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## Masterpiece

“The Fourth of July, 1916” by Childe Hassam

## A Gift of Old Glory

*Childe Hassam ‘The Fourth of July, 1916’ is a portrait of a period of transition.*

by John Wilmerding

**One century** after it was painted, Childe Hassam’s “The Fourth of July, 1916” has come to the New-York Historical Society as a gift from Richard Gilder, in time to celebrate Independence Day, 2016. Its full subtitle was “The Greatest Display of the American Flag Ever Seen in New York, Climax of the Preparedness Parade in May.” One in a series of over two dozen flag paintings that Hassam undertook between 1916 and 1919, it is the most exuberant and beautiful of the group. (It also has an illustrious provenance; former owners include Frank Sinatra and Brooke Astor.)



*Subtitled 'The Greatest Display of the American Flag Ever Seen in New York, Climax of the Preparedness Parade in May,' this work brings Impressionism to the threshold of Post-Impressionism. Photo: Childe Hassam*

For Hassam (1859-1935) and for America, this was a crucial period of transition. World War I had been under way in Europe for two years, and the U.S. was torn between neutrality and engagement. It wouldn't be until 1917, after Germany accelerated attacks on American vessels in the Atlantic, that the U.S. entered the conflict.

Born in the Boston neighborhood of Dorchester, the artist began his career there as an illustrator. Besides an interest in popular culture, he also absorbed Boston's taste for early nineteenth-century British landscape painting. In 1883 he made a brief trip to Europe, and went back in 1886 to study and work in Paris for three years. This brought Hassam his first extensive encounter with Claude Monet and French Impressionism.

By the time he returned to the U.S., settling in New York in 1889, Hassam had adopted the bright colors and spontaneous touch of the Impressionists. In 1916 he had a studio on West 53rd Street, just off Fifth Avenue, and on May 16 witnessed the lavish parade that caught the spirit of the day: simultaneously to champion American isolation and to express patriotic fervor for involvement.

“There was that Preparedness Day, and I looked up the avenue and saw these wonderful flags waving,” Hassam exclaimed in a letter at the time. This particular picture was the second of the group and the first to look down the avenue, identified by the flanking tall buildings and the green double-decker bus on the street. It was “a sea of stars and stripes floating to the breeze,” he went on. “Then comes the climax that fairly shouts for Old Glory.”

Hassam divides his composition into almost equal halves—a bright summer sky filled with large cumulus clouds and the street on the left, and the sidewalk and flag-covered buildings on the right. In a recollection of similar Parisian street scenes by him and several French Impressionists, he has given us an elevated viewpoint in the foreground. He has adjusted his brushstrokes to differing elements: daubs of white for the stars and longer strokes for the red stripes, touches of white with black highlights denoting the myriad straw hats dotting the crowds below.

The same combination of colors, now in loosely mixed strokes, gives only a vague impression of the avenue's far side. The perspective suggests depth, but the distant vanishing point is obscured in a haze. Unlike many French counterparts, Hassam maintains an overall structure of solid forms.

The vertical format of the canvas was a conscious choice to embody the high-rise growth of Manhattan at the turn of the century, and by extension the modernity of the city—New York as a symbol of progress and internationalism. It is clear Hassam was interested in design as much as documentation.

As World War I proceeded, with America now involved, Hassam subtly adjusted the subsequent treatments of his theme. The flags of other nations began to appear, signaling the alliances with Britain, France and Italy. With the war near its end, he painted flag scenes marking Allies Day, Italy-America Day and Lincoln's birthday. The last in the series, following the Armistice, he titled “Victory Won” (also known as “Victory Day”).

“The Fourth of July, 1916” was just one of two set in the full light of summer; others explored early morning and the seasons of autumn and winter. Another transition was at work: This painting represents the last hurrah of Impressionism, which had shifted its focus from landscape to cityscape. Hassam did not know it at the time, but he was working during the great turning point when the old order was ending and the modern world was at hand.

Coincident with his vision were the creation of the X-ray and the theory of relativity, along with the development of the automobile, airplane and cinema. In Hassam’s New York were Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, experimenting with Dada; Stanton MacDonald-Wright introducing abstraction; Max Weber, John Marin, Marsden Hartley and Arthur Dove exploring forms of Cubism and Expressionism.

The examples of avant-garde modernism introduced at the Armory Show in 1913 made apparent that the solid world of earlier realism was about to yield to disintegration and fragmentation, and to the accelerations of time and motion. Likewise, literature was soon to give up its linear narratives in the work of Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The invention of camouflage in World War I served to dissolve appearances.

Hassam’s painting brings Impressionism to the threshold of Post-Impressionism, where color, structure and light will move beyond describing the visible world. This picture summarizes a pivotal moment in the life of the nation and Western consciousness.

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