
The Independents: The Ashcan School & Their Circle from Florida Collections

by Valerie Ann Leeds

Gifford Beal and his older brother, Reynolds, were marginal figures in the Independent Movement. A former Henri student, Gifford was more closely involved with Henri's circle than his brother. He was invited to exhibit in the Armory Show; though two of his works were catalogued, records show they were not received for the exhibition.^[12] The Beals exhibited extensively at the National Academy. Gifford joined The New Society of Artists and showed in the last MacDowell Club exhibition along with his brother. Each shared a common interest in circus themes, producing lively images, such as *The Circus, New York* that spotlights circus acts, the performers, and the surrounding environment.

Gifford Beal favored picturesque landscapes and views of the upper classes. His work lacked the inherent social consciousness of other Ashcan artists. Notable qualities in his earlier efforts include strong coloration and a style that evokes aspects of Bellows' Maine subjects, and Sloan's Gloucester scenes.

Gloucester proved an attractive setting to Max Kuehne. Kuehne painted a number of striking vistas of its harbor area and around Rockport. His typically vibrant palette and brushstrokes energize the surface of *The Promontory, Rocky Neck* and *East Gloucester*. Kuehne trained under Kenneth Hayes Miller and William Merritt Chase before enrolling in Henri's school, where he studied in 1909 and 1910. Kuehne entered Henri's extended set, striking-up friendships with Glackens, Lawson, Prendergast, Du Bois, Hopper, and Kent, and exhibited with them in the 1910 Independent Exhibition.

Both Rockwell Kent and Walt Kuhn were intricately linked to the later phase of the Independent Movement. Kent was initially allied with the younger artists who studied with Henri. After the 1910 Exhibition of Independent Artists, he helped plan a subsequent independent show for 1911. For this exhibition, he wanted to adopt a more radical stance that barred the independent exhibition participants from showing at the National Academy. This policy divided the group into two separate factions.

Arthur B. Davies backed Kent; Henri, Sloan, and Bellows were opposed. Kent proceeded, but it was boycotted by a number of key progressive artists. The show became known as the "Independent Exhibition of the Paintings and Drawings of Twelve Men."^[13] Though he sought to break from Henri's domination, Kent periodically showed with Henri and the realists.

At times, various members of his circle vented bouts of resentment toward Henri, due to his strong character and his lead position in the artistic forefront. Sloan, Kent, Davies, and Walt Kuhn periodically felt overshadowed by the public attention Henri cultivated and received.

Around 1910, Kuhn's friendship with Davies quickened, due in part to their shared agenda promoting art of the European avant-garde. As the principal organizers of the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art, they represented a strong force within the Association of American Painters and Sculptors. Although Kuhn worked actively with Henri to ensure the 1910 Independent Exhibition's success, his growing determination to usurp Henri's position of influence split the Independent Movement even as plans for the Armory Show began to crystallize. As early as December of 1911, Kuhn referred to eliminating Henri from preliminary plans for a new society; it later evolved into the Association of American Painters and Sculptors.

Kuhn's role in this compelling event is clear; his artistic position is less so. Trained abroad, he embraced the European modems and a multiplicity of stylistic approach. es more readily than many of his American colleagues. Nonetheless, his own vision narrowed, choosing to concentrate on portraits, though he also produced a number of still lifes. By the 1920s, Kuhn focused on painting entertainers, predominately jugglers, clowns, acrobats, musicians, and showgirls. His portraits wield piercing psychological intensity viewed straight-on, executed in a blunt, direct manner, with flattened space and the simplistic backgrounds illustrated by *Golden and Blue Bolero*. Kuhn's work represents realism's final cadence, the last juncture of realism and modernism, before the modernists swept representational art aside, leaving Henri and the Ashcan School aside.

Though some urban realist scenes initially elicited strong critical reaction, work produced by "progressive artists" was not

nearly as radical as much of the modern art displayed at Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery 291 as early as 1907. Henri's New York realists dominated progressive art from about 1904 until the 1913 Armory Show. There in one single event, those who shared Henri's artistic approach were relegated to the sidelines by the more advanced styles that came to dominate the American avant-garde. However, a number of artists associated with the progressive movement -- including Sloan, Shinn, Hopper, Du Bois, Beal, Kent, Speicher, and Kroll -- remained committed to realism and employed it well into the mid-twentieth century, independent in their vision to the end.

Notes:

1 The sobriquet "the Ashcan School" was most likely introduced in the 1930s by Holger Cahill and Alfred H. Barr. The term was used to characterize the work of the urban realists. See: Holger Cahill and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Art in America: A Complete Survey* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1934), p. 91. Also see: Rebecca Zurier, et al., *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York* exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1995).

2 See, for example: Charles De Kay, "Six Impressionists. Startling Works by Red-Hot American Painters," *The New York Times*, January 20, 1904; [Charles Fitzgerald], "A Significant Group of Paintings," *The Evening Sun* (New York), January 23, 1904; [Arthur Hoeber], "A Most Lugubrious Show at the National Arts Club," *The Commercial Advertiser* (New York), January 21, 1904; and an unidentified clipping from *The Mail and Express* (New York), January 25, 1904.

3 For the most thorough account of the events leading up to and surrounding the 1908 exhibition of The Eight at Macbeth Galleries, see: Elizabeth Milroy, *Painters of a New Century: The Eight & American Art*, exh. cat. (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1991). For Henri's role, see: William Innes Homer, *Robert Henri and His Circle* (1969; New York: Hacker Art Books, 1988), pp. 126-156, and Bennard B. Perlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), pp. 74-87.

4 See: Bruce St. John, ed., *John Sloan's New York Scene from the Diaries, Notes and Correspondence 1906-1913* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 405-407, for Sloan's diary entries on April 1 and April 5, 1910. Also see: Homer, *Robert Henri and His Circle*, pp. 152-157.

5 See: Milton W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), pp. 118, 214, 217.

6 For background and history of the Society of Independent Artists, see: Clark S. Marlbor, *The Society of Independent Artists: The Exhibition Record, 1917-1944* (Park Ridge, New Jersey: Noyes Press, 1984), pp. 1-99.

7 Henri's Record Book and diary, Estate of Robert Henri, collection of Janet Le Clair. Diary notes are from March 1926. The diary is available on microfilm through the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, roll 886, frames 846-847. Henri did major reworking of the facial features on April 20, and April 22, 1921, and then noted that the work was totally repainted with a different palette on February 26, 1922. The extensive repainting may have contributed to the model's older appearance in the final painting.

8 See James Kraft and Helen Farr Sloan, *John Sloan in Santa Fe*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1981) for a more in-depth view of Sloan's time in Santa Fe.

9 Jerome Myers, *Artist in Manhattan* (New York: American Artists Group, 1940), p.35.

10 Glackens painted Central Park in a number of works including: *Central Park; Winter*, c. 1906 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), and the more similar *May Day, Central Park*, c. 1905 (The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco). Prendergast's numerous scenes of Central Park include the watercolors *Central Park*, c. 1900-03 (Blanden Memorial Art Museum, Fort Dodge, Iowa); *Picnic, May Day, Central Park*, c. 1901 (The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh); *May Day, Central Park*, c. 1900-03 (Whitney Museum of American Art), and *May Day, Central Park*, 1901 (The Cleveland Museum of Art).

11 Nancy Hale and Fredson Bowers, eds., *Leon Kroll: A Spoken Memoir* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1983), p. 109.

12 Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, p. 246.

13 For Kent's account of the events surrounding the 1911 Independent Exhibition see Kent, *It's Me O Lord: Autobiography of Rockwell Kent* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1995), pp. 226-236. For Henri's impressions see the entry in his diary, February 5, 1911, Estate of Robert Henri, collection of Janet Le Clair. For Sloan's views, see St. John, ed., *John Sloan's New York Scene*, pp. 486, 505-06.

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William Glackens, By William H. Gerdtz / Essay by Jorge H. Santis, Published 1996, ISBN: 978-1-55859-868-3. (online book excerpt available from [Abbeville Press](#)) (right: catalogue front cover courtesy Abbeville Press)

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He was an artist from the Ashcan school of art, that were a group of realist painters that wanted to challenge and be set a part from American impressionists. Although Ashcan artists advocated for modern actualities, they were not so radical that they used their artwork for social criticism or reform. They identified with the vitality of the lower classes and illustrated the dismal aspects of urban existence. However, they themselves led middle-class lives and were influenced by New York's restaurants, bars, theater and vaudeville.¹ Relating to other themes in our class, George Bellows was im