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Flags, Afternoon on the Avenue, 1917, exemplifies Childe Hassam's most famous series and holds his auction record of \$7.9 million, paid at Christie's New York in May 1998.

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ARTIST DOSSIER:

Childe Hassam

BY ANDREW RUSSETH

WHILE PRESIDENT OBAMA'S DECISION to hang works by such contemporary artists as Glenn Ligon and Ed Ruscha in the White House made headlines in 2009, few news outlets noted that he gave Childe Hassam's 1917 view of a flag-filled Fifth Avenue, *Avenue in the Rain*, pride of place in the Oval Office. It is perhaps understandable that this choice attracted less attention: Hassam's depictions of such patriotic displays are among the most iconic American works of art, all too appropriate for the head of state's inner sanctum. They have also been among the most popular of

Hassam's works—a similar canvas from the same year, *Flags, Afternoon on the Avenue*, brought an artist record \$7,922,500 at Christie's in 1998.

Hassam's reputation has had downs as well as ups. For most of his half-century career, the artist received widespread acclaim. "Childe Hassam was like a major general, covered with medals and honors, with stripes of long service," painter Jerome Myers wrote in his 1940 autobiography, *Artist in Manhattan*. After Hassam's death in 1935, however, his oeuvre fell out of fashion as

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Fifth Avenue, 1917, for \$10 million in 2002. It reportedly later sold for twice that.

But the flag pictures are just part of Hassam's output. "He had a range of interests and painted in a variety of styles," says Kathleen Burnside, who is working with Hirschl & Adler of New York director Stuart P. Feld on a catalogue raisonné. Hassam was prolific and versatile, garnering praise for his shimmering urban street scenes as well as his pastoral landscapes. Before his foray into Impressionism, he worked as an illustrator and painted his native Boston—he was born in nearby Dorchester in 1859, the son of a cutlery merchant—in a Barbizon style, applying techniques he learned while traveling in Europe in 1883. His formal training in the U.S. was minimal, and in 1886 he moved to Paris with his wife, Kathleen Maud, to study at the Académie Julian, a near requirement for advanced American artists of the time. Here his mature style begins to reveal itself in pictures like *Paris, Winter Day*, 1887, and *Dans le parc*, 1889. "His handling of paint becomes quicker and more fluid," says Robin Starr, the director of American and European paintings and prints at the Boston-based Skinner Auctioneers, which in May 2010 sold the fine 1887 pastel *At the Grand Prix* for \$699,000.

In 1889, Hassam settled in New York and became a passionate agitator in the leading arts organizations of the day. In 1890 he was elected to the progressive Society of American Artists. In 1897, however, he resigned, together with William Merritt Chase, Edmund C. Tarbell, and Willard L. Metcalf, among others, to protest the fact, as stated in their secession manifesto, that "there is too much business and too little art in the society as at present constituted." The defectors formed a new group known as the Ten, among whom, says Starr, "Hassam and Chase vie for the top position today." The New York dealer Ira Spanierman concurs: "Among the American Impressionists, he was always the highest-priced artist."

"For purists, works painted from circa 1885 to 1895, the high point of his Impressionist phase, are frequently the most sought after," says Dara »

Clockwise from left: The watercolor *Rainy Day*, New York, 1892, sold last year at Sotheby's New York for \$1,538,500, more than double its \$500,000 low estimate; the Paris-period *Quai St. Michel*, 1888, brought \$2,098,500 at Sotheby's in May; and the mid 1890s watercolor *Summer Afternoon*, Appledore, at Debra Force, in New York.

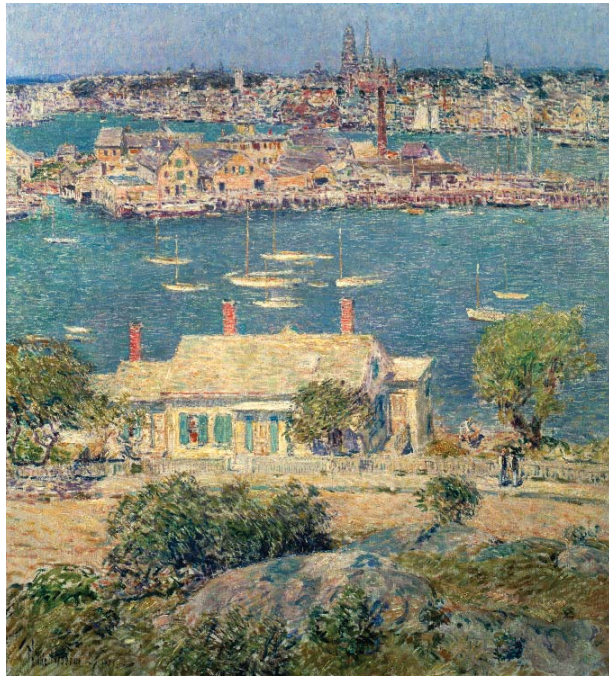
tastes turned from his brand of Impressionism to the grit of the ascendant Ashcan School, and the privations of the Depression and World War II dampened interest in his often-idyllic subjects. Interest revived in the mid 1960s when the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., presented a retrospective, Hassam's first major show in 36 years. "What came back first were the flag paintings," says the New York dealer Warren Adelson. During World War I, the artist produced around 30 works depicting the high-flying standards of the U.S. and other Allied powers. With the majority of these ensconced in the nation's finest museums, the limited number on the market are chased by collectors, resulting in huge prices. Brooke Astor's son Anthony Marshall privately sold his mother's *Flags*,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TWO IMAGES: SOTHEBY'S; TIM PYLE; DEBRA FORCE FINE ART, NEW YORK

Mitchell, Sotheby's director of American art. The most desirable include depictions of bustling New York and Paris streets and of the majestic landscapes of rural France and the Isle of Shoals, in Maine, where Hassam vacationed, visiting his longtime friend the poet Celia Thaxter, who early on advised him to drop his given name, Frederick. During the past 15 years, these pictures have regularly fetched more than \$1 million at auction. At Sotheby's in May, *Quai St. Michel*, 1888, showing a young woman browsing the stalls along the Seine, fetched \$2,098,500, a respectable sum if significantly less than the \$3,027,500 it brought in 1998 at Christie's, reflecting the diminished power of the American-art market. Privately, pristine street scenes with well-rendered figures—Hassam's handling of human subjects varies considerably—have reportedly sold for around \$10 million.

Hassam also garners strong, stable prices for media that collectors sometimes consider secondary to oil painting. "Watercolors and pastels can sell for over \$2 million if the quality is right," says the New York dealer Debra Force. (Hassam, ever an organizer, founded the New York Water Color Club in 1890.) These pieces, however, can often be had for much less. Force has a small watercolor sketch of an Isle of Shoals landscape lacking any of the painter's prized depictions of flowers for \$175,000. Adelson has an approximately 15-by-9-inch 1892 floral still life in the same medium for slightly more than \$500,000. Etchings offer a comparably affordable entry into Hassam's work. This was one of the few media he did not embrace immediately. "He really didn't start his printmaking career until 1915, at the age of 56," says the dealer Harris Schrank, who has a 1918 flag drypoint for \$45,000, near the high end for the artist's prints.



Left: The oil painting *Gloucester Harbor*, 1899, at Spanierman, New York, shows the loosened strokes of Hassam's later work. Below: Etchings like *The Writing Desk*, 1915, \$15,000 at New York's Harris Schrank, offer an affordable foothold for newcomers to Hassam.

By his 50s, Hassam's style had begun to change. "After the turn of the century, his figures become very stylized and rather wooden," says Mitchell. "His technique becomes a bit more Post-Impressionist—his brushstrokes become broader." In keeping with his high-society clientele, Hassam painted numerous East Hampton golf scenes during this period. "Few people care for those," says Spanierman. "The great big ones maybe sell for \$100,000."

"People avoid looking at some of the later pieces," says Force. "You have to pick and choose, but the quality is sometimes there." Mitchell points to the stunning roughly three-foot-square canvas *Sunset at Sea*, 1911, which brought \$3,737,000 at Christie's in 2007, close to the height of the market.

In 2008 prices for American art, as for most segments, tumbled. Christie's American art head Eric Widing believes they are rebounding, along with volume, to 2005–06 levels. Still, this category may not recover as quickly as some others. Future growth will require a strong U.S. economy and perhaps the cultivation of new buyers. "The old collectors"—the Mellons, the Astors—"are fading away," says Spanierman. Among European connoisseurs of Impressionism, notes Widing, "there's always been interest in crossover figures like Cassatt and Sargent, and we're beginning to see it with Frederick Frieseke and perhaps Hassam." Given the desirability and scarcity of his trademark subjects, Hassam's work is poised to fare relatively well. And it can't hurt that one of his pictures hangs in the Oval Office. Whenever Mitchell sees a photo of the Hassam, she says, "I always think, 'I wish we could sell that.'" ■

From the Files

- *Flags, Afternoon on the Avenue*, 1917, set Hassam's auction high, selling at Christie's in 1998 from the collection of **Thomas Mellon Evans** for \$7.9 million.
- Hassam's friends sometimes called him **Muley Hassam**, alluding to **Muley Hacén**, who became sultan of Granada in 1464. Some scholars believe this nickname may explain the crescent moon he began placing before his signature in 1885.

- Hassam's prodigious output of well more than 2,000 works astounded many of his contemporaries. "He produces more canvases than any man I know," painter **J. Alden Weir** wrote. "I wish I had that power."
- In May 2008 collector **Halsey Minor** won Hassam's 1887 *Paris, Winter Day* at Sotheby's for \$3.96 million. He never paid for it, and the work was resold at the same house a year later, after the peak in the American-art market, for \$2,322,500.