. Shinn; Earl Shinn to Hannah Shinn, 17 January 1854, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

school.⁶ Though one of the leading art schools in the country, the Academy lacked the resources that many of its pupils required and the instruction suffered as a result. Male and female students worked in separate studios, the nudes never being of the opposite gender. Years later Shinn wrote that the insensitivity of the Academy's Board of Directors to the needs of the students led a number of them to travel to Europe "to obtain—it cannot be said with propriety to complete—his education."⁷ Despite the shortcomings of Pennsylvania Academy, Shinn received his first formal art education there and gained an appreciation for the institutional base of art that would influence his later career. While at the Academy he also helped establish the Philadelphia Sketch Club with several other students and instructors as an outside forum for drawing and design and served as an officer for the club for several years.⁸

Shinn completed his study at the Academy in 1863. By that time the Civil War was in its second year. Shinn was drafted by the Union army in 1862 but never served, probably paying, like his brother James and many other Quakers, the three-hundred dollar commutation fee instead. Despite the wishes of his parents that he remain in Philadelphia and settle into what they would have considered a proper profession, Shinn moved to New York in January 1864 and found a job as a staff writer for the popular weekly *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. He mainly wrote criticism, which in 1865 took the form of a column, "New York Gossip," in which he reviewed art exhibition openings, theater and opera productions, literature, local politics, and the responses of New Yorkers to the

⁶ On the Pennsylvania Academy's curriculum in the 1850s and 1860s see Doreen Bolger, "The Education of the American Artist" in *In This Academy: The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1805-1976* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1976), 56-70.

⁷ Sigma [Earl Shinn], "A Philadelphia Art School," *The Art Amateur* 10 (January 1884), 32. Quoted in David Sellin, *The First Pose* (New York: Norton, 1976), 29-30.

⁸ Sellin, *The First Pose*, 11, 30-31.

news of the Civil War, all under the pseudonym—the first of several in his career—
“Lear.” He felt that the work suited him well, as he relates to his brother James in an
1864 letter:

My business here... has a few inconsiderable drawbacks, is defective in dignity,
and likewise in profit... [but] the privilege of exercising faculties the seeds of
which are already planted by the Creator, in place of creating new ones for the
service of a craft not natural to me is a very great privilege indeed... My
business, I wish to insist, is perfectly honorable, and without many of the dirty
temptations of conveyancing.⁹

What stands out in this passage is Shinn’s attempt to reconcile two seemingly
contradictory aspects of his identity, his religion and his love of art. By insisting that in
his present occupation he better serves God than in his previous one—in his parents’ eyes
a more legitimate profession—he attempts to reconcile those two poles of his identity.

Shinn was satisfied to write for *Leslie’s* over a short period, though already by
early 1865 he was expressing discontent with his job. In April of that year he wrote to
his brother,

I don’t mean to be a newspaper man all my life, but my advances toward other
openings are always checked. I would gladly take a place on the “Friend” [a
well-known Quaker periodical] at a barely living salary. Quakerism & Philada.
seem from here very much like Peace and Paradise...¹⁰

Several days later he wrote again to James,

The fact is, I don’t exactly suit [Leslie]... all the time goading me on to exert
myself, and be the life and soul of the paper. This I might do, if I could give my
own tone to the reading, but I am asked to throw myself with all my heart into its
tone, and that I won’t.¹¹

While writing gossip columns was a more satisfying pursuit for him than assessing
property claims, Shinn wanted more than what Leslie was giving him. He applied for a

⁹ Earl Shinn to James T. Shinn, 16 January 1864, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

¹⁰ Earl Shinn to James T. Shinn, 3 April 1865, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

¹¹ Earl Shinn to James T. Shinn, 7 April 1865, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

position at the newly-founded *Nation* in 1865 but was turned away. Also, there was the issue of his parents, who were never enthusiastic about Earl's interest in art or his move to New York. His mother's letters to him from this period are filled with pleas for him to come home; in one letter she writes, "...we cant help but feel anxious about thee, about thy manner of life, but above all about thy souls everlasting welfare, for such as ye sow, such shall ye reap."¹² Apparently the appeals of his parents were successful, for he left *Leslie's* in the summer of 1865 for the sake, he told James, of their father. It was not, however, a sign that he was ready to settle into a more conventional vocation, for he still dreamed of traveling and absorbing the cultures of the world; as he wrote to his brother before coming home, "Oh I want to go to Europe or South America or Somewheres."¹³

In the summer of 1865 he got his chance, for both of his parents passed away within two months of each other. They left each of their children with a small sum of money. Earl received five hundred dollars. Whatever pain he felt at the loss of his parents must have been met with a certain feeling of freedom to pursue his artistic interests without worrying about their disapproval. After spending several months in Philadelphia to help his siblings tend to their parents' estate, Shinn made his dream of traveling to Europe a reality and, using the money he inherited, set out for France in April of 1866. The Civil War had been over for a year and the generation of artists and writers that came of age during it was ready to begin rebuilding their previously divided country. The war challenged the very concept of 'Americanness' that intellectuals, artists, and politicians of the first half of the century attempted to define. The generation that grew

¹² Sarah Shinn to Earl Shinn, "4th mo. something," Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

¹³ Earl Shinn to James T. Shinn, 29 May 1865, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

out of it would alter and redirect the concept, moving from the isolationist stance of Emerson and Thoreau to a more active embrace of styles and trends from outside of their country. In their new vision of American culture, art—whether the poetry of Walt Whitman, the architecture of H.H. Richardson, or the canvases of Winslow Homer—would play a significant role. The young writers and artists of the post-bellum years saw art as a means of healing the wounds inflicted by the war and of creating and expressing a national character, as reflected in a passage from a Pennsylvania Academy exhibition review that Shinn wrote:

...[W]hile we thought the nation's whole energy was concentrated on the war, the quiet industry of artists in their cells has been hoarding such stores of honey, that we can step at once from streets in which the tread of armed men is ringing, into cloisters filled to overflowing by the silent and beautiful arts of Peace.¹⁴

The postwar generation would make art, often neglected or dismissed as a luxury of the decadent Old World by antebellum culture-builders, a central component of the development of a national culture.

An important element in this redefinition of American culture was the enthusiasm with which young Americans embraced Europe. Abandoning the nativist attitude that marked American self-definition in the first half of the century, the postwar generation sought to absorb Europe's cultural life and transport its best features back to the United States. As the development of the commercial steamship progressed, more Americans had the opportunity to travel to Europe, where many of them remained for a period of several years before returning home. Shinn was part of this first wave of American expatriates to Europe after the Civil War, a group that included Homer, Mark Twain, Mary Cassatt, Thomas Eakins (who, with Cassatt, had studied at the Pennsylvania

¹⁴ [Earl Shinn], "With the Academy Pictures," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*.

Academy of Fine Arts with Shinn), and Henry James, who captured the exhilaration and anxiety of his fellow émigrés in Christopher Newman, the title character of his 1877 novel *The American* who proclaims,

“I am not cultivated, I am not even educated; I know nothing about history, or art, or foreign tongues, or any other learned matters. But I am not a fool, either, and I shall undertake to know something about Europe by the time I have done with it. I feel something under my ribs here... that I can’t explain—a sort of mighty hankering, a desire to stretch out and haul in.”¹⁵

Newman’s “desire to stretch out and haul in” affected Shinn and other Americans who traveled abroad in this period. In emigrating to Europe, Shinn was participating in a collective effort to experience the art and culture of the Continent that so many young Americans felt. The generation that came of age around the time of the war was wealthier and better educated than the one that preceded it; the postwar boom in the northeast witnessed the expansion of an affluent middle class, the increased circulation of journals and newspapers, and the opening of a number of institutions of higher education, developments that I will discuss in greater detail later. For young artists, art schools such as the Pennsylvania Academy and the National Academy of Design in New York offered opportunities to sharpen their artistic talents and increase their exposure to a growing consumer audience. Still, the relative youth and lack of resources of these institutions in comparison with the academies of Paris, Rome, Munich, and other art centers of the Continent propelled many American artists to study in Europe.

Shinn left Philadelphia in 1866 with Howard Roberts, a young sculptor and friend from the Academy who would later provide the Capitol in Washington with its statue of Robert Fulton, and spent a month in England before arriving in Paris at the end of May.

¹⁵ Henry James, *The American*, in *Henry James: Novels 1871-1880* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983), 545.

Shinn had few prospects when he arrived there, a rudimentary knowledge of the French language, and dreams of studying at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He immediately contacted the American Legation in Paris which handled the applications of Americans to the school; it was not until September however that he received word from Legation Secretary John Hay that his application was denied as the school was overenrolled and had suspended the admission of foreign students indefinitely. Around the same time that Shinn contacted the Legation, he and Roberts looked up Robert Wylie, painter, former curator of the Pennsylvania Academy, and a founder of the Philadelphia Sketch Club who had emigrated to France in 1863 and was living in Paris when the two men arrived there. Wylie took them under his wing and helped them settle into life in Paris. Shinn describes his first weeks in France in a letter to his sister Anna:

On my arrival in Paris (5.26.66) I found my old friend Wylie leading a nice puritan life in a furnished chamber on the north side of the Seine, away from the Bohemian temptations of the Latin Quarter. I immediately engaged a room right over his head and shall return to the same place after this summer jaunt is over. My traveling companion Roberts settled next door... It is one of the very finest situations in Paris...¹⁶

Wylie and Shinn toured the museums and galleries of the city which the aspiring painter embraced with great enthusiasm. The Louvre in particular impressed him; he described it to his nieces as being “like all the public buildings in America put together in a square, and all is cool, and the great old paintings that you would think extremely horrid are everywhere around you...”¹⁷

In June Wylie convinced Shinn and Roberts to relocate to the Breton coastal town of Pont-Aven for the summer. Wylie visited the town, situated on the rocky coast of

¹⁶ Earl Shinn to Anna Shipley, 17 June 1866, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

¹⁷ Earl Shinn to Anna Shipley, 24 June 1866, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

Finistere, for the first time two summers before. Pont-Aven, made famous twenty years later by Gauguin and a horde of other Post-Impressionists, had never been home to any artists, let alone American ones, until Wylie's arrival there. In the summer of 1866, Wylie brought with him a group of fellow artists, and the artists' colony at Pont-Aven was born. Accompanying Wylie, Shinn, and Roberts were three other newly arrived American painters acquainted with Wylie: Benjamin Champney, Charles Way, and Frederick A. Bridgman. Shinn expressed the excitement with which their small group embarked on the journey to Finistere:

Well, after I had taken two weeks to the ordinary sights of Paris under the kind wing of my friend Wylie... our little American society quietly extracted its own roots and drifted down here to Finistere. We are, as I said, in a fine mouldy [*sic*] artistic country... Our party are the heroes of the place, which was discovered by Wylie two years ago, and never entertained an American before. We now number six, and are daily expecting an accession of three; the gendarmes doff to us with the utmost respect...¹⁸

Shinn and his compatriots did not travel to Pont-Aven to study art in an academic sense, but rather to remove themselves from the scholastic world that excluded them. They painted landscapes, seascapes, and portraits and figure studies of local Bretons to whom, as Shinn wrote, they were "the lions of Pont-Aven."¹⁹ The number of American artists in the town grew over the summer as did their popularity among locals.

Shinn was thrilled to be a member of the Pont-Aven colony and expressed his excitement not only in letters to his siblings but also in a humorous weekly column he wrote for the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* under the pseudonym "L'Enfant Perdu" titled "Rash Steps." It was in Pont-Aven too that Shinn began his professional relationship with the *Nation* (the magazine that had turned him away the summer before),

¹⁸ Earl Shinn to Anna Shipley, 17 June 1866, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

¹⁹ [Shinn], *Harper's*, 1881, p. 697f. Quoted in Sellin, *Americans in Brittany and Normandy, 1860-1910* (Phoenix: Phoenix Museum of Art, 1982), 23.

sending two correspondences to the journal, one about Paris and the other about Pont-Aven. These articles are filled with obscure references and indecipherable allusions, but they aptly convey the feelings of adventure and discovery that Shinn—and no doubt his fellow expatriates—felt. In the first letter, published in September 1866, he gives an account of a conversation he had shortly after arriving with his new friend, “Cèsar y___,” who, he writes, tells him,

“That Paris was the America of art. For diplomacy, for the public idea, we fly to you; but for the toleration of taste, for the painter’s dream, even America emigrates. She reverses the procession of empire... and comes to study of France the principles of liberty. You, monsieur, arrive for improvement in art. A proud chair awaits you.”²⁰

“Cèsar,” who appears again in his second *Nation* article from Brittany, is most likely Wylie. In any case, the Pont-Aven correspondences provide useful accounts of the lives of the artists there as well as quasi-ethnographic descriptions of the local Breton culture.

Notwithstanding his enthusiasm about Pont-Aven, Shinn began to question his ability to paint professionally during that summer. In a letter to Anna he wrote

My labors in Pontaven, dear Anna, have proved to my own satisfaction that I am able to draw; I consider myself as excelling in that particular most of the professionals around me; my improvement has been steady, and though I have had many of the artist’s trials and discouragements, yet on a calm review I find enough advance to tempt me on. My principal difficulties and horrors occurred while painfully teaching myself that I could never be a painter... I am not worrying about it; I propose doing my best for self-education through the winter; I have no skill in extracting the market-success from my talents; I suppose, if Providence means me to be a designer I shall find myself supporting myself; if I find myself starving, I shall consider that an indication that Providence does not intend me for an artist; I have no clever criterions; in these days there is no open vision.²¹

Shinn, as we learn from his letters home, was colorblind and near-sighted, conditions that effectively precluded a future in producing art (though not from critiquing it,

²⁰ E[arl] S[hinn], “Art-Study Abroad,” *Nation* 3 (6 September 1866).

²¹ Earl Shinn to Anna Shipley, 6 October 1866, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

remarkably). Regardless, he returned to Paris in October and enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts where, despite the continuing difficulty of foreign students to gain admittance, he was accepted—thanks to the persistent cajoling of government and school officials by his friend Thomas Eakins—at the end of that month. He began his study in November.

The Ecole des Beaux-Arts was founded by Mazarin in 1648 and for over a century served as a font of palace designers and court painters. By the middle of the nineteenth century, having survived the collapse of the Ancien Regime and the rise and fall of several subsequent governments, the Ecole was an exclusive, hierarchical, deeply conservative, and highly influential institution that tended to reject any novel style that even remotely defied the principles of classicism. Members of the Academie wielded enormous power in the Paris art world, deciding which works would be exhibited at each year's Salon—the most important art exhibition in the world—and which ones would not. Moreover, if an artist was fortunate enough to be accepted in the Salon, he was only allowed to display three works. Resentment among artists excluded from the Academie and the Salons—and even those who were accepted but annoyed that they could only show three pieces—culminated early in 1863 when a group of artists protested the strict regulations and closed system of the Salons to the Emperor Napoleon III. The Emperor, annoyed at the elitism of the Academicians, responded by organizing the famous “Salon des Refusés,” an alternate exhibition for works that had been rejected from the Salon. It was a sign of things to come. Later that year, Napoleon III oversaw the reform of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, which saw reductions in the power of the Academicians, changes

in the school's curriculum, and the establishment of three new painting ateliers.²² One of the three new professors hired in the reform was Shinn's principal instructor at the Ecole, Jean-Leon Gèrôme.

By the time the thirty-nine year-old Gèrôme took his post as professor at the Ecole, his career had already taken several turns. As a young man in the 1840s he established himself as the leader of the Neo-Grecs, a group of Parisian painters whose works displayed an eclectic neoclassicism that borrowed themes of earlier neoclassical painters like David, as well as contemporaries such as Ingres and Gèrôme's instructor Charles Gleyre, but had little of the severity and solemnity of those artists' paintings which usually depicted historical, mythological, or Biblical scenes. Rather, the Neo-Grecs' pieces were playful, humorous, and often tinged with a light eroticism. They combined the coyness and lighthearted sexuality of the late rococo period with the stark subject matter of neoclassicism. Gèrôme's most famous early work, *The Cock Fight* (1846), is a good example of the Neo-Grec style. With brilliant colors it depicts two young nudes, a man and a woman, quite accurately rendered, in an idealized classical setting watching a cockfight. The scene exudes a playful eroticism that clearly distinguishes it from earlier neoclassical paintings as well as Gèrôme's later work which gradually moved towards Realism.²³

After the establishment of the Second Republic, Gèrôme began to receive state commissions and increasingly moved away from the Neo-Grec style in favor of a more

²² The most authoritative text on the Academie and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in the nineteenth century is Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1971). See also *The French Academy: Classicism and its Antagonists*, ed. June Hargrove (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990).

²³ For more on Gèrôme's painting career, see Gerald M. Ackerman, *Jean-Leon Gèrôme: His Life, His Work, 1824-1904* (Courbevoie: ACR edition, 1997), 22-43.

official one that adopted the austerity of neoclassicism. As his state exposure grew, he began to be counted by some (though not by himself) among the Realists, a group of artists that appeared in the middle of the century and that included Gustave Courbet and Honore Daumier. As an artistic movement, nineteenth-century Realism corresponded to the emphasis on objective, scientific observation of nature that influenced nearly every aspect of society. The landscapes of the Barbizon School in the 1850s and the Pont-Aven artists in the following decade reflected this attention to nature. Gèrôme increasingly embraced the notion of objective painting, that an artist ought to render exactly what he sees in his work, and incorporated it into his ‘ethnographic’ paintings from numerous trips to Africa and the Middle East beginning in 1855. Scholars generally acknowledge that Realism was the precursor to Impressionism, though Gèrôme took pains to distinguish his brand of “Academic Realism” from that of more radical painters like Manet and Degas.²⁴

When the Comte de Nieuwerkerke, Minister of Public Instruction of the Second Empire, appointed Gèrôme an instructor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the painter was already famous in France and had adopted a brand of realism in his painting that was appropriate to the reformed art school. Though his style was far from radical, it was considered modern and the Ministry believed that he could revitalize the rigid system of instruction at the Ecole. As a teacher, Gèrôme was known for his sharp wit, his blunt criticism, and his laxity with students, from whom he commanded great respect. He was

²⁴ For more information on nineteenth-century Realism see Gerald Needham, *Nineteenth-Century Realist Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) and James Malpas, *Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 1. Jack Lindsay, *Gustave Courbet: His Life and Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848-1851* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973), and Gonzalo Sanchez, *Organizing Independence: The Artists Federation of the Paris Commune and Its Legacy, 1871-1889* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) provide useful interpretations of Courbet’s art in the context of French society and politics.

a particular favorite of foreign students, especially Americans and particularly Philadelphians, whom he allowed into his atelier as “special students” as they could not compete for the school’s prestigious Prix de Rome.²⁵ Shinn was among his disciples, who also included Thomas Eakins and Frederick A. Bridgman. In a later article for the *Nation* Shinn described the pious admiration of Gèrôme’s pupils for their instructor:

It appears to me there is an unfeigned respect, a confiding homage, extended to their teacher that is much like a devotional feeling... I am scarcely less than serious... when I claim that those honest fellows devote to their professor some of the sacrifices taken from religion.²⁶

Shinn had an almost religious awe of Gèrôme, whose approaches to art instruction and composition would have a considerable impact on his attention to technique and his criteria for evaluating art.

Although painting was introduced at the Ecole in the 1863 reforms, Gèrôme’s instruction focused on drawing from nude models. A master draughtsman himself, he believed that one could not be a painter without first knowing how to draw. In fact, only his most experienced students ever touched a paintbrush in his atelier; the majority of them devoted their energies to *acadèmies*, figure studies from a nude model. As Shinn observed, “The true event of school life are the schooling and the advance; not the describable things, not the holidays and junketings, not the diversions and recreations... What is really the week’s affair to the Beaux-Arts man is his ‘academy.’”²⁷ Gèrôme’s emphases on drawing and the classical representation of the human body as the end of art had an important effect on Shinn’s theories of art and art instruction. A decade later, in

²⁵ Ackerman, *Jean-Leon Gèrôme*, 162. The annual Prix de Rome was the top prize for students at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The winner spent four years at the French Academy in Rome.

²⁶ [Shinn], “Art-Study in the Imperial School at Paris. No. IV. A Dinner to M. Gèrôme,” *Nation* 8 (24 June 1869), 492.

²⁷ [Shinn], “Art-Study in the Imperial School at Paris. No. V. ‘Style’ and ‘Quality’—The Routine of Work—Eugenie,” *Nation* 9 (22 July 1869), 68.

his catalogue of the art gallery at the Centennial Exhibition, he would write that “the aim of art is ‘to produce a representation of a beautiful human figure, with correctness of design and in a graceful attitude.’”²⁸ Similarly, in a review of the 1878 National Academy of Design exhibition, Shinn criticized the “want of education” shown in a canvas by Louis Comfort Tiffany and wrote, “Any competent European teacher would withdraw Mr. Tiffany from his painting, which he is not ready to undertake, and put him through a course with life-models and Greek statues.”²⁹ These opinions correspond to Gèrôme’s approach to art instruction, illustrated in his critique of a student’s *académie* as quoted by Shinn:

‘You do not yet understand the continuity of forms in nature... You are deceived and should use your eyes; the accent is not in the line, it is in the shading beside the line, and even there far more slightly than you think. Here again, the vein crosses the fore-arm. You make a hideous saliency. Nature never, absolutely never, breaks a line.’³⁰

Gèrôme’s emphases on training and objectivity in art would have a profound impact on Shinn’s art criticism. Indeed, it was Shinn who thirteen years later would introduce much of America to Gèrôme in a book of photogravures of the artist’s paintings that he assembled and edited.

If anyone had a greater influence on Shinn during his time in France than Gèrôme it was Hippolyte Taine, lecturer in art history and aesthetics at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. In addition to instruction in drawing and painting, students at the Ecole attended classes and lectures on anatomy, history, art history, aesthetics, literature, decorative arts, and ornamental design, several of which resulted from the 1863 reforms. Taine was a respected if institutionally marginal French historian, philosopher, and critic whose

²⁸ Edward Strahan [Earl Shinn], *Masterpieces of the Centennial Exhibition, Vol. I* (Philadelphia: Gebbie and Barrie, 1876-78 [reprint, New York: Garland, 1977]), 5.

²⁹ [Shinn], “The National Academy Exhibition. Final Notice,” *Nation* 26 (30 May 1878), 364.

³⁰ [Shinn], “Art-Study in the Imperial School at Paris. No. II. Gèrôme,” *Nation* 8 (6 May 1869), 352.

Histoire de la littérature anglaise of 1864 placed him at the forefront of French literary criticism. That same year he began lecturing at the Ecole. Shinn demonstrated his esteem for Taine in a letter to his sister: “Among the privileges of my ticket is a magnificent course... of lectures on art subjects, including... Critical Aesthetics by Taine, the great art-critic; how I shall revel in the latter!”³¹ Taine was not trained in art history but had formulated a model for interpreting art as a social phenomenon that could be studied and evaluated scientifically. He sought to make art criticism a science and advanced a theory that artistic production was governed by the laws of “race, milieu, and moment.” A passage from one of Taine’s first lectures in the winter of 1864 outlines his approach to interpreting art:

Suppose, that through the effect of all these discoveries, we succeed in defining the nature, and in marking the conditions of each art, we shall have a complete explanation of the Fine Arts, and of art in general; that is to say, a philosophy of Fine Arts – what is called an aesthetic system... Ours is modern, and different from the ancient, inasmuch as it is historic, and not dogmatic; that is to say, it imposes no precepts, but ascertains and verifies laws... The modern method, which I strive to pursue, and which is beginning to be introduced in all the moral sciences, consists in considering human productions, and particularly works of art, as facts and productions of which it is essential to mark the characteristics and seek the causes, and nothing more.³²

His attempt at making art criticism and aesthetic theory objective enterprises founded upon scientific methods corresponded to the dominant intellectual currents of mid-nineteenth century Europe which espoused the view that society, like the natural world, could be apprehended and improved upon by an understanding of the laws that govern it, just as nature could be comprehended and manipulated by a knowledge of the laws that govern it. Auguste Comte formulated his theory of Positivism in the 1840s, a model that

³¹ Earl Shinn to Anna Shipley, 10 November 1866, Richard Tapper Cadbury Collection, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

³² Hippolyte Taine, *Lectures on Art: Vol. I*, trans. John Durand (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1875), 36-37.

endorsed the application of scientific principles to the social world; society, he argued, is governed by objective laws which its inhabitants, through a proper understanding of those laws, can use to improve it. In the natural sciences, Lamarck's theory of heredity and Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection created an explosion of "scientism" that affected not only the emergent fields of social science but other disciplines as well; for instance, Stendhal's "theory of the novel" was an application of the scientific method in literary studies. Taine would extend scientism to visual art.³³

Taine's formula of "race, milieu, and moment" as the constituent elements in a work of art meant that any product of an individual artist, though necessarily different from one of another artist or another of the same artist, was defined by the distinctive character of the artist's nation (race) at that particular moment in time; thus the art of Italian Renaissance was marked by the imaginative exuberance and warm climate Italy during that period while that of the Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reflected the calm demeanor, cooler climate, and economic prosperity of the Dutch during that time. Taine believed that even artists of different media and styles, if they were painters of the same nationality during the same epoch, formed a distinct "school." His was a determinist philosophy of art; while he left room for individual genius and creative expression in art, he saw any artistic production as being necessarily tied to the social and material setting that shaped it. However, not only did he believe that all paintings of a particular time and place were shaped by that setting, but that all

³³ Thomas H. Goetz, *Taine and the Fine Arts* (Madrid: Playor, 1973), 35-42. Taine also applied the scientific method to music, architecture, and literary criticism, but those theoretical formulations are of no concern here. For more information on Taine's aesthetic theories and his tenure at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts see Philip Hotchkiss Walsh, "Viollet-le-Duc and Taine at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts: On the First Professorship of Art History in France" and Mary G. Morton, "Art History on the Academic Fringe: Taine's Philosophy of Art" in *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London: Routledge, 2002), chs. 5 and 13.

sculptures, musical compositions, plays, poems, novels, and architectural works—that is, *all* artistic productions—shared those common characteristics and were shaped by events and trends of their particular nation in that particular period. For example, the nature of the art of the Spanish Golden Age—the paintings of Velazquez, Zurbaran, and Murillo, the plays of Lope de Vega and Calderon de la Barca, the epic poetry of Cervantes—was shaped by the consolidation of power by the Catholic Church, the wealth Spain gained from its overseas colonies, and its military victories in Europe and paralleled those historical conditions so that Spain’s political decline in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed an artistic one as well.³⁴ Taine’s philosophy of art thus posited that the arts of a nation are bound to the specific character of that nation at that moment and defined by its political, economic, and social conditions. Shinn, we shall see, would take up Taine’s scientific theory of art criticism and his formula of race, milieu, and moment in his own career as a critic.

Shinn studied at the Ecole through the winter of 1866-67. His performance as a student is unclear, though he occasionally references the praise he receives from Gèrôme in his letters. The session ended in April of 1867, after which he embarked on a trip to Italy where he remained through the summer. Shinn returned to Paris in August for the 1867 Exposition Universelle and then set off again for Pont-Aven with Wylie in September. In November he returned to the Ecole for a second winter term. Though he continued drawing and painting, Shinn increasingly resigned himself to abandoning a career in painting and instead looked to art criticism—the discipline of his favorite lecturer—as a way of utilizing his talents and interests. He wrote to his sister,

³⁴ Taine, *Lectures on Art*, 27-29.

...[T]he height of my aim at present is to be a critic and comprehend civilization and things of taste. Art I should like, and I have a vocation for it; but I think my near-sightedness, color-blindness and failing vision are pretty strong hints from nature that that career is not intended for me; I have the powers, and the conceptions, and the understanding, and under a happier star might have been an artist, but I feel debarred from that path, and swept into the current of literature, for which I have not a vocation.³⁵

The reasons for Shinn's continued study at the Ecole are unclear, though they probably included an appreciation of the level of instruction he was receiving and his continuing allegiance to Gèrôme and Taine. In any case, he completed his term in the spring of 1868 and made plans to leave Paris for home, ready to return to his native country but nostalgic for the romance of Paris and the magnificence of its art. He was particularly reluctant to leave his favorite Paris museum, the Louvre; shortly before he returned to America he wrote to his brother, "I go through the Louvre now as if I had received a sentence to exile, reciting (all I know of) Eve's lament at leaving Eden."³⁶ The Louvre, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Gèrôme, Taine, Pont-Aven, and Paris: these were the models for Shinn's conception of a national art culture. In the ensuing decades he would attempt to create in his own country a cultural atmosphere like the one he experienced in France. He returned to Philadelphia in April of 1868 to begin his career as an art critic, little aware of the role he would play in the making of American culture over the next eighteen years.

³⁵ Earl Shinn to Anna Shipley, 3 July 1867, Richard Tapper Cadbury Collection, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College.

³⁶ Earl Shinn to James T. Shinn, 13 February 1868, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

TWO

“The Great Objects of Art Criticism”

Upon his return to Philadelphia, Earl Shinn found a job writing art and literary criticism for the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*. He spent two years in his native city during which he left little record of his life, save for his *Bulletin* pieces and a series of articles he wrote on his experiences in Paris for the *Nation* in 1869 that James Russell Lowell, in a letter to *Nation* editor E.L. Godkin, called “the very best of its kind.”¹ In December of 1870 Shinn moved back to New York to spend the remainder of his life. New York, the city that mesmerized him six years before, was the natural choice for a young art critic. It had surpassed Boston and Philadelphia as the artistic capital of the country, with many of the best artists established there and the city’s National Academy of Design hosting the most prestigious and well-publicized annual art exhibitions in America. New York was also home to a number of the country’s most important publications. Shinn found a job with the *Nation* as a regular contributor in 1871 and wrote art criticism for the magazine over the next decade, serving as head art critic from 1874 to 1879. In addition to the *Nation*, Shinn contributed to several other periodicals including *Lippincott’s Magazine* (1872), the *New York Evening Post* (periodically throughout the 1870s), *Scribner’s Monthly* (1879), and *The Art Amateur* (1879-84), and published ten books over the course of his sixteen years in New York. This chapter analyzes Shinn’s attempts to reconcile the tensions between cosmopolitanism and nationalism and elitism and populism in the making of American culture through his art criticism of the 1870s and 1880s. In his efforts to create an art culture that was

¹ James Russell Lowell to E.L. Godkin, 16 July 1869, *Life and Letters of E.L. Godkin: Vol. II*, ed. Rollo Ogden (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 84.

simultaneously accessible to all and restricted to an educated minority and his ambivalence towards American art of the period, Shinn provides a particularly useful illustration of the ambiguities in the fashioning of American culture in the late nineteenth century.

Art criticism, like art itself, did not play a significant role in American society and culture before the Civil War. The country did foster some growth in artistic production beginning in the colonial period as Neil Harris and Meredith Neil have suggested.² Still, Americans for much of the nineteenth century lacked a native artistic tradition—with the exception of the Hudson River School—that they could look to for inspiration. Scholars have pointed to several reasons for the failure of American art to develop more strongly. H. Wayne Morgan argues that the absence of an artistic tradition in America can be attributed to the gulf between the perceived elitism and idleness of the fine arts and the utilitarian ethos of a democratic society.³ JoAnne Marie Mancini echoes Morgan's argument but focuses on the lack of an institutional infrastructure such as that of the primarily state-sponsored European art world.⁴ Thomas Gaehtgens and Hans Ickstadt recognize artistic production in America before the second half of the nineteenth century but limit it to areas in which art was employed for a more useful purpose, such as portrait painting; the difficulties of settling a new territory precluded any substantial further

² Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society, 1760-1860: The Formative Years* (New York: G. Braziller, 1966) and Meredith Neil, *Toward a National Taste: America's Quest for Aesthetic Independence* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1975) provide in-depth examinations of American art before the Civil War.

³ Morgan, *New Muses*, 6.

⁴ Mancini, "Enabling Modernism," 15.

development.⁵ In short, much of the recent work in the field suggests that the lack of a developed artistic tradition derived from distinct characteristics of American history.

Contemporary observers in the nineteenth century offered their own interpretations of America's weakness in the arts. Shinn, though generally encouraging in his writings about American art, wrote in 1872, "Even to-day one feels that the conservatory is hardly warm for the flower," suggesting that American artists have difficulty making a living through art in their country.⁶ Another critic, George P. Lathrop, wrote that despite "the positive bias in our national character toward productivity in the arts... painters find existence hard and precarious among us."⁷ Comments such as these suggest the lack of support, both symbolic and material, for American artists in the nineteenth century and convey the desire of critics and other art-world figures to make art play a more important role in shaping American culture.

Not surprisingly, art criticism was slow to develop in America before the Civil War.⁸ Early reviews of art exhibitions appeared in newspapers and magazines from the beginning of the nineteenth century, but they often consisted of lists of objects with brief descriptions attached to them. Many of these reviews offered only accounts of paintings' subject matters or biographical anecdotes about artists and their authors rarely injected personal opinion into them. Indeed, the authors of these early reviews were usually not

⁵ Thomas Gaehtgens and Hans Ickstadt, "Introduction," in *American Icons: Transatlantic Perspectives on Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century American Art* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities, 1992), 4.

⁶ E[arl] S[hinn], "The First American Art Academy: Second Paper," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science*, vol. 9 (March 1872), 319.

⁷ George P. Lathrop, "The Study of Art in Boston," *Harper's Monthly* 58 (May 1879), 818. Quoted in Mancini, "Enabling Modernism," 14-15.

⁸ For the most comprehensive histories of early American art criticism see Simoni, "Art Critics and Criticism in Nineteenth Century America," 2-8 and 17-35 and Dearing, "An Introduction to the History of American Art Criticism to 1925" and "Annual Exhibitions and the Birth of American Art Criticism to 1865" in *Rave Review*, 17-26 and 53-86.

critics *per se* but rather newspapermen with little or no knowledge of aesthetic principles who perhaps fancied themselves connoisseurs.⁹ There were exceptions to this tendency, of course, and a few essays and treatises that attempted to develop criteria for evaluating works of art appeared in these early years. Still, the majority of art criticism from the first three decades of the century reflects a notion of art writing as an amateur pursuit of literary men.

In the 1830s and 1840s, due in part to the emergence of the Hudson River School as the first distinctly American artistic movement and the reception of the early writings of influential English critic John Ruskin, American art criticism progressed towards a more sophisticated evaluation of the formal elements in a work of art over the mere description of its content. Granted, art criticism of this period remained descriptive, but critics altered the way they viewed and wrote about art. It was not until midcentury, however, that American art criticism took its first great strides. With the appearance of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* in the United States in 1848 (the book was published in England in 1843), American art criticism found a prophet in the English critic. Ruskin's principled approach to criticism and his view of art as a vehicle for Divine truth and moral education, tenets of his Pre-Raphaelite movement in England, found an enthusiastic audience in a number of American critics, including William J. Stillman and John Durand.¹⁰ In 1855 these two men founded one of the first American magazines devoted solely to the visual arts, *The Crayon*, and used it as a vehicle for promoting a Pre-Raphaelite approach to making and judging art. *The Crayon* was followed by another Ruskinian art journal, *The New Path*, published by a group called the Society for

⁹ Dearing, "An Introduction to the History of American Art Criticism to 1925," in *Rave Reviews*, 17.

¹⁰ Incidentally, it was Durand who translated Hippolyte Taine's *Philosophie de l'Art* into English in 1875-77.

the Advancement of Truth in Art in 1863. Ruskin's influence thus had a significant impact on the development of American art criticism.¹¹ While the American Pre-Raphaelites were founding these journals, mainstream newspapers such as the *New York Herald*, the *New York Tribune*, and the *New York Times* and magazines such as *Scribner's Monthly* began to include or expand art sections in their pages. Exhibition reviews of the National Academy of Design and other art institutions became longer and more frequent and the style of criticism more refined.

From these beginnings, a new critical approach of the postwar era emerged. As more Americans took interest in the arts, art critics asserted their social as well as their aesthetic utility as arbiters of culture. Their focus shifted from describing the subject matter of art objects to evaluating their form, style, and technique; these became the criteria on which critics judged works of art. The postwar art critic was understood to be a professional, in contrast to the earlier model of the critic as a man of letters who took an interest in art. An example of the changing perception of the art critic is Russell Sturgis' essay, "What Is Art Criticism?" which appeared in the *Nation* in 1866. Sturgis, a Ruskinian architect and critic who regularly contributed to *The New Path* highlights the misconceptions about art criticism among Americans:

The primeval newspaper notice—which announced that so-and-so had painted a remarkably fine picture and had invited the editor to see it, and which was followed by the announcement that somebody else had raised mammoth strawberries that year and had sent the editor a basketful—was not criticism... The affectionate laudation, unquestioning about relative merit or positive good result, admiring the painter as an "artist" and the picture as a "work of art," was not criticism... The patriotic congratulation which identified two or three painters dead and two or three sculptors living with the glory of America, and

¹¹ On Ruskin's influence in America see Roger B. Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) and Linda S. Ferber and William H. Gerds, *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites* (New York: Brooklyn Museum and Schocken Books, 1985).

glorified them in company with two or three poets, two or three inventors and a novelist, was not criticism.¹²

Sturgis called for a reappraisal of the critical profession, signaling the emergence of a new kind of art writer; not the amateur with a superficial interest in art of earlier decades, but a true critic, a professional possessing a wide knowledge not only of aesthetics and art history but anatomy, literature, and world history as well (in other words, the same subjects that Shinn studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts), along with a trained eye in evaluating art. He outlined a program of art criticism that, like Taine's, cast it as an objective science:

Criticism does not take sides, but sees all sides and all opinions with absolute evenness of perception. Criticism must recognize all the contradictory facts and all the apparently irreconcilable data, and must see all with equal clearness. It is the business of criticism to look into the matter, to examine all the facts in order to ascertain the essential facts, and to proclaim these when ascertained.¹³

In passages such as this one, we detect a changing notion of criticism from an activity to a profession. In this new form of art criticism, the critic would be an investigator, a scientist, and most importantly, an educator of the public. "To instruct the ignorant of art," Sturgis writes, "to interest the careless of art, and especially to guide the enquirer concerning art, seem to us the great objects of art criticism at the present time."¹⁴ Sturgis even cites a letter that Shinn had written (though he did not know Shinn had penned the letter as he only attached his initials to it) to the *New York Evening Post* earlier that year, before his departure for France, entitled "Who can be art critic?" [*sic*] and praises his future colleague for pointing to the fact "that the duty of the art critic for many a year to come must be to teach the principles of that art which appeals to the eye."¹⁵ Sturgis'

¹² [Russell Sturgis], "What Is Art Criticism?" *Nation* 2 (19 April 1866), 505.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

mention of Shinn foreshadows Shinn's participation in the construction of the professional criteria Sturgis was advocating after his move to New York in 1870.

Why did the professional art critic appear as a distinct social category only after the Civil War? Two separate but related phenomena contributed to the advance of art criticism in the postwar years. The first was the growth of the middle class. While the rise of millionaire industrialists and financiers like Jay Gould and Cornelius Vanderbilt and the growing numbers of overseas immigrants and rural migrants in the nation's cities signaled a growing divide in American society between rich and poor, there emerged within this divide a distinct middle class. An American middle class had been growing throughout the nineteenth century, but rapid industrialization in the North and the opportunities it presented for its citizens to increase their wealth facilitated the expansion of a class of urban, educated men and women without precedent in the nation's history. With more money, education, and leisure time, not to mention loftier social aspirations than any middle-class equivalent before them, the members of the postwar middle class sought to make the fine arts a part of their lives. They attended art exhibitions at the National Academy of Design and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. They sent their children to art schools, even to Europe, in growing numbers. They looked upon their homes as works of art, buying carpets, wallpaper, furniture, and other home accessories with a keener eye for aesthetics than their predecessors. They patronized the new art museums, a phenomenon discussed more in Chapter Three. In short, they served, even more than the industrial aristocracy that was amassing huge collections of paintings and sculptures, as the mass audience for art in the Gilded Age.

The second development was the growth of the periodical press, a phenomenon closely linked to the expansion of the educated middle class and its ability to access the American art world. Newspapers and magazines had been a part of American culture since the colonial period but they expanded in number and variety after the Civil War. Between 1865 and 1885, the number of American newspapers and magazines in circulation grew by four and a half times.¹⁶ Technological improvements in presses, stereotyping, and engraving were factors that encouraged this growth, but more importantly a rising class of literate and affluent Americans meant a larger audience for newspapers and magazines. Such massive expansion in the periodical press could not have occurred without a reading public to sustain it. The growth and improvement of public education in the antebellum period, combined with increased wealth and greater leisure time after the war, fostered the development of a larger and more class-conscious reading audience than ever before. Many influential and widely-read publications were founded in this period, including the *Nation* (1865), the *Galaxy* (1866), *Lippincott's Magazine* (1868), *Appleton's Journal* (1869), and *Scribner's Monthly* (1870). These publications tailored themselves to middle- or upper-middle-class audiences; aside from covering news events, they included short stories, poetry, travel narratives, book reviews, and other pieces of literature designed for an educated readership.¹⁷

As I mentioned above, a number of mainstream newspapers such as the *New York Times* began devoting more attention to art and expanding their art sections during the

¹⁶ Frank Luther Mott, *The History of American Magazines, Volume III: 1865-1885* (Harvard University Press, 1938), 5.

¹⁷ For more information on periodicals in the second half of the nineteenth century see Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Vol. III*; John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine in American History, 1741-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 57-88; and Kenneth M. Price and Susan Belasco Smith, "Introduction: Periodical Literature in Social and Historical Context," in *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 3-16.

postwar years. In addition, many of the most important and widely-read weekly and monthly magazines of the second half of the nineteenth century published articles on art more consistently than their antecedents; some, such as *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, the *Nation*, *Scribner's Monthly*, and *Lippincott's Magazine*, included separate sections devoted to art and art criticism. These magazines and newspapers had sizable circulations, some, like the *Nation* and the *New York Times*, catering primarily to a smaller, upper-class audience and others, like *Harper's*, aiming at a broad-based readership that crossed socioeconomic lines. Both *Harper's* and *Scribner's Monthly* had circulations of over 100,000 after 1865.¹⁸ Even *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, an inexpensive paper directed at a mass audience, devoted space in its pages to the arts. Moreover, magazines and journals devoted exclusively to the arts appeared; after *The Crayon* and *The New Path* came *The Art Journal* (1875), *The Art Amateur* (1879), and other similar publications. The result of these developments in the media was that more Americans than ever before had access to information on academy exhibitions and museum collections as well as artistic production and art appreciation. Increasingly newspapers and magazines acted as the organs of public edification in the fine arts as Sturgis had advocated. In addition, the introduction of new methods of reproducing images such as chromolithography brought the art itself – the paintings of Winslow Homer, for example – into the household in a way never before seen, though the value of such reproductive technology would be a subject of debate among critics for years.¹⁹

¹⁸ Mott, *The History of American Magazines, Volume III*, 6.

¹⁹ The debate over reproductions pitted those who advocated the wide diffusion of visual art, even if it was not authentic, against those who argued such reproductions had no intrinsic value as art. For more on this debate see Mancini, "Enabling Modernism," 168-216.

Between the demands of a growing middle class determined to define and assert itself through taste and the profusion of periodicals with expanded art sections, the stage was set for a new professionalism in American art criticism. As publications began to give more attention to art in order to meet and encourage the growing public demand, art critics achieved a degree of fame, despite the fact that their reviews tended to remain anonymous.²⁰ Shinn never attached his name to his writings though he did append his initials to some of his articles for *Lippincott's* and the *Nation* and the pseudonym "Edward Strahan" to most of his *Art Amateur* pieces.²¹ Despite this tendency towards anonymity by Shinn and other critics, the impact of their writings on a public that was increasingly concerned with art grew during this period. The social role of the art critic as a "cultural transmitter" (to borrow Sarah Burns' phrase) was cemented in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Burns places the professionalizing drive of postwar art critics in the larger scope of the creation of a "professional-managerial" class in this period, arguing that critics' professionalization reflected a larger process of social hierarchy construction rather than an effort to expand art world participation. She interprets Gilded Age art criticism as one component of an attempt on the part of this "professional-managerial" class to pacify the masses and prevent class warfare. Critics, in her view, were "cultural transmitters... [who] assumed the role of mediating the fundamental class conflict of capitalist society to create a rational, reproducible social

²⁰ Mott, *The History of American Magazines: Volume III*, 19.

²¹ Shinn used pseudonyms as a way of dissociating his writings from his father, who regularly submitted religious essays to various Quaker periodicals during his lifetime. Saul E. Zalesch, "Earl Shinn," *American National Biography*, ed. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

order.”²² JoAnne Mancini makes a similar argument, stating that critics of the period saw themselves as “the conduit for art-world cooperation,” the “art-world” being the artists, the promoters of art (the academies, museums, and publications), and the consumers of art—the public. Critics adopted this stance, she argues, as part of an effort to solidify their professional expertise in the climate of lingering confusion over what art criticism was and who was qualified to practice it that Sturgis had identified. To the critics, art criticism was “the most essential of art-world institutions,” and they were its unique practitioners.²³

Mancini makes a compelling argument and offers a useful model for interpreting American art criticism of the late nineteenth century. She observes that much of the art criticism in the years immediately following the Civil War promoted the cooperative building of institutions that critics saw as necessary for the creation of an American art culture and encouraged mass participation in the arts for that reason. Mancini argues, however, that in the ensuing decades a shift occurred in art criticism from an inclusive, participatory approach to a highly exclusive one, accessible only to a small, professional elite. Among these professionalizing critics she places Shinn, though with less emphasis than Shinn’s more patrician peers such as Clarence Cook, Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer, and John C. van Dyke.²⁴ Mancini’s model and her situating of Shinn in the group of elitist art critics serve as a useful starting point for analyzing Shinn’s criticism. I disagree, however, with her reading of Shinn as a professionalizing critic who sought to

²² Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 8. For more on professionalization in late nineteenth-century America see Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), ch. 5, Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton, 1976), and Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), ch. 3.

²³ Mancini, “Enabling Modernism,” 41-42

²⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 3.

erect a barrier between the public and his profession. Instead, I propose that Shinn attempted to mediate the conflicting inclusive and exclusive impulses in art criticism by encouraging public participation in art while advocating the codification of professional standards for the art critic.

One example of Shinn's efforts to reconcile these two conflicting elements of art criticism is a letter he wrote to the *New York Evening Post* in 1875 titled "Critics and Art Criticism." He argues, like Taine and Sturgis, that criticism is a science:

Criticism, we take it, means true and impartial judgment, and is supposed to be based upon a positive knowledge of the principles which enter into and form part of the thing or subject criticized... It is the exponent of truth, and may properly be termed a science.²⁵

To achieve the capacity to be an art critic, Shinn posits, one must have

an intimate acquaintance with academic rules and the uses and effects of color. This rudimentary knowledge requires years of patient and persevering study, and is within the reach of most persons who will devote to its acquisition sufficient time; but a knowledge of the rudiments only, important as they are, will not make a great artist or a good critic. We are then to look for higher art elements, both for practice and criticism. They are a due appreciation of intelligent and appropriate expression, poetic sentiment and cultured taste; and just in proportion as these prevail (other conditions being equal) will the artist and critic excel.²⁶

This passage demonstrates Shinn's concern, like many contemporary critics, with creating high standards for his profession. Unlike many of his peers, however, he emphasizes the innate capacity of humans for judging art and argues that anyone, provided that he has obtained the requisite knowledge and training, can be an art critic. He is not opening his profession to amateurs, nor is he stating that taste alone qualifies a person to evaluate art; taste, he writes, is "despotic, arbitrary, and conventional, and does not possess the means of determining any forms or principles of art upon scientific or logical grounds." Alone it is not a criterion for suitable judgment of art, "yet when highly

²⁵ E[arl] S[hinn], "Critics and Art Criticism," *New York Evening Post* (30 April 1875), 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

cultivated, it approaches criticism.”²⁷ That art criticism was a science for Shinn meant not only that it had high standards as a profession but that nearly anyone willing to put the time and energy into acquiring the knowledge of aesthetics, art history, anatomy, literature, and other requisite subject areas could be a critic. In 1875, such an opinion was not uncommon. However, art criticism would increasingly perceive itself as a practice of subjective interpretation restricted to professionals with an inborn ability to view and evaluate works of art in the last quarter of the century. Laying the foundation for the dominant ideas behind art criticism in the twentieth century, critics moved away from Shinn’s scientific, inclusive approach and confined themselves to a more limited, elite audience, alienating much of the public in the process.

An important aspect of Shinn’s effort to expand art-world participation was his focus on the institutional infrastructure of American art culture. As I mentioned above, postwar critics promoted the institutions—art schools, museums, exhibitions, world’s fairs, and even the periodicals for which they wrote—that they believed would serve as the foundation of an art culture in America. Their focus on this institutional base often accompanied an emphasis on the public’s role in the institution-building effort. An early commentary by Shinn on the installation of a new National Academy of Design building in 1865 illustrates this highlighting of public participation:

The building is for the benefit of the public, not for the artists; the latter having no claim upon the institution, except for the exhibition of their works, which is of as much advantage to the public as to themselves.²⁸

In a sense, the public itself was an institution of the art world, but one that depended on the construction and improvement of other institutions such as art academies and

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ [Shinn], “New York Gossip,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (28 April 1865), page unknown.

museums. Critics, as mediators among artists, institution-builders, and the public, saw themselves as essential components in the effort to forge an American art culture.

All art critics wrote reviews of academy exhibitions, as the critical literature of the period shows. Shinn, having received his artistic training at two schools, one in America and one in France, was equally concerned with the academies themselves. In 1872 he wrote a two-part history of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts for *Lippincott's Magazine*. Rather than a neutral recounting of the development of the institution, Shinn's history pays homage to his former school and calls for the advancement of art instruction in the United States. In tracing the sixty-seven year history of the Academy, Shinn deliberately links it with the history of the nation; the "moral corner-stone and reason of existence" of the Academy, he writes, "was fixed, we find, in Independence Hall itself, at a meeting of Philadelphians of consideration held in 1805."²⁹ He suggests that the history of American art lies not with individual artists (of which America, Shinn acknowledges, has had comparatively few) but with institutions like the Pennsylvania Academy. In the second part of the series, Shinn remarks on the Academy's contribution to the cultural life of Philadelphia:

For more than half a century the annual harvest of modern art has been thrown open to the public about the first of May, in the salons of the Academy. These happy little festivals have ever been among the best and most elevating attractions of the city.³⁰

The Academy, he contends, benefits not only the art students of Philadelphia but the entire population of the city by fostering a municipal art culture that would otherwise be lost. Shinn effectively calls for the expansion of art education in America by

²⁹ E[arl] S[hinn], "The First American Art Academy: First Paper," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science*, vol. 9 (February 1872), 143.

³⁰ E[arl] S[hinn], "The First American Art Academy: Second Paper," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* (March 1872), 319.

emphasizing not only its benefit to artists but its function in elevating all citizens in matters of culture and taste.

Another art-world institution that Shinn promoted was the artists' association. Often organized as an alternative to the academies, these groups gave artists and other art-world participants a sense of community as well as opportunities to enhance their publicity. Perhaps the most successful artists' association in this regard was the Tile Club, a group of New York artists and critics organized in 1877 that included Winslow Homer, William Merritt Chase, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and Shinn. The twelve members of the club congregated periodically to eat, drink, and paint English tiles. For several summers they embarked on outings along the east coast which Shinn and William Mackay Laffan, the other writer of the group, documented in a series of articles they wrote for *Scribner's Monthly* in 1879 and 1880. The Tile Club was a vehicle for art-world promotion as much as a space for artists and critics to assemble; its members simultaneously sought to expand their fame among the public and assert their professional authority in the art world. Shinn illustrates this dual function of the organization in a letter to his sister Elizabeth in which he describes a dinner for Club member Edwin Austin Abbey:

...[M]y own idea would have been that a little private meal among friends, with a last spell of the old familiar conversation, would have been the enjoyable thing. But it occurred to Laffan and [F. Hopkinson] Smith that it was a good occasion to make a distinct assertion of the Tile Club as a social power. So there were the literary and art editors of Scribner's... and the art editor of Harper's... And there was Benjamin, who wrote about the German painters for Harper's. And Bunce, editor of Appleton's Journal...³¹

³¹ Earl Shinn to Elizabeth Haines, 13 December 1878, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania.

The Tile Club was a social power, an exclusive, professional organization preoccupied with publicity. Through its use of the periodical press, the club straddled the line between excluding the public from its activities and drawing it into the larger art culture of the nation, similar to what Shinn was attempting to do in his criticism.³²

Shinn's focus on the institutions of the art world was perhaps partially symptomatic of his opinion of contemporary American art. Amidst the debate among artists and critics between those who rejected European influences and those who embraced them, both sides attempting to define and create a distinctly American art, Shinn was ambivalent about the art that his countrymen were producing. He saw American art as lagging behind that of Europe, hindered by his country's historical neglect of art and the institutional infrastructure essential for its growth. Shinn, like many of his contemporaries, was particularly inclined towards French art, whether the epic canvases of Gèrôme, the pastoral scenes of Millet, or the ballet dancers of early Degas. Shinn's first book and only novel, *The New Hyperion*, a travel narrative published in 1875, contained engravings by the French artist Gustave Dore rather than an American engraver, of whom there were many. "France, let us confess," he wrote in 1876, "is the first art-producing country to-day."³³

In regard to American artists, Shinn was generally less impressed but was tactful in his criticism; for example, he begins his review of the 1874 National Academy of Design exhibition, "There is some faithful and craftsmanlike portraiture in the exhibition,

³² For more on the Tile Club see Ronald G. Pisano, *The Tile Club and the Aesthetic Movement in America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999) and Constance Eleanor Koppelman, "Nature in Art and Culture: The Tile Club Artists, 1870-1900," (Ph.D. diss., SUNY Stony Brook, 1985).

³³ Edward Strahan [Shinn], *Masterpieces of the Centennial Exhibition, Vol. I*, 11.

though it would be pleasant to see a little more boldness of style.”³⁴ His reaction to the exhibition is more polite than enthusiastic. In a similar manner he writes of the 1876 exhibition, “The display now on view at the Academy is very encouraging in quality.”³⁵ Occasionally he took an apologetic tone when reviewing the exhibitions, as in his review of the 1875 National Academy show:

The works, it is true, are nearly all cabinet or other easel-pictures of limited size and modest standard, but they are conscientious, and reveal the ardor of study and an improved refinement of technic. It should be remembered by those disposed to complain of the lack of lofty art at our exhibitions, that the conditions of painting with us are hostile to whatever is grandiose in design and conception.³⁶

Here again he suggests the importance of building the institutions for an art culture. At the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia, Shinn’s ambivalence towards American art was most apparent. The art gallery of the Exhibition, which gave many Americans their first exposure to the art of Europe, indicated the inferior state of American art as compared to that of France or Germany. To Shinn, the American contributors also illustrated their inferiority to earlier American painters such as J.S. Copley and Benjamin West:

The want of accent and anxious gentility of most of the modern American pictures causes us to linger with considerable tenderness among their predecessors, the Colonial or early Revolutionary canvasses. Here at least is the distinction of a past school of thought.³⁷

Though he does not reveal what this “past school of thought” was, he suggests that even the best artists of his country lacked a style or ‘school of art’ that would distinguish them from artists of other nations and elevate their work to the level of European art.

³⁴ [Shinn], “The National Academy Exhibition. II,” *Nation* 18 (14 May 1874), 320.

³⁵ [Shinn], “Exhibition of the National Academy of Design. II,” *Nation* 22 (6 April 1876), 234.

³⁶ [Shinn], “Fiftieth Annual Exhibition of the Academy of Design,” *Nation* 20 (15 April 1875), 264.

³⁷ E[arl] S[hinn], “The International Exhibition.—XI. American Art—II,” *Nation* 22 (3 August 1876), 71.

Despite Shinn's ambivalence about the current state of American art, he saw potential for its improvement. Though he often directed his attention at the institutions of the art world, Shinn was nonetheless interested in endorsing the art that his countrymen were producing. To promote the National Academy of Design, for instance, would have been impossible without promoting the art of its members. He opens several of his exhibition reviews with such remarks as, "...it is gratifying to have to say that it is by far the best display of American paintings ever seen in one collection."³⁸ Shinn also saw great potential for American art in a crop of younger, European-trained artists such as Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer; in these painters he recognized the future of American art. Homer in particular embodied the potential for American art in Shinn's view: "We always think of Mr. Homer," he writes, "when we feel hopeful of the uprising of a national expression in art."³⁹ Homer and Eakins were not the only American artists who earned his praise. In his review of the 1877 National Academy of Design exhibition, Shinn writes,

[The exhibition's] most striking aspect is the bold front assumed by art-students working in Europe, who sign nearly all the best pieces, and the consequent collapse of what we used to complacently call the American school... The work of the European pupils is bold, youthful, and confident, with that peculiar loudness in enunciating their masters' principles... When this strength in asserting another's theories is exchanged for strength in forming personal theories, we shall have an "American school" again, and not before.⁴⁰

Shinn's excitement about these young artists who studied in Paris and Munich, the premier art centers of Europe, and his defense of their unconventional works in the face of opposition from conservative Academicians demonstrate his belief in the potential vitality of American art. However, this vitality pertained to these artists' European

³⁸ [Shinn], "Notes," *Nation* 24 (5 April 1877), 207.

³⁹ [Shinn], "The National Academy Exhibition. Final Notice," *Nation* 26 (30 May 1878), 363.

⁴⁰ [Shinn], "Notes," *Nation*, (5 April 1877), 207.

training as much as their inborn talent. Shinn's criticism, even at its most encouraging, did not celebrate contemporary American art for its expression of national character but rather for its successful assimilation of European styles. Shinn occasionally expressed his desire for American artists to move beyond their European masters' influences and praised Homer for painting in "a style that has never felt the style of foreign teachers to a controlling point."⁴¹ He accepted for the moment, however, the need for the artists of his country to study in Europe and borrow the styles and techniques of Continental painters. Shinn's opinions seem to suggest that America had not yet reached artistic maturity and that until it did, its artists would need to continue embracing the influences of their superiors across the Atlantic.⁴²

Despite his enthusiastic but cautious predictions for the rise of an American art that would surpass the schools of Europe by incorporating their principles while creating an original and nationally-appropriate style all its own, Shinn viewed the construction of the institutions of an art culture as the first priority of the promoters of American art. His frequent allusions to the superiority of the academies of Paris and Munich, his encouragement of the advancing of his own country's art schools, and his emphasis public involvement in the building of an American art culture reveal the emphasis he placed on art-world institutions. In this way Shinn diverged from Taine, for he believed that not all nations were endowed with a distinct artistic style; some countries needed to actively create an art culture in order to fashion a national art. This, he explains, is the reason for the artistic predominance of France, a country that lacked, in his view, the

⁴¹ [Shinn], "The National Academy Exhibition. Final Notice," *Nation* (30 May 1878), 363.

⁴² Linda J. Docherty discusses in greater detail the shift among American critics from a focus on "native" art, which reflected characteristics indigenous to a culture, to "national" art, achieved by the assimilation of foreign influences. Docherty, "A Search for Identity," chs. 3-5.

innate artistic capacities of Italy and Spain. Shinn writes, “That [France] has become so famous a producer is a kind of forcing of fate... Such as it is, the French nation as an artist shows what can be done with strength of will, as distinct from attribute and genius.”⁴³ In crediting French art’s institutional infrastructure with its prominent position in the art world, Shinn highlights the need for the United States to expand and improve its art institutions. More than the work of the country’s artists, the future of American art rested on its schools, museums, exhibitions, and even its critics, for they constituted an art-world institution as well. In the postwar period, art critics were promoters of art culture as much as judges of art objects, though they would increasingly assume the latter role in the ensuing years. Shinn, however, remained committed to helping build the foundations for an inclusive, accessible, and instructive national art culture throughout his career. Ironically, the institution he considered most important in the emergent American art culture and to which he devoted much of his career was perhaps the most exclusive one of all: the private art collection.

⁴³ E[arl] S[hinn], “Art Notes from Paris,” *Nation* 42 (12 November 1885), 399.

T H R E E

The Art Treasures of America

In the late summer of 1876, amidst the clamor of the Centennial Exhibition, Earl Shinn wrote a letter to James L. Claghorn, president of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, asking to give a lecture series on the history of aesthetics at the Academy's new building that fall. Shinn, always encouraging public involvement in the arts, stipulated, "I should prefer that your lecture-room should be thrown open to the classes quite free of expense when I lectured, and that the public be admitted at the same time with little or no restriction." Ever conscious of the model of the French academies, he cited Taine's lectures at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and their openness to the public, remarking that "the system worked well, befitting the dignity of a liberal educational institution."¹ The Board of Directors of the Academy approved Shinn's request and he delivered the lectures over three evenings in October, during which the gallery of the Academy, normally closed to all but the students, was opened to all lecture attendees.

Unfortunately, the transcript of the lectures was not preserved, depriving us of a potentially valuable source on Shinn's philosophy of art. However, the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* printed a review of the final lecture that provides a helpful description of Shinn's address. The brief article devotes most of its attention to describing the speaker's refutation of earlier hypotheses of antique art. More important for my purposes, however, is a quotation of Shinn concerning the contributions of the Romans to the history of art that the author of the review gives:

¹ Earl Shinn to James L. Claghorn, 9 August 1876, Archives of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

“The consideration of these achievements,” said Mr. Shinn, “forbids us to regard the Romans as a people who added nothing to art. But in its finer development the Romans were content to be collectors, and to use the mighty hand with which they crushed the nations around them as a tender and cautious protector for the works of genius which their captives possessed. But for this mighty hand, so strong to smite, so close to gripe, so tender to protect, the grandest masterpieces of the Greeks would have long since been pulverized by the Turks.”²

Was Shinn here offering more than simply a validation of Roman art collecting? In this passage, he links the Ancient Romans, “so strong to smite,” yet “so tender to protect... the grandest masterpieces of the Greeks,” and the American collectors of the period, amassing their own collections of art with greater frequency than ever before. By linking these collectors to an ancient past, Shinn canonizes them, validates their activities, and places art collecting at the center of American art culture.

This chapter examines Shinn’s work on art collections in America in the two decades after the Civil War. He devoted much of his career to documenting the possessions of private art collectors and promoting them to the public in a series of articles and books. With the rise of the robber barons in the second half of the century, art collecting emerged as a symbol of status and sophistication among the country’s wealthy elites. It was directly tied to the individualistic, *laissez-faire* capitalism of the period in which private citizens amassed huge personal fortunes and sought to cultivate (or at least simulate) a degree of taste and refinement that corresponded to their wealth. Shinn promoted a view of these collectors and their possessions as the centerpiece of America’s emergent art culture; of all the institutions that he identified, he saw the private art collection as the most important in making his country a leader in the art world. In his efforts to construct an art culture in America, Shinn championed the mostly foreign works of art that the nation’s collectors were acquiring over the pieces that its

² “The Course on Aesthetics at the Academy,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* (18 October 1876), 15.

native artists were producing. Still, he saw in these collections an assertion of American taste, for the national culture could be formed not only by artistic production but by the acquisition of foreign art as well. His writings on collectors and their collections convey the essence of American nationalism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. I contend that Shinn, like a number of collectors and critics, aware of America's artistic inferiority to Europe and its capacity for industry and money-making over the production of art, saw the collecting of European art as a way of compensating for that deficiency. More than a concession to the artistic superiority of Europe, Shinn saw in art collecting an expression of nationalism and the potential for a national culture that would rival that of France or England, made possible by the purchasing power of its wealthiest citizens.

Returning to the review of Shinn's final Academy lecture, his interest in the art of antiquity was consistent with cultural trends of the period. Evocations of Greco-Roman culture by Americans abounded in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. A writer in 1880 labeled the period the "American Renaissance," suggesting a perceived rebirth of beauty, order, and intellectual life in the United States, akin to the Italian Renaissance.³ Interest in the Italian Renaissance was stirred by its historiographical conception as a distinct period in history by nineteenth-century scholars such as Jacob Burckhardt and Jules Michelet. Concepts of the Renaissance developed by these European historians filtered into the United States, where Americans searching for a national identity and a tradition to which they could link themselves enthusiastically absorbed them. The idea of the Renaissance denoted a rupture with a culturally impoverished past and the beginning

³ Richard Guy Wilson traces the origin of the term "American Renaissance" to *The Californian*, a short-lived San Francisco magazine that first used the term in its June 1880 issue. Wilson, "Architecture and the Reinterpretation of the Past in the American Renaissance," *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring 1983), 72.

of an era of scientific discovery, economic prosperity, and creative genius. Perceiving their own age as a break from an unenlightened historical tradition that reached its depths in the Civil War and a flowering of culture and progress, Americans in the post-bellum era identified themselves with the Italian Renaissance and Greco-Roman civilization. Neoclassical architecture appeared in cities such as San Francisco, Washington, and St. Louis, and elaborate monuments in the neoclassical style were erected across the country to honor the nation's achievements and great figures. In painting and sculpture, artists looked increasingly to the distant past for inspiration, using mythological and historical imagery to express contemporary sentiments of national greatness and a connection to ancient civilization.

A new emphasis on beauty, order, historicism, and rebirth emerged in this period, inspired in part by Ruskin and another English critic popular among American audiences, Matthew Arnold, who in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) imbued his age with a Renaissance quality by asking, "And is not the close and bounded intellectual horizon within which we have long lived and moved now lifting up, and are not new lights finding free passage to shine in upon us?"⁴ This outlook shaped the writings of American travelers to Italy such as James Jackson Jarves and Charles Eliot Norton, who marveled at the antiquities of the Greeks and Romans. Culture, many Americans believed, reached its pinnacle in antiquity; to emulate the cultures of Greece and Rome was to attempt to elevate contemporary life out of the depths of poverty, corruption, and aesthetic barrenness. For many Americans in the late nineteenth century, the Renaissance provided an attractive

⁴ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 5, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 92. Shinn called Arnold "the only master of style alive." Earl Shinn to Anna Shipley, 6 October 1866, Morris-Shinn-Maier Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania.

model for a nation that was increasingly cosmopolitan and nationalistic. Increased familiarity with Europe and exposure to the civilizations of the Greeks and Romans led some Americans attempting to fashion a national identity in the aftermath of civil war to view their country as the inheritor of the classical tradition. The appearance of neoclassical monuments such as Franklin Simmons' *Peace Monument* (1877-78) in Washington, D.C., with its allegorical figures of History, Grief, and Victory, illustrates this desire to forge a national identity by evoking the culture of antiquity. For a democratic society with a relatively short history, perceiving itself as the successor to Greco-Roman civilization provided it with an appropriate understanding of both its cultural past and cultural present.

Shinn's parallel between contemporary America and the Roman Empire differs slightly from much of the rhetoric of the American Renaissance. Whereas a number of scholars, artists, and architects compared the present state of their country to the Italian Renaissance, Shinn made a more direct link between America and what he perceived as its distant cultural heritage. He was speaking, it should be noted, in 1876, four years before the term American Renaissance came into popular use. Still, Shinn's connecting of American cultural practices with those of the Romans corresponded to the neoclassicism that would mark the building of American culture in the following decades. Moreover, in the quotation from the *Bulletin* review he demonstrates another central theme of the American Renaissance: art collecting. The nation's *nouveaux riches*, amassing huge fortunes in the postwar industrial boom, looked to the figures of Cosimo and Lorenzo de Medici, the fifteenth-century Florentine art patrons and collectors who themselves continued the tradition of the Romans, as models. The Medici were an urban

banking dynasty with close political connections, much like the American industrialists and financiers of the late nineteenth century. They were civic-minded individuals, devoting personal funds towards the beautification of their city, the enlargement and renovation of churches and convents, and the building of public libraries. In a similar manner the millionaires of the Gilded Age would act as the patrons of museums, concert halls, libraries, universities, and other public institutions of learning and culture.⁵

Art collecting thus linked many Americans to their perceived cultural tradition in two ways. First, it brought to the United States artifacts of the Greek and Roman Empires and the ancient civilizations of Asia, Africa, and South America that collectors purchased from European museums and acquired from archeological digs.⁶ Second, collecting was itself an evocation of cultural activities of earlier periods in human history, not only the Italian Renaissance but also the Roman Empire. Like the Medici, art collectors such as John Jacob Astor and William T. Walters were powerful private citizens who used their wealth to obtain and protect great works of art that would enlighten their countrymen to the cultural tradition they had inherited as well as assert their nation's stature in the world. These collectors saw themselves as continuing a tradition that stretched back millennia, providing nineteenth century America with another link to its distant origins.

The collecting of art by Americans had a short history when Shinn's fascination with it was growing. Like American art itself, art collecting had a meager existence

⁵ Nancy Einreinhofer, *The American Art Museum: Elitism and Democracy* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), 1-15.

⁶ Archeology grew as a discipline in the United States during this period, as the establishment of the Archeological Institute of America in 1879 and the American School in Athens in 1882 illustrate. It was closely linked to art collecting in the decades surrounding the turn of the century. Joshua C. Taylor, *The Fine Arts in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 148.

before the second half of the nineteenth century. Early patterns of art collecting can be traced to the late eighteenth century, but the acquisition of paintings and other decorative objects was then conceived in more practical terms. Wealthy men occasionally commissioned artists to paint their portraits or portraits of their families, but this practice was generally for posterity rather than interest in the fine arts; in any case, such individuals generally did not consider themselves art collectors. Early art collecting was usually linked to art patronage, with cultural institutions such as the Boston Athenaeum (founded in 1807) encouraging wealthy citizens to buy the work of its artists. Beginning in 1827, it held exhibitions of contemporary American art directed at potential buyers.⁷ The emphasis on native patronage was even greater in the establishment of New York's American Art Union in 1839, consisting of a gallery for showcasing the work of American artists and a monthly journal for educating the public in matters of taste and stimulating public interest in its exhibitions. After thirteen successful years, however, the Supreme Court of New York ruled that the Art Union's method of purchasing art works and distributing funds to artists was unconstitutional and the organization shut down, finally bequeathing its collection to the New York Historical Society in 1858.⁸

Despite the efforts of organizations like the Art Union to stimulate patronage of American artists by private citizens, art collecting remained an activity of a minority of Americans at midcentury. Another factor in the lack of interest for art collecting was the underdeveloped state of art dealing in the first half of the century. As private collections

⁷ Even the outwardly nativist Athenaeum displayed works of Old Masters alongside contemporary American art at its exhibitions, suggesting a degree of ambivalence over the relationship between American and European art in the antebellum period. W.G. Constable, *Art Collecting in the United States of America* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964), 13-14.

⁸ Constable, *Art Collecting in the United States of America*, 12-15, 22-25. See also Lillian B. Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism: The Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

of art were small and few in number, the supply of paintings and sculptures, especially those of European artists, was low. American art, though much of it poor in quality, was easy for collectors to acquire, often through direct contact with the artist; if they wanted to purchase European art, they generally needed to travel to the Continent themselves, hire an agent there to make purchases for them, or contact an art dealer in Paris or London. Gradually, European art dealers such as the Parisian firm of Goupil, Vibert established branches in New York, making the purchasing of, for example, French Barbizon paintings easier than before. At the same time, a small number of American dealers, mostly in New York, were opening their gallery doors to the public. Despite the presence of these dealers, most antebellum Americans had neither the means nor the desire to buy the artworks they were selling. Furthermore, art scholarship emerged in America only in the 1850s and few Americans before the 1860s were competent enough to advise collectors on which art objects to purchase.⁹

With the explosion of industry and wealth that began during the Civil War, art dealing and art collecting became more feasible and fashionable than ever before in the United States. Dealers established themselves in New York and other east coast cities in greater numbers and whereas in previous years the preference for American or European art was unclear, in the postwar era the focus of dealers and collectors were decidedly European. The new collectors were the postwar industrial aristocrats, wealthier than their genteel predecessors and determined to display their riches through culture and taste. They viewed the elites of Europe as their models and sought to emulate them by purchasing French wines and perfumes, attending Italian operas in the new concert halls

⁹ For more on art dealing in nineteenth-century America see Malcolm Goldstein, *Landscape with Figures: A History of Art Dealing in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), chs. 2-6.

they were building, and buying European art, both antique and contemporary, which most of them perceived as being superior to the art that Americans were producing. This phenomenon pertained to the cosmopolitan outlook that increasingly shaped the tastes of America's wealthy citizens. The country's industrial progress and economic growth, along with the creation of enormous fortunes by a handful of individuals eager to demonstrate their sophistication and refinement, witnessed a clash between traditional notions of republican utilitarianism and egalitarianism and the growing desire of the *nouveaux riches* to emulate their European counterparts.

Amidst the growing interest in art collecting, Shinn began a campaign to document, celebrate, and shape the private art collections of his wealthy countrymen that consumed much of his time and energy for over a decade. The origins of Shinn's interest in private art collections are difficult to trace, but they were no doubt piqued by his exposure to the art scene in New York after he moved there in 1870. Though Shinn gives almost no indication of the reasons for his interest in these collections and their owners, several factors likely influenced him. His middle-class background is one possible reason for his interest in art collecting. Considering that the art collection was a symbol of wealth and high status, it seems plausible that Shinn experienced vicariously the affluence he never had through the collectors he celebrated. In his writings on private art collections he conveys an intense admiration for the wealthy, a fact made all the more complex by the precarious financial situation in which he lived as an adult.¹⁰ Another possible reason for his interest in art collecting was his experience in Europe, during

¹⁰ In many of his letters from 1870 onward, Shinn alludes to his state of poverty. For example, in an undated letter to his sister Anna (probably from the late 1870s) he writes, "As it is I am always poor, have no good clothes, and eat the coarsest and cheapest food that can be bought..." Earl Shinn to Anna Shipley, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

which he marveled at the collections of the Louvre and the murals of the Vatican, undoubtedly raising his awareness of the value of art collections in his own country. Moreover, his belief in the importance of art's institutional base surely affected his interest in private art collections which he perceived could be the foundation for a public art culture.

Whatever the reasons for his interest, Shinn's first foray into the subject was a nine-part series on private art collections in Philadelphia that he wrote for *Lippincott's* in 1872 following his pieces on the history of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. In these articles, Shinn praises each individual collector and his collection; though he is critical of certain paintings in each gallery, he ends each article with an affirmation of the strength of the collection and the collector's tastes, however they may differ from his own. He emphasizes the value of such collections for the nation and more specifically for the city of Philadelphia. In his article about the Wilstach Gallery, Shinn describes the triumph of the acquisition by the collector of a painting by the young Hungarian artist Mihály Munkácsy:

Whatever future honors await this remarkable youth in the future, in the Vienna Academy or the Paris Salon, he will hardly forget that his fame pertains, by its beginnings, to Philadelphia; that his portrait, in its outlandish Hungarian boots and cloak, is made at home in the placid city, among those huge albums of foreign artists which picture-buyers are in the habit of amassing; and that, however his laurel may broaden beside the Danube or the Seine, its first branch is kept green beside the Delaware.¹¹

Shinn betrays a distinct local pride in his native city despite his residence in New York.

An even stronger suggestion of his local pride comes through near the end of his final article of the series:

¹¹ E[arl] S[hinn], "Private Art-Collections of Philadelphia. IV.—The Wilstach Gallery," *Lippincott's Magazine*, vol. 10 (July 1872), 77-78.

The luxurious position taken by Philadelphia as the chief manufacturer in a magnificent continent she expresses by her treasures of art. It is not in splendid private hotels, with facades covered with nymphs and garlands, that our regal capitalists satisfy their pride. The glory is hidden within, in the sumptuous galleries of art which I have touched here and there with my descriptions.¹²

Though Shinn purposefully promotes the art culture of Philadelphia, a city losing ground in the art world to New York and Boston, Philadelphia in the above passage is a microcosm of the nation. In cities from Boston to San Francisco, “regal capitalists” were cultivating their tastes and finding refuge from the business world in their art galleries. At the same time, they were laying the groundwork for a national art culture that would be unparalleled in the world and asserting their country’s power, wealth, and refinement by outbidding “disappointed princes and maddened dealers” for works of art from the Continent.¹³

The *Lippincott’s* pieces provide a treasure trove of information on the tastes of American art collectors in the early postwar era. While Shinn remarks favorably on the presence of American works in some of the collections, the majority of paintings in the galleries he describes are by contemporary European artists. He showers these works with praise, both of the paintings themselves, to which the artists of his country should aspire, and of their acquisition, a point of national pride for him. A similar sentiment pervades in several of Shinn’s articles for *The Art Amateur* from 1879 and 1880 on private art collections in New York. In his description of James Lenox’s collection, he again celebrates the acquisition of a Munkácsy painting with overtly nationalistic language:

¹² E[arl] S[hinn], “Private Art-Collections of Philadelphia. X.—Additional Galleries,” *Lippincott’s Magazine*, vol. 10 (December 1872), 710.

¹³ E[arl] S[hinn], “Private Art-Collections of Philadelphia. IV.—The Wilstach Gallery,” *Lippincott’s Magazine* (July 1872), 76.

...[T]he pride of securing to America a canvas for which Europe competed, which Austria falsely boasted of having appropriated, which England claimed the initial right of popularizing through the burin, which France claimed for one of her most cunning etching-needles—all these considerations made a veritable success of notoriety for the picture.¹⁴

For the picture, but also for the nation. James Lenox, the late owner of the painting, was a private citizen, a founder of the New York-Presbyterian Hospital, and a prominent philanthropist in that city. His art collection, which included not only the piece by Munkàcsy but also paintings by J.M.W. Turner, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Thomas Gainsborough, was his own, as were the collections of the Philadelphians that Shinn saluted in his *Lippincott's* pieces; however, the Lenox collection also belonged to the United States. The division between private and public art collections, as W.G. Constable observes, was less distinct in America than in other countries in the last decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ The acquisition of a famous European painting by a wealthy American not only glorified the individual owner and elevated his taste and status, but contributed to the national image as well.

Another equally important aspect of these private art collections for Shinn was their accessibility to the public. For much of the nineteenth century, most Americans' only exposure to art would have come from exhibitions of the academies or other artists' organizations; the few art collectors in the country tended to keep their holdings from the public. After the Civil War, as wealth and collections grew simultaneously, individual collectors built galleries to house their artworks. In the philanthropic spirit that accompanied the gross excesses of the Gilded Age, some collectors opened their private galleries to the public, though in some cases for only one day a week. Many residents of

¹⁴ Edward Strahan [Shinn], "Art Collection of the Lenox Library," *The Art Amateur* 2 (December 1879), 8.

¹⁵ Constable, *Art Collecting in the United States of America*, 5.

New York and other art collecting centers thus had their first opportunity to see Old Masters and contemporary European artwork that other institutions lacked the means to possess. Shinn, always a promoter of public art institutions, saw the greatest potential for the forging of a national art culture in the generosity of private collectors to open their galleries to the public or loan their holdings to public exhibitions.

In a review of the loan exhibition at the Seventh Regiment Fair of New York in 1879, Shinn expressed this public sentiment in his introduction:

The horizons of the populace are broadened, and there is hardly a limit to the educational gain which ensues from thus temporarily lowering the barriers between the pastimes of the rich and the pleasures of the poor. For the time the two classes are allowed to pursue the same studies, follow the same aims, and attain the same ends. High degree and low degree merge their social differences in learning the causes of excellence in works of genius, and deciding why the colors of Diaz and Rousseau are bathed in a seemingly superhuman splendor, how the modelling and relief of a Munkacsy assert their vigor, and whence the contours of Lefebvre or Bonnat acquire their sculptural precision.¹⁶

Shinn's somewhat condescending faith in the public intellect aptly conveys a common opinion of art collectors and institutional promoters like himself during the period that art had the power to civilize a population and should therefore be accessible to all citizens. These dual sentiments of public service and self-glorification guided the founding of public cultural institutions such as concert halls, symphony orchestras, opera houses, universities, libraries, and municipal parks. These institutions were designed for the benefit of the public and the elevation of society. Perhaps the best example of the desire to bring high culture into public life was the establishment of art museums. It could be argued that the open galleries of private art collectors were the source of the art museums founded in the 1870s, as was the case with the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, a private

¹⁶ Edward Strahan [Shinn], "Art at the Seventh Regiment Fair," *The Art Amateur* 2 (December 1879), 4.

collection formally opened to the public in 1874; in any case, these museums could not have functioned without the initiatives of individual collectors.

The American art museum is essentially a product of the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ As industrialists and financiers consolidated their financial empires, they sought material symbols for their wealth, hence the growth of art collecting after the Civil War. Their sense of civic duty and desire to memorialize their names in the nation's history (emulating, if unconsciously, the model of the Medici in Renaissance Italy) led them to donate funds and works of art towards the establishment of public art museums that would equal in quality and prominence the finest museums of Europe but that, unlike those institutions, would be financed by private individuals rather than the state. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston were both founded in 1870, followed by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1876. Several other important art museums such as the Art Institute of Chicago (1879) and the Cincinnati Museum of Art (1880) were also established in this period. More museums would follow at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth, though their collections often came from individuals who began purchasing art after the Civil War. What is remarkable is that all of these institutions began with a private collection or a set of collections and materialized through the efforts of private coalitions with little or no government assistance. While art museums, like art criticism, would increasingly cater to an elite audience at the end of the nineteenth century, the mission of

¹⁷ For more on the history of the American art museum see Nathaniel Burt, *Palaces for the People: A Social History of the American Art Museum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), ch. 3; Einreinhofer, *The American Art Museum*, ch. 2; Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), ch. 3; Neil Harris, "The Gilded Age Revisited: Boston and the Museum Movement," *American Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 4 (Winter 1962), 545-566; and Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), chs.1, 3, 4, 5, and 7.

the founders of these institutions was ostensibly to educate and elevate the public through exposure to fine art. In any case, they brought art into public life in a way never before experienced in America.

As the 1870s progressed, Shinn's focus gradually shifted from writing criticism to documenting the art collecting habits of America's *nouveau riche*. The articles he wrote for *Lippincott's* and *The Art Amateur* provide glimpses of this shift in his attention.

However, the clearest expressions of Shinn's interest in private art collections and the strongest statements of his belief in their importance to the nation's art culture were two books that he published between 1879 and 1884 under his familiar pseudonym Edward Strahan. The texts, *The Art Treasures of America, Being the Choicest Works of Art in the Public and Private Collections of North America* and *Mr. Vanderbilt's House and Collection*, were the crowning achievements of his career and are perhaps the most remarkable tributes to American art collectors ever produced. These massive works, published first in serial form and later compiled into enormous multivolume *editions de luxe* marketed to an upper- and upper-middle-class audience, marked the culmination of Shinn's fascination with art collectors and collecting and the apex of his efforts to record and shape the tastes of American collectors. What is striking about these texts is that Shinn, though he devotes most of his writing to describing the works of art in each collection, is equally concerned with the collectors themselves. His praise of paintings by such artists as Fortuny, Meissonier, Gèrôme, and Millet, among others, is simultaneously a tribute to the tastes of the men and women who own those artworks.

Art Treasures, published between 1879 and 1882, is a virtual travelogue of private art galleries across the country, a map of national taste at the closing of the first postwar

art collecting wave. Throughout the decade, Shinn traveled around the country, visiting the homes and galleries of the country's wealthiest citizens to whom art collecting had become a pastime and a preoccupation. Many of the collections Shinn describes are in New York, Philadelphia, and other cities in the northeast, but he also writes about galleries in Chicago, San Francisco, and other burgeoning art centers of the Midwest and West.¹⁸ In his capacity as a geographer of aesthetic taste in America, Shinn illustrates the uniformity of taste among different collectors, whether in Boston or Baltimore, St. Louis or Cincinnati. The tone of the book is a nationalizing one; Shinn casts America as a single cultural entity, in contrast to the more regional attitude assumed by writers and artists of the antebellum years. In the collections he surveys, Shinn sees the making of a single and uniquely American civilization, though one founded not upon its own artistic productions but those of other civilizations. The Union victory in the Civil War marked the reunification of the United States as a political unit; the growth of private art collections and the increasing similarity of their contents, Shinn seems to suggest, were signs of a unification in taste and the forging of a single, national culture, albeit an elite one built largely on artworks from Europe and elsewhere, that would befit the nation's rising status as a world power.

Shinn is careful to acknowledge the public service that these collectors were performing. He writes,

There is in America evidence... of a sense of responsibility to the public; the feeling which actuates the possessor of an Italian palace or an English hall to

¹⁸ Shinn also ventures slightly beyond his country's borders to describe the collection of George A. Drummond, a Montreal businessman and art connoisseur, though the rest of the galleries he describes were in the United States. Edward Strahan [Shinn], *The Art Treasures of America, Being the Choicest Works of Art in the Public and Private Collections of North America*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Gebbie and Barrie, 1879-1882 [reprint, New York: Garland, 1977]), 63-67.

share with the world all the studies which can be commanded in the ancestral gallery of pictures.¹⁹

For the author, the private art collection was a public investment, reflecting the widespread expectation that a private collection would be transferred to a public art museum or gallery upon the death of the owner, or that the collector's private gallery would be made public. He applauds William Corcoran and his public gallery in Washington, where "every citizen of the United States, Yankee or Hoosier, cultured or rude, black, white, or red..." can gain culturally enlightenment by viewing the works of Detaille and other European painters as well as a number of American pieces. The gallery, Shinn reminds his readers, was not "built by kings and pontiffs," but rather "by an individual, in a simple burst of genial goodness."²⁰ Through the beneficence of private individuals like Corcoran, without government assistance or compulsion, Shinn saw the most promise for America's blossoming art culture.

Whereas *Art Treasures* records the tastes of many collectors, *Mr. Vanderbilt's House and Collection*, published in 1883-84, is a monument in print to a single collector, William Henry Vanderbilt, son of the railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt, himself an art collector. This book is perhaps an even greater testament to the importance that Shinn saw in the individual art collector, for he devotes four volumes to one man's art collection and the palace on Fifth Avenue that housed it. Vanderbilt's taste for Barbizon paintings and Japanese decorative art comes through in Shinn's description of his gallery and mansion, a newly built, neo-Renaissance *palazzo* situated in the middle of Manhattan. As in his previous book, Shinn celebrates the art collector, comparing him to "a Venetian merchant prince, a Tudor gentleman, a Flemish banker," and a wealthy

¹⁹ Edward Strahan [Shinn], *The Art Treasures of America*, vol. 1, vi.

²⁰ *Ibid*, vol. 1, 3-4.

patrician of Pompeii; for him, Vanderbilt, like Corcoran, embodies an age “when wealth is first consenting to act the Medicean part in America, to patronize the inventors, to create the arts, and to originate a form of civilization.” It is because of collectors like him, Shinn observes, that “[t]he country, at this moment, is just beginning to be astonishing.”²¹

The competing and complementary strains of cosmopolitanism and nationalism in American high culture of the late-nineteenth century are at the center of both *The Art Treasures of America* and *Mr. Vanderbilt's House and Collection*, though especially of the former. On the one hand, all of the collections that Shinn describes are composed almost entirely of European art, mostly of the French academic and Barbizon styles. Shinn, always placing the art of Europe over that of his own country, writes glowingly of paintings by European artists that range from the restrained, scientific Gèrôme to the passionate, colorful Delacroix to the robust, explosive Mariano Fortuny. He seldom mentions works by American artists, past or present, either because the collections did not include them or because he chose not to write about them. When he does treat American art, his descriptions are generally full of cautious praise of the artists and unabashed applause of the collectors' generous support of their countrymen's art. In his description of the sculpture collection of Mrs. A.T. Stewart, for example, he writes favorably of the works by American sculptors and applauds “the collector's liberal, and on the whole intelligent, fostering of native art,” betraying a rather patronizing tone

²¹ Edward Strahan [Shinn], *Mr. Vanderbilt's House and Collection*, pt. 1, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Gebbie and Barrie, 1883-1884), v-vi.

towards the art itself which, in his view, still lags behind the work of most European artists.²²

If the cosmopolitan attitude reflected in the two books is strong, the nationalistic tone is stronger. Like his earlier magazine pieces, they proclaim America's cultural advancement in relation to the nations of Europe, the cultures of which long outdated America's, precisely through its possession of artworks from those older nations. For Shinn, art collecting, specifically of European art, was a declaration of American taste and cultivation by way of its assertion of economic supremacy over the former kingdoms and principalities of the Old World. In America, modern art would find a home, as he explains in the introduction to *Art Treasures of America*:

This work presents, it will be seen, America's 'case' as an art collector. I believe its pages will surprise the best-informed expert by showing what a proportion of the highest genius finds a home on these shores. For the art of the old masters we have to go to the Vatican and the Louvre. But there is a great modern art, which is the development of this century, and for which it is to be accountable to posterity – an art plainly modified by the industrial and practical spirit of the age, but modified just as plainly by its intelligence, and by the application of that scientific treatment which is changing history, physics and creeds beneath our eyes. For this art, on which posterity will sit in equality, America will be the judgment-hall, for its Vaticans and Louvres are here.²³

A similar sentiment comes through in the introduction to *Mr. Vanderbilt's House and Collection*; Shinn remarks that the book captures a cultural phenomenon, "seized at the moment when the nation began to have a taste of its own, an architecture, a connoisseurship, and a choice in the appliances of luxury, society, culture."²⁴ Both of these passages convey Shinn's attempt to reconcile his vision of a distinctly American art culture with his esteem for European art. He aims to cast the acquisition of foreign art as an expression of nationalism. In one sense, art collecting was a form of cultural capital;

²² Edward Strahan [Shinn], *The Art Treasures of America*, vol. 1, 49.

²³ Edward Strahan [Shinn], *The Art Treasures of America*, vol. 1, vi.

²⁴ Edward Strahan [Shinn], *Mr. Vanderbilt's House and Collection*, pt. 1 vol. 1, v.

certainly for the individual collectors concerned with presenting themselves as the embodiments of high culture, but also for the nation as a whole. The nineteenth century witnessed continuous attempts by Americans to reconcile their country's identity in relation to Europe; whereas at midcentury this anxiety often found expression in the rejection of European culture, by the 1870s it gave way to an embrace of all things European and a series of efforts to model American culture after its Old World counterpart. Still, the goal was a distinctly *American* identity and the attempts to construct it therefore took on nationalistic qualities. In this way the collecting of European art, not to mention art objects from China, Japan, Egypt, and other ancient civilizations, was a kind of conquest, both metaphorically and literally; a colonizing practice that announced America's growing dominance over other nations and cultures. Though America lacked, relative to most other cultures of the world, a long cultural memory or a set of cultural traditions to which its artists could look to for inspiration, it had the ability to absorb the products of other cultures, older and, many Americans believed, more refined than its own by virtue of the wealth of a handful of private citizens. That America's cultural heritage was less impressive than that of Europe was no longer as significant a factor as it had been; the country could forge one by acquiring the cultural productions of other nations through its tremendous buying power. Never before had a country, kingdom, or empire been able to purchase its culture in the way that the art collectors in late nineteenth-century America did. Like the Romans, these collectors would construct a great civilization through their possession of artworks of other nations. In this way, Shinn perceived these collectors—and himself—as the builders of American culture in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Scholars have grappled over the years with the difficulty of attaching a label to the period in American history that began after the Civil War and ended in the first years of the twentieth century. The Brown Decades, the Age of Energy, the Age of Excess, and, of course, the Gilded Age are among the many efforts to capture in a name the essence of the period.¹ None of these titles describes more than a few aspects of an age that resists definition. Indeed, the ambiguities and contradictions in American society and culture of the period make it impossible to summarize it in a two- or three-word name. This was a society in which the metropolitan palaces of millionaire industrialists and tenement houses crowded with overseas immigrants occupied the same urban space; where efforts at political reform coexisted with rampant corruption; and where stirrings of antimodernism (to borrow T.J. Jackson Lears' term) accompanied an enthusiastic embrace of material wealth and technological development.² Perhaps a more appropriate label for this period would be the Age of Ambivalence, for any effort to define the era in a particular manner almost always encounters an opposite and equally valid way of characterizing it. This ambivalence manifested itself in many ways but perhaps no more clearly than in the art of the period and, more generally, in the efforts to construct an American 'high culture.' Suspended between its traditional self-conception as a frontier democracy, the antithesis of the continent it left behind, and a rising tide of modernity,

¹ Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America, 1865-1895*. Second revised edition. (New York: Dover, 1955); Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865-1915* (New York: Viking, 1971); Ray Ginger, *Age of Excess: The United States from 1877 to 1914* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age*. The Oxford Mark Twain, ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

² T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), xiii.

class distinction, and racial tension, American culture faced an identity crisis unprecedented in the nation's history.

Earl Shinn embodied this cultural ambivalence. He was simultaneously cosmopolitan and nationalist, elitist and populist, a keeper of culture and a deliverer of it. In his writings he lamented the state of American art as compared to that of Europe while also applauding the art of his countrymen and encouraging patrons to support the work of American artists. He praised the artworks that collectors had acquired from across the Atlantic and acknowledged, often tacitly, their superiority to the art being produced in America, but viewed such acquisitions as symbols of national wealth and, in turn, of the high level of American taste. He advocated high professional standards for art criticism while promoting a scientific approach to his work that theoretically opened the field to all. He sought to expand public involvement in the art world by advertising exhibitions and museum openings in his reviews, yet he devoted the bulk of his career to documenting the most exclusive of art world activities. Even in his personal life he exemplified this ambivalence, for while he was fascinated, perhaps even obsessed, with the rich and their possessions, he fancied himself a modern-day ascetic and denied himself the worldly pleasures that he took such pains to document. His writings, however, betray the tensions in the process of cultural construction in late nineteenth-century America. Artists, scholars, critics, novelists, poets, musicians, connoisseurs, and others in these years emulated Europe while working to distinguish their own national culture from that of the Old World. They aimed to transplant high culture to American soil, to expand its reach into a public that they believed it could elevate but also to use it as a dividing line between their elite group and the rest of the populace.

Towards the end of the century, the efforts to reconcile these contradictory impulses receded and new efforts to distinguish high culture from popular culture emerged, as Lawrence Levine has observed.³ In art criticism, critics abandoned the inclusive, didactic approaches that they and their predecessors had taken in the 1860s and 1870s and adopted, as JoAnne Mancini points out, an elitist, esoteric tone that alienated rather than embraced the public.⁴ Paving the way for the dominant currents in art criticism of the twentieth century, critics of the 1880s and 1890s perceived high culture as a province of the educated and the wealthy, the marker of distinction for the upper classes. They met the challenge of legislating taste in a democratic society by renouncing democracy and constructing a cultural plutocracy in which they played a crucial role. This shift in art criticism may explain why Shinn was forgotten after his death. Even in the 1880s, when critics increasingly viewed art as a barrier between the elites and the masses, Shinn attempted to mediate between the two. For longer than most other critics, he continued to view art as a means of civilizing an uncultured population and lauded the public-mindedness of art collectors in order to encourage more of them to assume the same beneficence. Moreover, his scientific approach to evaluating art, which opened the field to anyone with the requisite knowledge and training, was supplanted during his lifetime by the view of art criticism as the property of a select few who possessed an innate capacity for judging works of art. Already in the 1880s, his beliefs about art, criticism, and culture were becoming outmoded.

Despite Shinn's obsolescence, and indeed because of it, he provides a model for understanding the ambiguities and contradictions in American art and cultural

³ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, chs. 2, 3.

⁴ Mancini, "Enabling Modernism," 121-134.

construction in the late nineteenth century. In an age when democratic principles still weighed heavily upon conceptions of culture, when Americans were caught between admiration and envy of European culture on the one hand and revulsion towards it on the other, and when categories of 'high' and 'popular' culture, though still permeable, were becoming more rigid, Shinn attempted to bridge the divides between the fine arts and the masses, plutocracy and democracy, and cosmopolitanism and nationalism in American culture. More important than his success or failure in such an endeavor are the anxieties and ambiguities that his efforts reflected.

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