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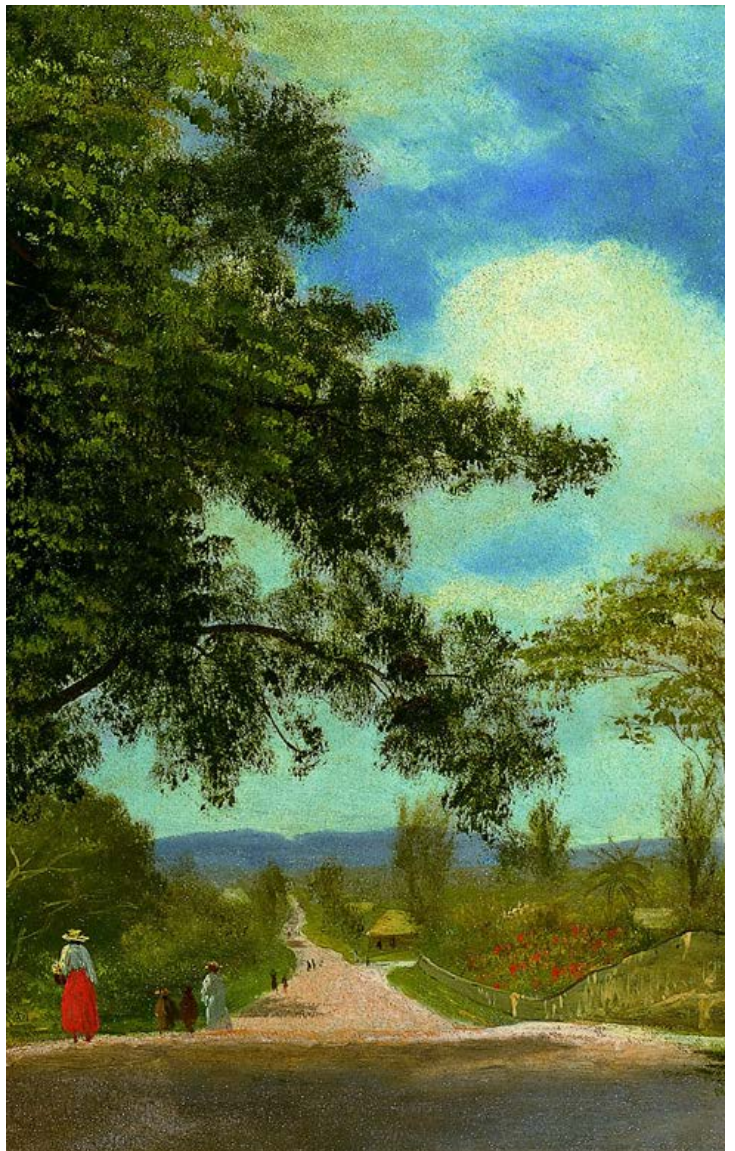
Introduction

To mark the exhibition of *American Art from the Thyssen Collection*, this issue of *Ventanas*, the digital magazine that publishes research on the museum's holdings, is devoted to American art. An integral part of a curator's daily routine, this investigative work is not limited to supporting exhibitions but also studies and explores new findings and interpretations of the artworks in the collection, taking a self-reflective approach to the latest historiographical trends.

Accordingly, in the first essay, which focuses on *Street in Nassau* by Albert Bierstadt, a German-trained painter known chiefly for his landscapes of the American West, Alba Campo Rosillo examines issues of race and national identity that interested the artist during his visits to the capital of the Bahamas. Also in this issue, Campo Rosillo takes a look at the fascinating figure of the Duchess of Sutherland, whose portrait was painted by John Singer Sargent in 1904; Clara Marcellán gives an account of the gestation and evolution of American Synchromism precisely at a time when the museum's galleries are hosting a selection of works resulting from this artistic experiment lent by the Vilcek Foundation in New York; and, lastly, Paula Pérez Arias surveys Richard Estes's complex hyperrealistic painting *Telephone Booths* in connection with the political and artistic context in which it was created in 1967.

Bierstadt's view of a street in Nassau: a painting about becoming

Alba Campo Rosillo



Albert Bierstadt
Street in Nassau, c. 1877–80
(detail)
[\[+ info\]](#)



fig. 1

Albert Bierstadt
Street in Nassau, c. 1877–80
Oil on board pasted onto canvas,
35.5 × 48.3 cm
Colección Carmen Thyssen,
CTB.1996.19

1

Special thanks to Anne S. Cross and Jill Vaum Rothschild for their suggestions and comments to improve this article.

Albert Bierstadt was particularly adept at capturing the atmosphere of his time in powerful works that clearly fascinated Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza.¹ Born in Germany in 1830, the artist grew up in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in the United States before moving back to Germany to undertake formal studies in Düsseldorf between 1853 and 1857. After finishing his German training, Bierstadt returned to America, where he specialised in the creation of sensational landscapes of the country's West. Like the painter, the baron had German ancestors and a distinct taste for romantic landscape painting. On the occasion of the centenary of the baron's birth, the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza conducted a research project to look into the history of his American art collection, with interesting finds. For instance, it uncovered that between 1980 and 1996, the baron – first singly, and then together with his last wife Carmen Cervera – purchased seven pieces by Bierstadt, assembling a representative sample of his production. The paintings range from 1863 to 1900 and allow for an examination of this artist's style and preferred themes.

Unlike his large-scale paintings of America's natural wonders, one small picture in particular, *Street in Nassau* [fig. 1], signals a shift in Bierstadt's mature body of work. In 1877 the artist visited Nassau for the first time. He travelled to the Bahamas in the company of his wife Rosalie, who had been diagnosed as consumptive and advised to seek a temperate climate to alleviate her pulmonary problems in winter. During his stay on the island, Bierstadt started making sketches that introduce a new facet of his work: instead of the grand landscapes celebrating unspoiled nature with a harmonious palette for which he was renowned, he turned to the depiction of everyday scenes using accents of colour. By the time Bierstadt began this new line of work, his reputation had dwindled and the paintings for which he had been acclaimed had fallen into critical disfavour. What follows argues that his experience on the island brought about this change in subject matter and perspective, as reflected in *Street in Nassau*. I will examine Bierstadt's understudied production in the Bahamas in the context of his larger oeuvre. In so doing, I will explore the local cultural diversity and complex politics of the period that compelled the artist to create such exceptional and reflective paintings around issues of colour, race and national identity.

Bierstadt's body of work

Street in Nassau presents a rural road along a walled property and a spattering of cabins in the background. In the foreground at left, two people rest on a bench while a man and a woman on foot interact under the shade of a tree. The two large, leafy trees at left originate inside the walled property, which has a pillared entry with pyramid-shaped capitals next to which a boy or man in a hat stands. It is daytime and the azure blue sky shows through patches of clouds. Slightly off-centre in the middle ground, a woman in a white blouse and bright red skirt holding a basket loaded with goods walks away. Her placement in the composition and the vibrancy of the colour in which she is rendered turn her into the focal point of the painting. Ahead of her, small groups of people walk down the road toward the distance. Trees frame both



fig. 2
Albert Bierstadt
Mountain Scene, 1865-70
 Private collection

sides of the composition, those on the right less dense than the ones on the left. Further away the road leads to a group of one-story houses and up to the mountains. The constructions are Afro-Bahamian huts with roofs made from thatch that contrast with the mansion which can be intuited from the stone wall at left.

Street in Nassau is an exception within the baron's collection of Bierstadt's oeuvre. Contrary to its small scale and mundane subject, the other six works that belonged at some point to Baron Thyssen are all large scenes of wide valleys with special light effects. They represent the sublime, where the landscape elements appear in large scale and full force, underscoring the power of nature on human beings.² *Sunset at Yosemite* immerses the viewer in a glowing bath of light with towering mountains whose colour extends to the sky and lake. The eye finds respite from the warm hues in the green foreground – where a field of grass and trees frame the composition on both sides – and the small figures of cattle standing in the lake. Similar in composition but different in lighting is *Mountain Scene* [fig. 2]. Monumental compositions and broad spaces constitute the defining traits of Bierstadt's sublime work, in which, notwithstanding, fine detail receives the same attention as the overall setting, inviting both scrutiny and absorption.

2

For more on the sublime and visual examples of these works, see Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, Sophie Lynford, Jennifer Raab and Nicholas Robbins, *Picturesque and Sublime: Thomas Cole's Trans-Atlantic Inheritance*, Catskill, New York, Thomas Cole National Historic Site, 2018, 123–33.



fig. 3
Albert Bierstadt
Sacramento River Valley, 1872–73
Oil on canvas, 81.5 × 122.5 cm
Private collection

fig. 4
Albert Bierstadt
The Golden Gate, 1900
Oil on canvas, 96.5 × 152.5 cm
Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection

Further comparison of Bierstadt's work reinforces the idea that there was an underlying repetitive compositional formula surrounding the sublime. In another pair of paintings from the original Thyssen Collection, *Evening on the Prairie* and *Sacramento River Valley* [fig. 3], the figure of a man or a tree mark the low foreground, while the warm evening sunlight illuminates the background and cloudy sky. The sublime resonates in the enveloping light that suggests the presence of the divine. Later Bierstadt purchases in the baron's holdings include large scenes of tumultuous waters, either falling down the face of a cliff – as in *The Falls of St. Anthony* – or crashing on a shore [fig. 4]. Rocky bodies contain the water in both paintings, showing the inhospitable character of nature and its power to damage and kill.

Street in Nassau, however, participates in the aesthetic of the 'picturesque', which delights in the representation of a beauty different from the sublime. The picturesque, a category conceptualised in the 18th century, shaped remote regions of wild nature and gentle characteristics to provide the onlooker with feelings of calm and rest.³ *Street in Nassau* did just that – it captured the daily activity of a rural road in the exotic Bahamas. The scale is human, not majestic; the light natural, not divine; the colour spread out, not applied in blocks. The harmonious palette and lack of dramatic elements soothe the eye and the mind.

3

For more on the picturesque and visual examples of these works, see Barringer, Forrester, Lynford, Raab and Robbins, *Picturesque and Sublime*, n. 2, 98–119.

4

James Henry Stark, *Stark's History and Guide to the Bahama Islands*, Boston, Photo-electrotype Company, 1891, 107.

5

Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2006, 126–27.

6

Dana E. Byrd, 'Trouble in Paradise? Winslow Homer in the Bahamas, Cuba, and Florida, 1884–1886', in *Winslow Homer and the Camera: Photography and the Art of Painting*, Brunswick, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2018, 102–40, here 114.

7

The Royal Victoria Hotel opened in 1861 and was the first luxury venue of this type in Nassau.

8

Rosalie Bierstadt, 'Dreamy Susan: Part I', *Far and Near* 20 (June 1892), 160–61.

Street in Nassau

The city of Nassau was the capital of the Caribbean island of New Providence, which functioned as the seat of government for more than 700 islands in the Bahamas archipelago. First colonised by the British in 1718 (and independent since 1973), in 1891 New Providence had 14,000 inhabitants, of which one fifth was white and the rest were Black or of mixed ancestry.⁴ The white elite consisted of British colonial administrators and merchants. Non-white Bahamians suffered from political and geographical segregation in housing, education, work and social intercourse.⁵ This discrimination was particularly evident in the tourist resorts that sprouted all over the island, which could not be accessed by Black subjects unless they were there to serve the white guests.⁶ In her 1892 short story, 'Dreamy Susan', Rosalie Bierstadt describes her 'colored' housemaid at the Royal Victoria Hotel, for whom this job was her first experience in 'waiting on de quality folks', as Rosalie quotes Susan saying.⁷ In the writer's opinion, the maid had, 'like all the Nassau colored people of her class, who are the politest [she had] ever met, the habit of assenting to nearly everything said to her'.⁸ It would be difficult to find a clearer example of the racial politics on the island at the end of the century, where Black Bahamians served the white population in a colonial culture of segregation and repression where subjugation was made to look like politeness.

Tourism developed in response to the island's limitations for agricultural production. The soil of white limestone of New Providence was unfit for a plantation economy. Indeed, Krista Thompson identifies Nassau's 'antitropical landscape' – one lacking in plantations of commercial scale as on other islands – as the reason why the island became a destination for travellers.⁹ The white elite soon began catering to the winter tourists who arrived at its shores, looking to enjoy its gentle climate, wild vegetation and, to their minds, exotic Black population. Already in 1856, *The Illustrated London News* talked of the 'warm-hearted hospitality' to be found in the 'clean, neat, quiet town of Nassau', where stacks of conch shells and huge sponges were ubiquitous and 'it seems to snow-cotton'.¹⁰ Rosalie Bierstadt put it this way: there was 'no climate to equal that of the Bahamas – no breezes at once so balmy and so bracing – no skies so blue'.¹¹ This was a dream paradise for white residents, ordered and calm, with plenty of resources to enable foreigners to enjoy an easy life.

Following Bierstadt's first visit in 1877, the artist stayed on Nassau Island three more times, accompanying his wife until she passed away in 1893. A dozen or so Bahamian pieces from that time, including sketches and paintings, have survived, shedding light on Bierstadt's Caribbean production. This body of work includes three large paintings that attest to Bierstadt's life-long taste for the sublime: they present a beach with a dramatic wave breaking on the shore that threatens to engulf the viewer [figs. 5, 6]. In the 1878 version, the remains of a shipwreck pierce the menacing wave, addressing one of the most popular topics of sublime landscape painting. Bierstadt's Bahamian works also include small sketches, originally painted on paper and later pasted onto another support. These sketches show costal landscapes too, but contrary to the breaking waves that play a central role in his oil paintings, they feature serene scenes in compositions that combine the horizontal with the vertical axis, often introducing a subtle diagonal line that does not disturb the overall feeling of calm.

⁹ Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*, n. 5, 96–97.

¹⁰ 'The Market in Nassau, New Providence', *The Illustrated London News*, 5 January 1856, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00010577/00001>.

¹¹ Rosalie Bierstadt, 'Dreamy Susan: Part 2', *Far and Near* 21 (July 1892), 182.

fig. 5

Albert Bierstadt
Beach at Nassau, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 28.6 × 47 cm
Private collection



fig. 6

Albert Bierstadt
The Shore of the Turquoise Sea, 1878
Oil on canvas 108 × 163.8 cm
Manoogian Collection, Detroit





fig. 7
Albert Bierstadt
Nassau Harbor, c. 1877
 Oil on paper mounted on paperboard,
 37.5 × 50.8 cm
 De Young Fine Arts Museums
 of San Francisco, Museum purchase,
 Mildred Anna Williams Collection,
 1961.22

In *Nassau Harbor* [fig. 7], the horizontal prevails, as do the colours blue and orange, sprinkled with white patches that shape a sail, a shirt, a cloud. The white accents draw the eye toward the picturesque scenery pervaded with everyday life. Unlike these sketches, *Street in Nassau* was made in oil on board, probably because Bierstadt needed a hard support on which to paint *en-plein-air*, and then pasted onto canvas for exhibition. The painting participates in the experimental quality of his sketches in its materiality and fresh approach, yet it deviates from both the sketches and the oil paintings in that the composition has much more movement and rhythm than these other pieces, a cadence that is accentuated by the application of colour.

Failures or opportunities

Bierstadt's good instinct for business opportunities cemented his fame as an ambitious man.¹² Although he came from humble origins, the artist made a fortune in the 1860s from his investments in photography, land and mining speculation, engineering inventions and public relations. Above all, he profiled himself as the painter *par excellence* of American Western landscapes. Especially clever were the commercial tours he organised to display his painted panoramas, staged in cinematic fashion across the United States. These events enabled him to collect an entrance fee from visitors and the benefits from the sale of prints and pamphlets, and helped his popularity rise. Bierstadt reached the pinnacle of his career in 1865, when several British railroad entrepreneurs commissioned him to paint landscapes of the areas they were developing. The artist celebrated his success that year by purchasing land at Irvington-on-Hudson to build a lavish mansion.¹³ Bierstadt was on fire.

However, his success was not to last. The 1860s saw mounting criticism of his oeuvre. In the first art historical biography of US artists published in 1867, Henry T. Tuckerman criticised Bierstadt's work as follows: 'Bierstadt is a true representative of the Dusseldorf school in landscape [...]; they are often excellent draughtsmen, expert, like all artistic Germans, in form and composition, but in color frequently hard and dry; they abound in the intellectual, and are wanting in the sensuous [...]. Skill prevails over imagination in the Dusseldorf artists; [...] as a class, these painters are inclined to the sensational; [...] they are more *effective* than *impressive*; more clever than tender; yet, withal, admirably equipped for their work, though often uninspired by it'.¹⁴ Even earlier, in 1864, James Jackson Jarves had deplored the loud theatricality of Bierstadt's paintings, and in 1869 he disqualified them outright in the following terms: '[the paintings] are bold and effective speculations in art on principles of trade; emotionless and soulless'.¹⁵

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'Council Minutes', 14 May 1902, NAD Archives, referenced in Linda S. Ferber, 'The History of a Reputation', in Nancy K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, with a contribution by Helena E. Wright, New York, Hudson Hills Press in association with the Brooklyn Museum, 1990, 22.

13

Linda S. Ferber, 'The History of a Reputation', n. 12, 21–68.

14

Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life, comprising biographical and critical sketches of American artists: preceded by an historical account of the rise and progress of art in America*, New York, G. P. Putnam & Son, 1867, 392.

15

James Jackson Jarves, *The Art-Idea*, 3 vols, New York, Hurd and Houghton, 1877 [1864], 233; and James Jackson Jarves, *Art Thoughts*, New York, Hurd & Houghton, 1869, 299.

'Hard', 'dry' and 'uninspired' maybe, but 'sensational' and theatrically loud – of course, that was the whole point! Bierstadt's paintings were large and, despite Tuckerman's opinion, impressive, and he exhibited them using special light effects and curtains to provoke a reaction in the viewer. They wanted to be sensational – they chased sensation. However, these painted sensations lost favour in the late 1860s and 1870s, when Bierstadt stopped receiving awards at the Paris Art Salons. Lois Marie Fink reflects that 'nature's grandeur, as the source of images that stimulated the eye or emotions of viewers, had become passé, and Bierstadt's scenic wonders, with their definitive sense of completion, further alienated a public that increasingly rejected passive viewing experiences in favor of paintings that encouraged their own involvement'.¹⁶ I argue that it was to align himself with this new way of engaging the viewer that Bierstadt changed his approach to painting in his Nassau works, trying to look for formulas to captivate again the audience.

Novel colour approaches

Street in Nassau was Bierstadt's most daring attempt at trying to establish a new relationship with the viewer. Instead of the colour fields or blocks with which he usually worked, his picturesque Bahamian paintings – *Street in Nassau* in particular – sprinkled colour here and there. With this, the artist deliberately created a rhythmic code designed to engage viewers and encourage them to sweep their gaze across the painting. In *Street in Nassau*, the red spot in the form of the hatted woman at centre catches the eye with magnetic force, sending it to the right through the connecting arched branches of the trees, echoed by the undulating shapes of the clouds. The tree branches converge to highlight the red flowers amid the green grass. The elliptically shaped elongated shade on the foreground moves the eye, this time to the left, where it ascends through the lit pillared entry, up the tree trunk and back to the woman through the tree branches. The use of colour is crucial to set the eye in motion, to steer it to meander around the figures and make sense of the composition.

¹⁶

Lois Marie Fink, *American Art at the Nineteenth-Century Paris Salons*, Washington, D.C., National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 229–30.

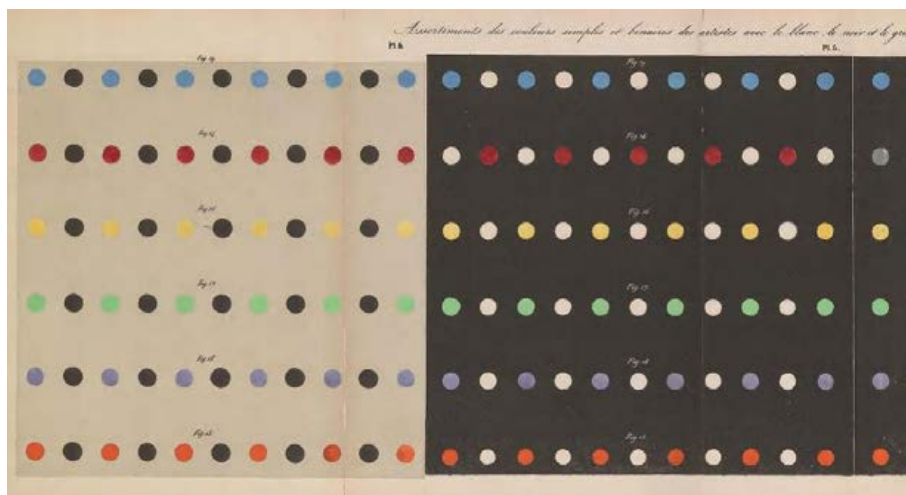


fig. 8

Michel Eugène Chevreul
De la loi du contraste simultané
des couleurs, et de l'assortiment des
objets colorés, considéré d'après
cette loi, Paris, Pitois-Levrault, 1839

The chromatic scheme which Bierstadt applied to *Street in Nassau* derived from the scientific discoveries of Michel Eugène Chevreul, the French chemist who was director of dyeing at the Manufactures Royales des Gobelins. In this post he endeavoured to solve the mystery as to why tapestries looked chromatically dull. Chevreul was asked to study the formula of the dyes, but he realised that the problem was not chemical but optical, what mattered was not the formula but the way colours interacted with each other when juxtaposed. The chemist established the law of simultaneous contrast after careful empirical observation to determine that the eye perceives colours differently when they are placed side by side. Based on these observations, Chevreul published in 1839 a treatise with colour combinations of primary and secondary shades that artists and designers would mine for decades.¹⁷

17

Michel Eugène Chevreul, *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs, et de l'assortiment des objets colorés, considéré d'après cette loi*, Paris, Pitois-Levrault, 1839. The treatise was soon translated into English and its popularity spread across the continents. It is well documented that Winslow Homer owned a translated copy in which he made extensive notes on colour effects.

In *Street in Nassau*, Bierstadt clearly followed Chevreul's teachings to improve his critical reputation. The colour combinations of Chevreul's plates 5 and 6 [fig. 8] are clearly in evidence in *Street in Nassau*, where light blue combines with white in the sky; green and purple with pale blue on the horizon line; orange, yellow and white with purple tones on the ground; and repetitions of these combinations on the left wall. The most striking colour scheme is that featuring the woman in a red skirt and white blouse surrounded by green and very close to a large extension of blue.

fig. 9 ↓

Winslow Homer
Waverly Oaks, 1864
Oil on paper mounted on panel,
33.6 × 25.4 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, 589 (1980.87)



fig. 10 ↑

William Merritt Chase
In the Park. A By-path, c. 1889
Oil on paper mounted on panel,
33.6 × 25.4 cm
Colección Carmen Thyssen,
CTB.1979.15

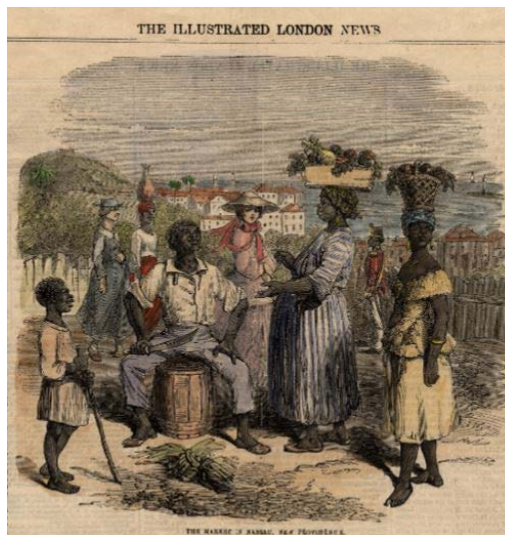
We also see these effective colour combinations in other paintings in the collection, as in the works by US American artist Winslow Homer, who owned an English translation of Chevreul's treatise. Homer used Chevreul's palette from early on, as in *Waverly Oaks* [fig. 9]. Here, the figure in a red cape is surrounded by green foliage, and there is light blue crowning the view in the sky peeking through the branches.¹⁸ Another exquisite example of such colour combinations appears in a much later work by another US American artist, William Merritt Chase, in *In the Park. A By-path* [fig. 10], where the woman sitting at the centre of the painting wears a red skirt and hat in a rich green environment, and the grey path introduces the blue and purple tones. These are only two of the many instances of use of Chevreul's handbook in the work of the artists represented at the museum, where their chromatic experiments evince a taste for dispersed tonalities combining complementary colours.

18

John Spanton, *Chevreul on Colours* (1859), in Judith Walsh, 'Winslow Homer and the Color Theories of Michel-Eugène Chevreul', in Martha Tedeschi and Kristi Dahm, eds, *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light*, Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, 2008, 199–205, here 199.

fig. 11

'The Market in Nassau, New Providence', *The Illustrated London News*, 5 January 1856



19

Bierstadt, 'Dreamy Susan: Part 2', n. 11, 182.

20

See 'The Market in Nassau, New Providence', in *The Illustrated London News*, 5 January 1856 [fig. 11], <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00010577/00001>.

21

The Black population originated as migrant captives of white planters shipped from Africa over the centuries. Between 1788 and 1807, the British took 9,560 African captives to the colony. After the British abolition of the Slave Trade in 1832–34, the British Navy freed thousands of African captives; see Helen A. Regis, ed., *Caribbean and Southern: Transnational Perspectives on the U.S. South*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2006, 40. In the following decades, hundreds of Black and Seminole subjects revolted and fled from Florida and other territories to the Bahamas; see Rosalyn Howard, 'The "Wild Indians" of Andros Island: Black Seminole Legacy in the Bahamas', *Journal of Black Studies* 37:2 (2006), 275–98.

22

Judith Bettelheim, 'From Masquerade to Fashion and Back', in Lowery Stokes Sims, Leslie King-Hammond, Naomi Beckwith and Martina D'Alton, *The Global Africa Project*, New York, Museum of Arts and Design, 2010, 162–67, here 163.

Besides the novel colour theories coming from France, Albert Bierstadt had access to other sources of artistic inspiration from the island's Afro-Bahamian population. Rosalie Bierstadt noted 'that fondness for bright colors, which is so pronounced in the African race', in her 1893 novella.¹⁹ In the 19th century, one of the island's white tourist attractions was its Black community and its cultural expressions. Foreign visitors often associated the Afro-Bahamian population with African and middle-eastern peoples.²⁰ In an illustration accompanying the promotional article 'The Market in Nassau' from 1856 [fig. 11], the Black subjects are associated with the 'Arabian nights', the 'Queen of Sheba' and the 'Sphynx'. Most were first generation Afro-Bahamian, with a mix of ancestries between African, indigenous and white descending from residents in other Caribbean regions.²¹ Although the link with African culture might not have been as direct as the white population imagined, Black subjects certainly participated from a wider diaspora culture shared throughout the Caribbean. On the occasion of *The Global Africa Project* exhibition that explored the 'Impact of African Visual Culture on Contemporary Art, Craft and Design around the World', the historian Judith Bettelheim identified 'high visibility within an urban mix among diasporic communities of African descent.'²² The penchant for colour among the local Black population vindicated pride in their identity among the white population.

As his work reveals, Bierstadt noticed this taste for lively colours assigned to Afro-Bahamians during his first trip to the Bahamas in 1877. To paint *Street in Nassau*, he had to descend from the hill on top of which the Victoria Hotel stood and mingle with the Black subjects who went about their business in a non-segregated road. It is even possible that he witnessed Junkanoo, a Bahamian national festival celebrated on the mornings of Boxing Day and New Year. Although Bierstadt arrived after the official celebrations had taken place,²³ the tourist-centred economy of the island makes it plausible that there might have been Junkanoo simulacra performances outside the late-December and early-January festivities. Junkanoo consisted of a parade on Bay Street, the main white shopping thoroughfare, where Black subjects dressed up and performed dances and music taking over a space usually forbidden to them. This was the only moment of the year in which the Black population reclaimed its visibility and agency, and it built from West African legends and culture. Participants wore costumes of cloth and paper often decked with items specific to the islands, such as sea sponges and leaves, and painted their faces. The musicians played using instruments made with local products too, such as conch shells, horns and poinciana seed pods.²⁴

23

Albert Bierstadt arrived in Nassau on 4 March 1877 and stayed until 24 April of that year. Nancy K. Anderson, 'Chronology', in Anderson and Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, n. 12, 230.

24

'Junkanoo', Bahamas Government, https://www.bahamas.gov.bs/wps/wcm/connect/MOF_Content/internet/The+Government/Residents/Culture/Junkanoo/.

25

'Red Set-Girls, and Jack-in-the-Green', in *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*, <http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/2308>.

Mention of Junkanoo is relevant in this discussion given the visual coincidences that exist between the figures in Bierstadt's painting and some of the festivity's characters. The attire of the market woman at the centre of the composition, who wears white and red clothes and a straw hat, is reminiscent of Junkanoo's 'Red Set Girls', who were the main dancers in the festivity's parade [fig. 12]. According to an early 19th-century witness who captured scenes from the celebration, the Red Set Girls would start dancing in the late morning and continue through the night. Like the market woman in Bierstadt's painting, they would appear in the company of green foliage, in this case encircling the character of 'Jack-in-the-Green', a person covered in coconut-tree leaves crowned with a red bow and flags.²⁵ This image connects with Bierstadt's painting, linking local traditions and tastes perceived as exotic by Anglo-American tourists with his rendered figures.



fig. 12

Isaac Mendes Belisario
'Red Set-Girls, and Jack-in-the-Green' (1836),
Sketches of Character, in illustration of the
habits, occupation, and costume of the Negro
population, in the island of Jamaica: drawn
after nature, and in lithography, Kingston,
*Jamaica, 1837–38, in *Slavery Images: A Visual**
Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life
in the Early African Diaspora

In addition to Junkanoo, a local product might have sparked Bierstadt's experimentation with colour: sponges. Afro-Bahamian men worked mostly in the harvesting of sponge, the colony's major export.²⁶ Helen A. Cooper astutely argues that when Winslow Homer visited the Bahamas in 1884, the local sponge industry defined his Bahamian oeuvre. I would like to extend Cooper's idea to Bierstadt's work, in particular to his technique of spreading patches of colour as if applied with a sponge, as opposed to the monotone colour washes seen in his sublime landscapes. Marine influences extended to other areas of island life too. It is interesting to note that Bahamian residents of European descent called themselves 'Conchs', for the crustaceans that could be fished in the sea.²⁷ One wonders if the Conch denomination for Caucasian people had to do with the paleness of the mollusk's shell, or with its material fragility.

26

Helen A. Cooper, 'Bahamas and Cuba 1884–1885', in *Winslow Homer Watercolors*, Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art; New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986, 131–49.

27

Byrd, 'Trouble in Paradise?', n. 6, 108.

Collecting sponge was a taxing activity that forced the local fishermen to dive in the sea and endure the scorching sun for months-long expeditions. Black Bahamians certainly shared the porosity of a living creature adaptable to the flow of their changing environment, as survivors of the Middle Passage and of enslavement and their legacies.

Colour was political. The fate of millions of Black people in the United States was at stake in the 1870s given the violent white supremacist efforts to revert the racial order of chattel enslavement. Following the ratification of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth amendments that abolished slavery, guaranteed citizenship and promised equal protection under the law, the Fifteenth Amendment established that the right of citizens to vote 'shall not be denied or abridged [...] on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude'.²⁸ In response to the newfound freedoms of Black Americans, enraged white supremacists validated associations like the Ku Klux Klan and gave way to the racial segregation policies known as the Jim Crow Laws of the 1880s.²⁹ In this context, 'colour' as the conceptual name for skin shade mattered. It was on the basis of body colour that people were denied their rights, tortured and murdered. Against the apparent lightness of the scene depicted in *Street in Nassau*, it is important to note that all the people in the painting are Black, and that there are no brushstrokes of pure white colour. Colour pervades the work, with the wall on the left likely shielding a white-owned villa, hidden and safeguarded behind the prominent tree cover. The Afro-Bahamian huts that appear further down the road have no protecting wall. The white world is secured by structures with deep foundations, the Black world is vulnerable to the structural racism that segregated on perceived differences in colour.

28

Fifteenth Amendment, Section 1, United States Constitution, ratified in 1870.

29

Michael Harriot, '1869–1874: Reconstruction', in Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain, *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America 1619–2019*, London, Penguin Vintage, 2022, 235.

Paths to becoming

The experimental character of *Street in Nassau* stems from new epistemological issues as well, crystallised by the road that recedes into the background. Historical scholar Lois Marie Fink states that images of paths 'signified the act of going, the process of flux and change inherent in many late nineteenth-century experiences, and linked with contemporary concerns of "becoming" as opposed to "being"'.³⁰ Flux, passage, transitioning from one point to another was symbolised through the road motif and exercised via the movement of the eye induced by its composition. Beyond being a mere painting about a trip, *Street in Nassau* embodies the trip, as ambassador of a culture composed of movement and dispersion: the African diaspora. The protagonists of the painting are all Black people, African descendants in a British colonial island, a people in political flux. In 1877–80, Afro-Bahamians were British subjects in the Caribbean.

The processual character of becoming ties into the politics of slavery in poignant ways. Christina Sharpe introduces the term 'Trans*Atlantic' as 'that s/place, condition, or process that appears alongside and in relation to the Black Atlantic but also in excess of its currents' where 'Trans*' is 'about or toward the range of transformations enacted on and by Black bodies'.³¹ In addition to this reflection, Dionne Brand argues that 'that one door [of no return, the door in the Coast Castle on Ghana's Gold Coast] transformed us into bodies emptied of being, bodies emptied of self-interpretation, into which new interpretations could be placed'.³² The emptiness to which Brand refers resulted from the trauma of the Middle Passage. The motif of the road in Bierstadt's painting seems an appropriate setting for the Black diasporic bodies to walk, one in which metaphorically they can fill their emptied beings with potential becomings.

30

Fink, *American Art at the Nineteenth-Century Paris Salons*, n. 16, 231.

31

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016, 30.

32

Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, Toronto, Doubleday Canada, 2001, 25.

Bierstadt probably started the painting in 1877, the year following the major celebrations of the United States centennial. He lent six paintings to the Philadelphia Centennial



fig. 13

Albert Bierstadt

***Entrance into Monterey*, 1876**

Oil on canvas, 182.9 × 304.8 cm

**Collection of the United States House
of Representatives**

Exposition and almost certainly visited the fair. One painting, *Entrance into Monterey* [fig. 13], depicts an episode of the origins of the colonised West Coast, with the Spanish conquistadors gathered under a tree around a cross atop an altar celebrating mass in the middle ground; in the foreground, a group of indigenous people observe them while admiring the domestic animals which the colonisers brought with them. Bierstadt was considering the earlier history of his country around this time for the purpose of the exhibition. The world fair was relevant not only because almost ten million people – one fourth of the US population at the time – attended, but especially because it celebrated the first hundred years of US history since its foundation. It was a moment of reckoning, of self-reflection; the definition of a national identity was at stake.

After the Civil War had divided the country, this exhibition sought to suture the dismembered nation. It attempted to do this by looking at the past in order to shape a new model for the future.³³ It is an interesting circumstance that precisely at this moment of inner reflection about the past, present and future of the country, Bierstadt, the painter of US Western expansionism, should have travelled to the British Bahamian tourist paradise.

The US sections of the Centennial Exposition advanced the idea that the country had British roots, and that it was the country's British colonial past that should bind its citizens.³⁴ In 1877, besides being a tourist resort, the British island of the Bahamas was a haven for British loyalists fleeing the war, the result of which the centennial paradoxically celebrated. Moreover, it became the main harbour connecting Confederate states with the rest of the world during the Civil War after President Abraham Lincoln set a blockade to the Confederate ports to cut their supplies. How did this troubled legacy fit into the becoming of the United States? How did the United States look to Bierstadt, an artist of German descent and shaper of US nationalistic ideas, from the British colony run on the backs of segregated Black Bahamians?

33

Kimberly Orcutt, *Power & Posterity: American Art at Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exhibition*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017.

34

The Centennial Exhibition featured examples of New English products and history as the solution to the country's fragmentation. According to Mary Elizabeth Boone, 'English-speaking Protestants on the northeastern seaboard [were presented as] the ancestral founders and therefore the inheritors of the nation'. Mary Elizabeth Boone, *The Spanish Element in Our Nationality: Spain and America at the World's Fairs and Centennial Celebrations, 1876–1915*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019, 41.

fig. 14

Winslow Homer
Children under a Palm Tree, 1885
 Watercolour and pencil on paper,
 35.6 × 50.8 cm
 Private collection



35

There were conch carvings, aloe rope, silver, china and Dresden china, jewellery, lacework, corals, shells, straw work, ivory work, pottery and glass work, Indian slippers, Burmese shoes, Chinese daggers and silk sashes, among others. 'The Bahamas Loan Exhibition', *Nassau Guardian* (2 December 1885), University of Florida, George A. Smathers Library, Digital Library of the Caribbean, Caribbean Newspapers, 2, [36](https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00076890/02873/2j?ssearch=nassau+%3dguardian; 'Bahamas Loan Exhibition', Nassau Guardian (5 December 1885), University of Florida, George A. Smathers Library, Digital Library of the Caribbean, Caribbean Newspapers, https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00076890/02874/1x; 'Bahamas Loan Exhibition', Nassau Guardian (12 December 1885), 2, https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00076890/02876/2x.</p>
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See Martha Tedeschi, 'Memoranda of Travel: The Tropics', in Martha Tedeschi and Kristi Dahm, *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light*, Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, 2008, 170–98; and Byrd, 'Trouble in Paradise?', n. 6, 102–40.

Afterlives

On 1 December 1885, Sir Henry Arthur Blake, British Governor of the Bahamas, inaugurated the First Bahamas Loan Exhibition. Bierstadt's 'exquisite sketches', as the local press characterised them, appeared on display next to 'so many rare and pretty things'.³⁵ The works Bierstadt created on the island hung together with all kinds of local and global products that were an expression of the international commercial network in which the island participated. Winslow Homer was another of the artists who visited the Bahamas and contributed to its tourist promotion. On an assignment from *Century Magazine*, this artist painted, among other things, the three children of the island's governor, clad in oriental costume and studying an undefined object under a palm tree [fig. 14]. Palm branches show up in two places at left and right, imbuing with Caribbean exoticism the otherwise vague setting. It is remarkable that of all the watercolours he made during his trip to the Bahamas in 1885,³⁶ the only time that Homer painted white people he set them in foreign costume framed by a tropical plant, a fact that located them in a cultural limbo of exoticism yet anchored them in the Caribbean. The image points to the artificiality of the white presence on the island, only able to signify when disguised.



fig. 15
Winslow Homer
Dressing for the Carnival, 1877
 Oil on canvas, 50.8 × 76.2 cm
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
 New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund,
 1922, 22.220

In 1877 Homer, too, made a poignant painting of a group of African American people gathered to celebrate the Fourth of July – US Independence Day – in Virginia, with one man clad as a Junkanoo character [fig. 15]. He stands at the centre of the composition, wearing a patchwork blouse, trousers and cap that combine fragments of brightly coloured fabrics. Behind him a child riding astride a lad's back holds the US flag, as does another young boy wearing a cap and sucking his fingers. As the Fourth of July became a common festivity in the South, the characters of Homer's painting fused the celebration of the country's independence with the most festive Black diasporic-wide event, visually bringing together their pride in their diasporic roots and in the nation-state in colourful fabric creations. In both Homer paintings, the main character is wearing a combination of red, yellow and white clothes, and the sun critically impacts on these hues, lightening or darkening their tone. This attests to the changing perception of colour as affected by natural phenomena and points of view. In contrast to Bierstadt's *Street in Nassau*, *Dressing for the Carnival* renders its characters from up close, focusing on the drama of becoming, with one woman sewing the final touch on the Junkanoo-clad man. The quality of becoming takes centre stage in a painting of African diasporic US American subjects.

Rosalie Bierstadt passed away in Nassau in 1893, the year in which the United States celebrated its second major international exhibition, the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The world fair boasted US achievements after 500 years of European colonisation of the Americas. As if closing a vital cycle in the haven of healing for her, the last breath Rosalie took was the balmy Bahamian air. Nearing the end of his life, Albert, her husband, made *The Golden Gate* in 1900 [fig. 4], replicating the breaking wave that he had painted for the first time during his second trip to the Bahamas in 1878. The same wave is featured in two more paintings, adding to a total of four appearances in his body of work.³⁷ Although the wave is without doubt a version of a Bahamian phenomenon, the site identified in the title is the one-mile-wide (1.6 km) strait connecting San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean in the US West Coast. How remarkable that one of his last paintings should have depicted a Bahamian view placed in the US Pacific shoreline, projecting the country by sea to the rest of the world on the opposite side of the United Kingdom. With this landscape, in which boats cross the sea and a rainbow illuminates the stormy sky, Bierstadt seems to have been looking towards the future of the United States, in which African Americans play a larger role. ●

37

Albert Bierstadt, *Beach at Nassau*, 1877?, whereabouts unknown; *The Shore of the Turquoise Sea*, 1878, Manoogian Collection, Detroit [fig. 6]; *After a Norther, Bahamas*, after 1878, Haggin Museum, Stockton; and *The Golden Gate*, 1900, private collection [fig. 4].

'Please don't say synchronisme...

Clara Marcellán



Patrick Henry Bruce
Painting. Still Life, c. 1923–24
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 1

Patrick Henry Bruce**Painting. *Still Life*, c. 1923–24****Oil and pencil on canvas, 64.5 × 80.6 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,****Madrid, 481 (1980.31)**[\[+ info\]](#)

... which doesn't apply to painting, the termination is "chrome", color'.¹ Of all the isms of modern art, one is less familiar to the European public: Synchronism.² Its creators, Americans Morgan Russell (1886–1953) and Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890–1973), resided in Paris when they publicly showed their works under this name. Despite being short-lived, this movement, which was mainly active from 1912 to 1916, has gone down in history – or at least in some art histories – as the first American abstract trend and the first to make an impact on Europe.

1

Letter from Morgan Russell to Andrew Dasburg, 12 March 1914. Cited from Gail Levin, *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910–1925* [exh. cat.], New York, Whitney Museum of American Art–Braziller, 1978, 20.

2

Works by Russell and Macdonald-Wright have previously been featured in Madrid in 2003 at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza exhibition *Analogías musicales*, as well as in major shows such as *Vom Klang der Bilder: die Musik in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* [exh. cat. Staatsgalerie Stuttgart], ed. Karin von Maur, Munich, Prestel, 1985.

In the summer of 2022, the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza is hosting a small exhibition of eight works from the collection of the Vilcek Foundation in New York that offer an insight into the gestation and evolution of this artistic experiment. What set it apart from the other isms such as the Orphism/Simultanism practised by Robert and Sonia Delaunay, with whose works there is an evident similarity? What impact did these artists make on their counterparts on this side of the Atlantic? And in their own country? American artist Patrick Henry Bruce (1881–1936), one of whose works is housed in the museum's collections [fig. 1], is commonly linked to this movement. Yet he never considered himself a Synchronist and neither subscribed to its theories nor showed his work together with Russell and Macdonald-Wright. Why, then, have their names become intertwined in art history?



fig. 2

Morgan Russell

***Synchronist Still Life*, c. 1910**

Oil on canvas, 41.6 × 33.3 cm

The Vilcek Foundation Collection,

New York, VF2016.02.01

© Courtesy Jean-Pierre Joyce

Paris, an Art Lab

Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright began their artistic careers in the United States before they met in Paris in 1911. Russell had taken up residence in the French capital around 1908 to study sculpture at Henri Matisse's academy with the financial support of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.³ There he filled the post left vacant by fellow American artist Max Weber and coincided with another compatriot, Patrick Henry Bruce. Bruce was not just a pupil: he had been one of the founders of the school together with Leo and Sarah Stein, and was then also its treasurer.

The students used a rented space and Matisse looked over their work on Saturdays. The class often went to Leo and Gertrude Stein's apartment on the Rue de Fleurus, where the Steins used to entertain. Artists, enthusiasts and expatriates gathered to view and discuss the works of Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso in the only place in Paris where they were permanently on view.

Macdonald-Wright and Russell probably met through Lee Simonson, an American painter and stage designer who was a friend of Leo and Gertrude Stein. The starting point for their artistic explorations and experiments was the colours of Fauvism and the structure of Cubism [fig. 2],⁴ of which there were plenty of examples in the Steins' collection: there they had the chance to see Picasso's *Glasses and Fruit* (1908), now part of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza's holdings; Morgan Russell asked to borrow Cézanne's *Five Apples* (1878–79) to analyse it; and he and Macdonald-Wright bore Matisse's *Blue Nude (Souvenir of Biskra)* (1907) very much in mind when studying the contortions of the sculptures of Michelangelo, whose *Dying Slave* [fig. 3] they repeatedly went to see in the Louvre.

³

The future founder of the Whitney Museum of American Art. They probably met in New York when she was taking sculpture classes at the Art Students League, where Russell worked as a model around 1904.

⁴

William C. Agee and Barbara Rose, *Patrick Henry Bruce, American Modernist: A Catalogue Raisonné*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1979, 2.

fig. 3

Michelangelo
***The Dying Slave*, 1513–15**
Marble, 227 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris,
MR 1590



1911 marked a turning point in both men's artistic ideas as a result of the classes taught by Percyval Tudor-Hart, who ran an academy in Paris from 1903 to 1913. They combined the colour theories of Michel Eugène Chevreul and Hermann von Helmholtz, which Matisse shared with his students, with the complex theory of Tudor-Hart, who proposed a geometric colour scale, modifying its luminosity and establishing equivalences with musical tones. Macdonald-Wright and Russell devised a simplified system that enabled them to create colour scales and harmonies, analogous to musical chords. The extremes were yellow (which to Russell represented light in its full force) and violet, the complementary colour that embodies the opposite, shadow [see fig. 4]. Russell wrote in his notes in August 1912: 'Make lines colors [...] never paint "the thing" or the subject. Paint the emotion not illustration [...] a few curly lines and to depth, rythm [sic] light [...] a few little spectrums, dark violets and lights...'⁵

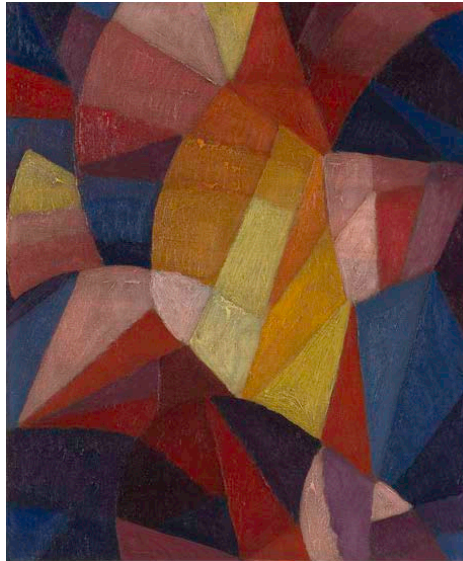
5

Cited from Gail Levin, 'Morgan Russell's Notebooks: An American Avant-Garde Painter in Paris', in *RACAR: Revue d'Art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 3:2 (1976), 73–75, 77–87, here 81.

How to create an artistic group

fig. 4

Morgan Russell
***Synchromy*, c. 1913–14**
 Oil on canvas, 45.7 × 38.1 cm
 The Vilcek Foundation Collection,
 New York, VF2019.01.03
 © Courtesy Jean-Pierre Joyce



As a critic writing in the German magazine *Kunstchronik* pointed out in connection with the Synchromist exhibition of 1913, artistic revolutions occurred in Paris at least twice a year:⁶ Marinetti published the Manifesto of Futurism in *Le Figaro* in 1909; Metzinger saw his article 'Note on Painting' printed in *Pan* in 1910, followed by 'Cubism and Tradition' in *Paris-Journal* in 1911; Robert Delaunay wrote one of the five versions of his article 'Light' in the summer of 1912 and saw its German edition, translated by Paul Klee, published in *Der Sturm* in January 1913. In September 1913, Leo Stein, whom Russell had asked to collaborate in the edition of the catalogue of the Synchromist exhibition, summed up the many art groups in Paris as follows:

6

Albert Dreyfus, 'Die Synchronisten', in *Kunstchronik* 9 (21 November 1913), 141. The following issue of the magazine published a correction and indicated that the name of the group was Synchromisten, though it was commonly misspelled.

7

Cited from Brenda Wineapple, *Sister Brother: Gertrude and Leo Stein*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press; London–New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1996, 372.

I don't believe that ever before have there been so many cliques and such little ones. Russell and Wright find virtue in each other's work and in none other, Picasso and Braque are a world apart, the six futurists form an independent system. [Robert] Delaunay stands in lonely grandeur on a mountain top. For a while he had [Patrick] Bruce in his train but Bruce has ruptured the bond that left him revolving in Delaunay's sphere of influence and he is now a system all by himself. If Russell has invented the ugliest art form Bruce has achieved [one] that is by all odds the stupidest. One could list these systems almost indefinitely.⁷

Name and manifesto

Engrossed in a search based on colour and abstraction, which they considered original and different despite Leo Stein's scepticism, Russell and Macdonald-Wright set about finding a name to identify their art and devised a theory with which to present themselves. In a similar way to the word 'symphony', which means 'with sound', 'Synchromism' means 'with colour'. Russell used the term 'synchromy' in his notes and artistic writings in October 1912, and soon became involved in a quarrel with Sonia and Robert Delaunay over who had been the first to coin and employ it.

Their manifestoes were published in the catalogues accompanying the two shows they organised in 1913. In them they explained that 'they chose the name Synchromism not to designate a school but to avoid being misclassified under some inappropriate label'⁸ such as Orphism. Russell and Macdonald-Wright considered the movement headed by Robert Delaunay to be too flat, superficial, decorative and incapable of using colour abstractly.

They did acknowledge their debt to the groundbreaking shift led by Impressionism and its study of light as their starting point, which entailed establishing colour relationships rather than colouring with a decorative or dramatic intent. In their view, Orphism had not progressed beyond what Monet and the Impressionists had achieved. They found the Futurist and Cubist efforts to be both superficial and of secondary interest. Russell even referred to Picasso as a mere vulgariser of Cézanne. Russell later toned down these statements, which should be taken in the context of the string of manifestoes published during those years, which were predominantly arrogant and messianic.

Russell announced in his manifesto that they were incorporating the notion of time into painting and hoped that viewers would feel that a development was taking place when they viewed it. The *Kunstchronik* magazine noted the parallels between Synchromist painting and dance, the creation of forms through colours, which 'dance with each other like a prima ballerina'.⁹

⁸

Cited from Levin, *Synchromism and American Color Abstraction*, n. 1, 24.

⁹

Dreyfus, 'Die Synchronisten', n. 6, 142.



fig. 5
Jean de Paleologu
La Loïe Fuller. Folies-Bergère
poster, 1890s
Colour lithograph, printed
by Paul Dupont, Paris

10
Loïe Fuller had a close relationship
with Marie and Pierre Curie.

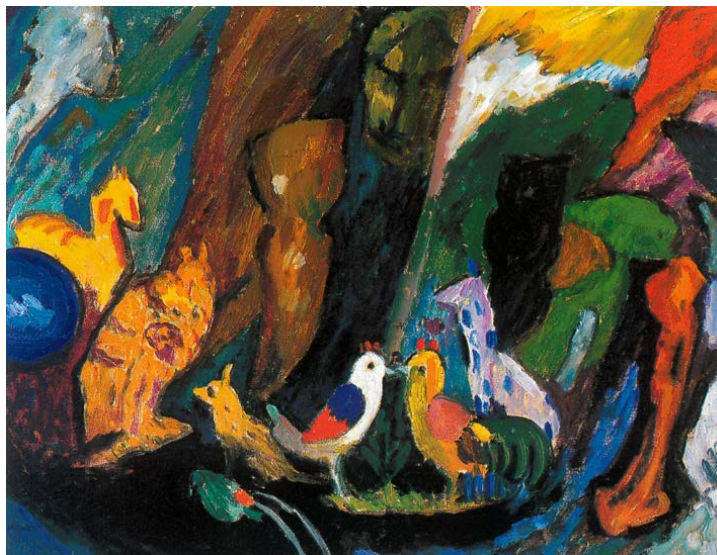
11
See the *Electric Paris* exhibition at
the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown,
17 February to 21 April 2013.

It is interesting to consider this visual experience in the context of what was going on in the world of the theatre: the projection of coloured lights onto backdrops; the swirling coloured fabrics used by pioneering American dancer Loïe Fuller, who began to enjoy success on the Parisian stages in 1892 [fig. 5], constantly innovating in the use of pigments, chemical products¹⁰ and coloured lights; and urban lighting itself. It should be remembered that Paris was one of the first cities to have street lighting,¹¹ and the Steins' apartment was fitted with electric lighting around 1913, when Synchronism was in full swing.

Exhibitions

fig. 6

Gabriele Münter
***Still Life with Little Birds*, 1914**
 Oil on canvas, 60.5 × 78 cm
 Private collection



The Synchronists made their German début at Der Neue Kunstsalon in Munich from 1 to 30 June 1913. The gallery had been founded in October 1912 by Max Dietzel and Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, and closed around September 1914. During its short lifetime it displayed the work of Emil Nolde, Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and another American, Marsden Hartley, among others. The Synchronists' show was preceded by an exhibition of the work of Gabriele Münter, who probably visited that of Russell and Macdonald-Wright. Two of her paintings from that period may have been influenced by the pictures she saw there [fig. 6].¹² The German artist was intensely involved in the activities of the Blue Rider group around that time and collaborated closely with Wassily Kandinsky, who published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in 1911. Münter had spent two years in the United States, from 1898 to 1900, and her command of English facilitated her relationship with artists such as Marsden Hartley, whom she helped introduce to German painters. Both she and her Blue Rider colleagues kept abreast of the novelties from Paris and were in contact with Robert Delaunay. The year the Synchronists made their appearance in Munich, Delaunay showed his work with critical acclaim at the Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon in Berlin, where two pieces by Bruce were also included by arrangement of the Simultanist artist.

12

Annegret Hoberg, 'Gabriele Münter in München und Murnau 1901–1914', in *Gabriele Münter, 1877–1962. Retrospektive* [exh. cat. Lenbachhaus], Munich, Prestel, 1992, 27–46, here 42. I am grateful to Marta Ruiz del Árbol for this reference.

fig. 7

Morgan Russell
Bernheim-Jeune & Cie. Galleries
 exhibition poster, 1913
 Gouache, oil and letterpress printing
 on paper, 84.8 × 51.8 cm
 The Vilcek Foundation Collection,
 VF2015.05.10
 © Courtesy Jean-Pierre Joyce



From 27 October to 8 November 1913, the Bernheim-Jeune gallery hosted a show of 29 Synchronist works, 17 by Russell and 12 by Macdonald-Wright.¹³ Both this and the Munich show were publicised with posters designed by them with a combination of letterpress printing, drawings and gouaches. Macdonald-Wright recalled how the posters, displayed on walls and kiosks, had disappeared the day after they were put up in Munich, as people had taken them away as souvenirs.¹⁴ Three examples are currently known, two of them in the Vilcek Foundation. The one advertising the Paris exhibition [fig. 7] features as a motif a variation on the *Study for Synchrony in Blue-Violet* where, starting from blue, the artist constructs a large inverted S shape with a series of contrasting colour planes and light gradations. This work sums up the movement's principles: evocation of form and space through colour.

13

There is a copy of the catalogue of this exhibition in the library of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid.

14

John Alan Walker, 'Interview: Stanton Macdonald-Wright', in *American Art Review* 1:59 (January–February 1974), cited from Levin, *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction*, n. 1.

fig. 8

Stanton Macdonald-Wright
Conception Life-Cycle Series No. II:
Tinted Sketch for Synchrony
in Blue-Violet, 1914

Watercolour, pen and carbon black
 ink on paper, 58.4 × 44.8 cm

The Vilcek Foundation Collection,
 New York, VF2016.03.13

© Courtesy of the Estate
 of Jean Macdonald-Wright



The media reproduced the messages conveyed by the manifestoes published in the catalogues, though a few expressed their disappointment at the works. They did not always find in them the promised emotion¹⁵ – an emotion that was supposed to be musical according to Macdonald-Wright [fig. 8]. The goal they had set themselves was not completely clear or tangible: to explore in depth the mysterious connections between colour, form and space, and their organic rhythm, density, transparency and luminosity, in order to penetrate reality and transmit the excitement of their discoveries. The self-assurance both artists showed in their results led a few critics to leave it to viewers to decide whether they had succeeded.¹⁶

¹⁵

'Les "Synchronistes" Morgan Russell et S. Macdonald Wright', *La Chronique des Arts et de la Curiosité* 34 (8 November 1913), 269.

¹⁶

Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires, 21 October 1913, 2.

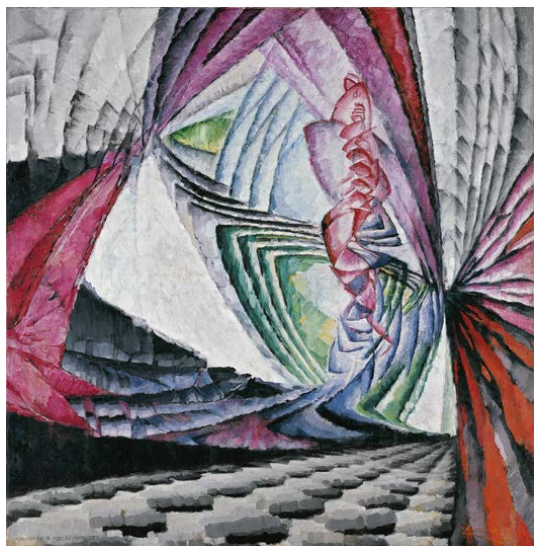


fig. 9

František Kupka

***Localization of Graphic Motifs I*, 1912–13**

Oil on canvas, 200 × 194 cm

Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 634 (1980.55)

[\[+ info\]](#)

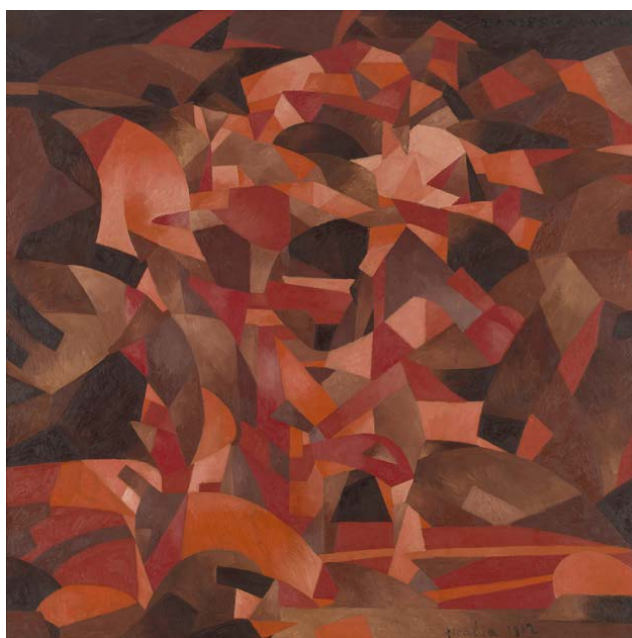
fig. 10 →

Francis Picabia

***Dances at the Spring [II]*, 1912**

Oil on canvas, 251.8 × 248.9 cm

**The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Collection,
given by their family, 1412.1974**



That same year František Kupka showed at the Paris Salon d'automne *Localization of Graphic Motifs I* [fig. 9], now in the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza. Kupka used colour swirls to recreate the vital energy of the universe, which according to his theory was expressed through vibration and radiation. As with Orphism, the visual result was similar to the Synchronists' own experiments. And it is likely that, in his eagerness to set himself apart from Delaunay and his followers, Russell closely observed Kupka's paintings, as well as Francis Picabia's oeuvre.¹⁷ Picabia's *Dances at the Spring [II]* [fig. 10], for example, was displayed in the Section d'Or in 1912, and at the Armory Show in 1913.

¹⁷

Agee and Rose, *Patrick Henry Bruce*, n. 4, 53.

The Synchronists in the United States

Shortly after their Paris show, the Synchronists chose a friendlier environment where odious comparisons were less likely. The Carroll Galleries presented the work of Russell and Macdonald-Wright in March 1914 in a New York still under the influence of the Armory Show and the emergence of European abstract art. In their native country the Synchronists also had the support of critic Willard Huntington Wright (aka S. S. Van Dine), Stanton's brother, who in *Modern Painting, Its Tendency and Meaning*, published in 1915, presented Synchronism as a more advanced movement in pursuit of the purity of art, with colour as the sole expressive element.

The following year, 1916, Macdonald-Wright and his brother promoted the *Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*. The selection committee included influential figures such as Robert Henri, a painter and master of artists such as Edward Hopper and Russell himself, and Alfred Stieglitz, the driving force behind the American avant-garde movements. Their aim was to assert the role of American Modernism in response to the Armory Show, where the European avant-gardes had eclipsed the North American artists. In addition to the two Synchronists, the list of participants in the Forum included Thomas Hart Benton, who was then experimenting with the Synchronist language before becoming one of the main practitioners of American regionalism, and many artists belonging to Stieglitz's circle such as Arthur Dove, Charles Sheeler, Marsden Hartley and John Marin. The catalogue reproduced Macdonald-Wright's 'Statement on Synchronism',¹⁸ in which he stressed the desirable path art should take, following the example of the best modern music, devoid of anecdote and illustration, abstract and purely aesthetic.

Macdonald-Wright showed his work in a one-man exhibition at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery, 291, in 1917, while Russell, who remained in France for most of his life, worked on his designs for a machine that combined light, colour and music. Macdonald-Wright succeeded in building the Sychrome Kineidoscope, a kinetic colour machine, in 1959, six years after Russell died.

¹⁸

Stanton Macdonald-Wright, 'Statement on Synchronism', in *Catalogue of the Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, New York, Anderson Galleries, March 1916.

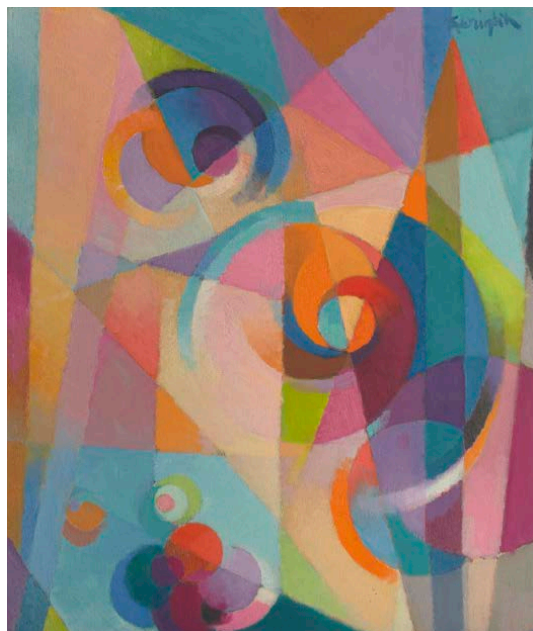


fig. 11

Stanton Macdonald-Wright
Gestation #3, 1963
Oil on panel, 59.7 × 50 cm
The Vilcek Foundation Collection,
New York, VF2016.03.14
 © Courtesy of the Estate
 of Jean Macdonald-Wright

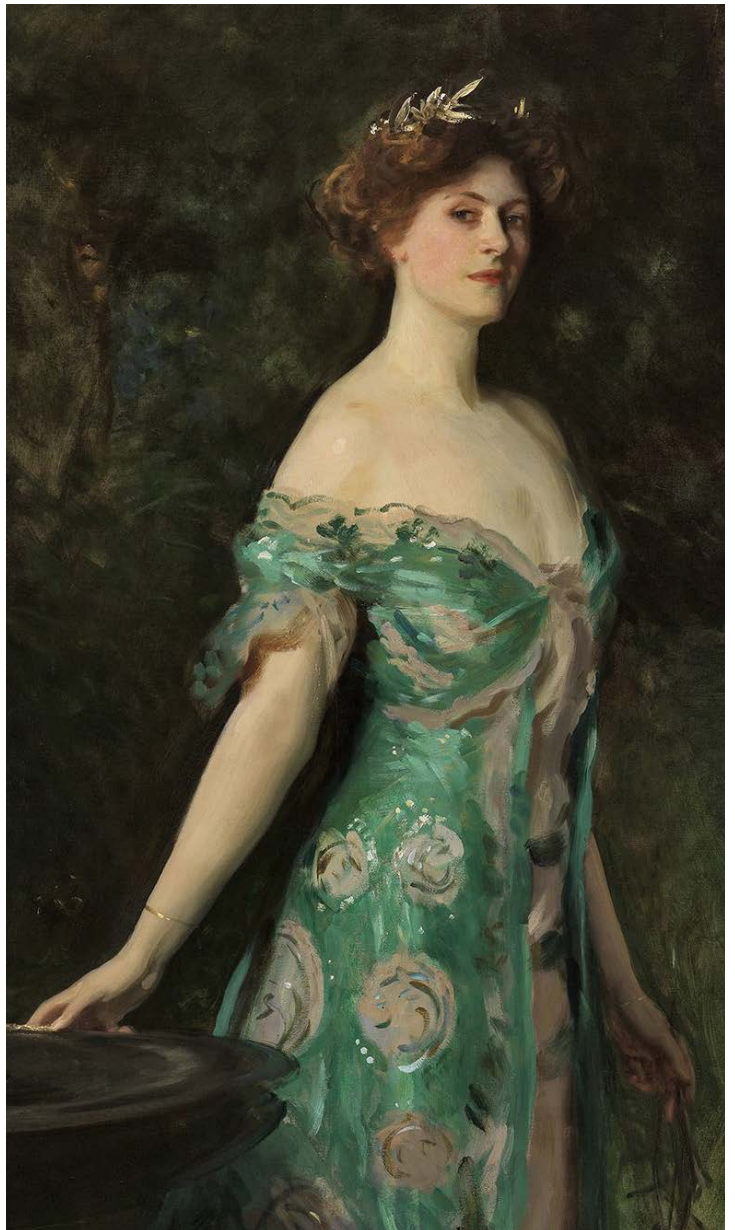
They both returned to figurative painting in the 1920s, putting an end to the heroic years of Synchronism, though they occasionally revisited this language [fig. 11].

In the 1960s, their contributions began to be recalled in a string of exhibitions on American abstract art following the apogee of Abstract Expressionism: *Synchronism and Color Principles in American Painting, 1910–1930*, curated by William C. Agee in 1965 and shown at M. Knoedler and Co.; *From Synchronism Forward: a View of Abstract Art in America*, organised by the American Federation of Arts, which toured the United States from November 1967 to November 1968; and in 1978, *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910–1925*, which Gail Levin staged at the Whitney Museum of American Art after studying Morgan Russell's previously inaccessible archives. The latter exhibition travelled to five other venues in the United States.

Bruce was included in this revival and has commonly been linked to the Synchronists ever since. His progressive isolation in France eventually led him to become virtually unknown in the United States. In the 1930s, Bruce further impeded efforts to study his career by destroying most of his early works, including those closest to Orphism and Synchronism. The term that Russell and Macdonald-Wright had created to avoid being mislabelled ended up precisely being used to mislabel Bruce, though specialist scholars insist it should be avoided. And as Russell did on many occasions, it remains necessary to recall the etymology and correct spelling of this label: Synchronism, from 'syn-' (with) and 'chrome' (colour). ●

Lady Britain: John Singer Sargent's portrait of Duchess Millicent

Alba Campo Rosillo



John Singer Sargent
Portrait of Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, 1904
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

1

Special thanks to Sabena Kull for her suggestions and comments to improve this article.

2

Elizabeth Ewan, Sue Innes, Sian Reynolds and Rose Pipes, eds, *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women: From the Earliest Times to 2004*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 311.

3

Watch the lecture on this portrait given by the museum's artistic director, Guillermo Solana, 'Retratos de Mujer en la Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza: John Singer Sargent: Retrato de Millicent, Duquesa de Sutherland', Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Vimeo, 2009, available at <https://vimeo.com/5056178>.

4

See Alba Campo Rosillo, 'Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza and the Dissemination of American Art', in Paloma Alarcó and Alba Campo Rosillo, *American Art from the Thyssen Collection*, with texts by Clara Marcellán and Marta Ruiz del Árbol, Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2021, 28–39. The baron owned two more paintings by this artist: *Venetian Onion Seller*, c. 1880–82, acquired in 1979 and *Ilex Wood: Majorca*, 1908, purchased in 1997.

In 1904 they had both achieved public recognition, and they came together to craft a genial portrait.¹ She, the sitter, was an esteemed figure in London's social, literary and diplomatic circles. He, the painter, was a consecrated artist who captured on canvas the celebrities in that milieu. At that moment, Lady Millicent Fanny St Clair-Erskine (1867–1955), Duchess of Sutherland since 1892, was a British beauty of 37. Society hostess at large, she was also a writer of short stories and novels (often published under the pen name Erskine Gower), poet, editor and social reformer.² John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), the London society painter who chronicled British aristocracy through portraits, was an acclaimed American artist of 48, as well as a gifted pianist and an amateur architect. Both spoke several languages – including English, French, Italian and German – and the two were charismatic figures who jointly engineered an iconic portrait of the duchess [fig. 1].³ It is hardly surprising that Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, a cosmopolite, avid art collector and successful entrepreneur, should have felt attracted to this masterpiece of public self-fashioning, an art he mastered himself.⁴

The formal composition of the painting references the tradition of 18th-century portraiture and calls up two previous portraits by Sargent in which the artist imbued the works with his persona [figs. 6, 7]. But this was more than just an art manifesto; it was also a political declaration of intentions in which Anglo-French relations shone in the context of British imperialism. Great Britain, the third and last country where Sargent established his residence, was crucial in re-launching his career. Moreover, the British art establishment quickly claimed the artist as a full British citizen. The duchess was a modern, progressive woman whose initiative enabled her to forge her own path. I would like to argue that this portrait rooted the duchess in a traditional female role to appease jealous sexist criticism. Together with the exaltations of Britishness in her travelogue and the symbols of British might in the portrait, Duchess Millicent appealed to national pride, veiling her career achievements to advance her convictions.



fig. 1
John Singer Sargent
Portrait of Millicent,
Duchess of Sutherland, 1904
Oil on canvas, 254 × 146 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, 732 (1983.12)

The goddess of the woods

Duchess Millicent was certainly special. Renowned for her beauty, charm and militancy as much as for her literary talent, she was seen as a force of nature. Moreover, her long slim body, hazel eyes and copper hair secured her a place among the six best-looking Londonites of her time.⁵ When she became Duchess of Sutherland, she rose in the ranks of London's social circles as a cherished hostess who brought to her new quarters in Stafford House a wealth of warmth and wit. Besides turning her residence into a diplomatic centre, she took to more activist endeavours, fighting the causes of the Lifeboat Association, the Veterinary Relief, the Inverness Sanatorium, the Scottish Home Industries, the Potteries' Cripples' Guild, the Scheme for the Encouragement of the Kindly Treatment of Animals and the British Women's Temperance Association.⁶ By 1901, the passion with which she pursued these philanthropies – among the potters, for instance, she contested the use of poisonous lead in the glazing process – gained her the nickname 'Meddlesome Millie'.⁷ Celebrated for her good looks and despised for her activism, Duchess Millicent's reception functioned as a thermometer of the period's disposition toward ambitious women like herself.

In the portrait, Duchess Millicent is presented as a goddess of the woods. Silhouetted against an indistinct green and brown mass of vegetation that almost completely covers the sky, her figure stands out. Both her shimmering dress and her glowing skin draw visual attention to her. She wears a silver laurel wreath and a copper green gown with a floral pattern in pink and a low neckline. In her left hand she holds a willow branch, while her right arm is turned outward as her hand softly caresses the edge of the fountain basin. She is posing on a path lined by thick foliage, which blocks the lower part of a pedestal supporting a female bust. The floral dress and bay leaf tiara in her hair together with the sylvan setting in which she stands present her as an individual in communion with nature. The luminosity of her skin and the glimmer of her wreath introduce the idea of her person as a magical being, a divinity with creative powers of some sort.

⁵ Denis Stuart, *Dear Duchess: Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, 1867–1955*, London, Gollancz, 1982, 54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 57, 105.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.



fig. 2
Stephen Crane
Frontispiece for Millicent Sutherland,
The Winds of the World, London,
William Heinemann, 1902

By the time Sargent painted her, Millicent was a renowned author. In 1889 she had published *How I Spent my Twentieth Year*, a travelogue of her tour around the world. In her literary pursuits she cultivated many genres, including novel, short story, poetry, drama, journalism and, in 1892, poetry, with 'Lines Dedicated to Those Who Mourn Their Dead in the Wrecks of the Bokhara, Roumania, and Scotch Express'. By 1899 she had written another novel, *One Hour and the Next*, followed in 1902 by a collection of short stories, *The Winds of the World*. Subsequent to the time she sat for Sargent, she edited the volume of contemporary poetry *The Wayfarer's Love* in 1904, published the musical libretto *The Conqueror* in 1905, and in 1914 narrated her *Six Weeks at the War*. Her written publications are nowhere to be seen in the portrait. I contend that this was an intentional move to make her public persona more palatable, and that all references to her literary genius are veiled in classical or symbolic iconography.

Many of Duchess Millicent's published works allude to nature, either directly in the text or through the illustrations that adorn them. In *The Winds of the World*, for instance, a visionary collection of seven tragic stories that look into themes of passion, dreams and fate, the duchess's literary talent is matched by the artistic prowess of Stephen Crane, who designed the frontispiece of the book [fig. 2]. In the centre, a man and a woman embrace as if to protect themselves from the four winged women who blow large horns as they spread the winds referenced in the book's title. The illustration shows these creatures floating in the air, their majestic wings spread out as they turn to face the couple. Each fantastical being wears her hair in a different way: the figure portrayed upside down has a long straight mane floating upwards; the one to her left has thicker straight hair held back with an Egyptian-looking hair band; the character at the bottom has wavy tresses crowned with a floral wreath; and the one closing the circle has short frizzy hair. Unlike the hugging couple, these beings merge with the natural background in which the fringes of their wings echo the leafy shapes of the trees. The wreath blending with the surroundings worn by the woman at bottom reappears in the duchess's portrait, as if she was embodying in her likeness the power to blow the worldly winds.

8

Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010, 4, 1.

9

Vernon Lee, *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life*, London, New York, J. Lane, 1909, 4.

10

Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *Diccionario de los símbolos*, Barcelona, Herder, 2018, 972; Federico Revilla, *Diccionario de iconografía y simbología*, Madrid, Cátedra, 2007, 388; James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, with an introduction by Kenneth Clark, London, John Murray, 1974, 190.

11

Revilla, *Diccionario de iconografía*, n. 10, 600.

12

Ibid., 580.

13

Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Diccionario de los símbolos*, n. 10, 1416.

Sargent's portrait evinces the link between literature and nature in Duchess Millicent's self-fashioning. Alison Syme observes that like many fellow artists from the 19th century, Sargent believed in the role of the 'artist-as-pollinator' and 'artist-as-plant'. She argues that 'a poetics of vegetal creation became central to literature and the visual arts.'⁸ In the likeness, the wreath worn by the duchess is made of laurel. The species used to make it was probably *Laurus nobilis*, the title used by Sargent's friend Violet Paget – whose nom de plume was Vernon Lee – for the sixth volume of her *Chapters on Art and Life*, which included an essay on 'The Use of Beauty' (1909). In it Paget extols the many benefits of bay leaves and describes them 'as a symbol of what we have no word to express; the aggregate of all art, all poetry, and particularly of all poetic and artistic vision and emotion'.⁹ Precisely because of its evergreen character, the laurel tree represents immortality, which explains its use in antiquity to crown heroes, geniuses and the wise.¹⁰ Connected to this, Duchess Millicent's way of grasping a willow branch in the manner one holds a pen when writing makes reference to her literary undertakings. The willow tree evokes nostalgia, melancholy, death and immortality,¹¹ and thus stands for her written legacy. The duchess's accomplishments in the world of letters also appear to be commemorated by the bust on the pedestal behind her, which, having a female face, suggests that her written legacy would outlive her for posterity.

The portrait of Duchess Millicent echoes themes found in another Sargent painting from 1885–86, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, both participating in the same modern take on sentimentality [fig. 3]. The flowers in the painting surrounding the girls connect with the roses on the duchess's dress. A rose, once shorn of its thorns, is a privileged symbol of the Virgin Mary, an allegory of love and silence.¹² Besides this, the willow's graceful shape and evergreen character represents female fertility, a theme that links the two works.¹³ As in the duchess's gown, the flowers permeating the earlier canvas enfold the little girls and recreate a world of innocence and fragility around them.



fig. 3

John Singer Sargent
***Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, 1885–86**
Oil on canvas, 174 × 153.7 cm
Tate Britain, London, Presented
by the Trustees of the Chantrey
Bequest 1887, N01615

14

Rebecca Bailey Bedell, *Moved to Tears: Rethinking the Art of the Sentimental in the United States*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018, 144–45.

15

'The picture was bought for the Tate Gallery in 1887, under the terms of the Chantrey bequest, largely at the insistence of the Royal Academy President, Sir Frederic Leighton. A portrait by Sargent of Mrs Barnard (1885), made at the same time as *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, is also in the Tate (Tate Gallery N05901)', in Terry Riggs, 'Summary: *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*', Tate Britain, 1998, available at <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sargent-carnation-lily-lily-rose-n01615>.

Sargent, an avant-garde aesthete, despised conventionality and bourgeois appeasement, two elements linked to the culture of the sentimental. But as Rebecca Bedell has convincingly argued, he engaged with sentimentality in this work, in which the evanescence of childhood imbues the painting with 'a tenderly poignant nostalgia'. Bedell associates the sentimental with the portraits of children by Joshua Reynolds and the Pre-Raphaelite artists, and states that this was 'the most sentimental of all [Sargent's] paintings'.¹⁴ This is significant given that Sargent exhibited the work at the Royal Academy in 1887, only a year after having moved to England. Tate Britain acquired it that same year, consolidating Sargent's fame in Great Britain, his country of adoption. The title derives from the 18th-century song 'The Wreath', which once again connects the portrait of poet Millicent with the poetic painting of the girls.¹⁵

Among titans

Sargent's portrait of Duchess Millicent used an old-fashioned framework to cloak the ambitious and outspoken character of the sitter. As period criticism described it, the likeness provoked the same pleasure as those signed by Thomas Gainsborough, George Romney or Sir Joshua Reynolds.¹⁶ The latter was the greatest British portrait painter of his day, president of the Royal Academy of Art between 1768 and 1792. During his long tenure, Reynolds set the ground for the art to come and, in particular, for portrait painting. He delivered a total of 15 lectures, each one on the occasion of the Academy's annual prize-giving ceremony, offering priceless advice to students. His *Discourses on Art* established that grace in portraiture 'consists more in taking the general air than in observing the exact similitude of every feature'.¹⁷ Moreover, he stated that 'if a portrait-painter is desirous to raise and improve his subject [...] [he] changes the dress from a temporary fashion to one more permanent'.¹⁸ This Reynolds called the 'Historical Style', which is 'neither an exact minute representation of an individual, nor completely ideal'.¹⁹ Finally, he argued that this style was to infuse 'this contracted subject' with 'large ideas'.²⁰ Reynolds enhanced the art of portrait painting by appealing to the atemporal and the conceptual.

As witnessed in Duchess Millicent's portrait, the Historical Style advocated the transformation of sitters into divinities or allegorical figures. More than a century earlier, Reynolds painted the portrait of *Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse* [fig. 4] with Sarah (Kemble) Siddons seated in front of the representations of comedy and tragedy. Duchess Millicent's laurel wreath associates her with the god Apollo and with the allegorical figures of Clio, Immortality, Eternal Felicity, Strength, Glory and Poetry.²¹ Besides linking the sitter with these divine, conceptual figures, Millicent's likeness also underlines her grandeur. As in the portrait of Lady Jane Halliday [fig. 5], where Reynolds depicted the sitter as a wind goddess commanding the natural elements in the landscape, Sargent renders the duchess larger than life, with a disproportionately elongated body to evoke her exceptional nature. Also like Lady Halliday, the duchess appears to operate wonders in the portrait: from her left hand grows a willow branch and from her right a golden light emanates, illuminating the edge of the water fountain. Duchess Millicent is not only dazzling, she literally dazzles.

¹⁶ 'Art Notes', *14th Exhibition, Royal Society of Portrait Painters*, London, 1904, 530.

¹⁷ Joshua Reynolds, 'Discourse IV', in Robert R. Wark, *Discourses on Art*, New Haven, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (London), Yale University Press, 1997, 59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁹ 'Discourse V', in *ibid.*, 88.

²⁰ 'Discourse XI', in *ibid.*, 200.

²¹ Ester Lels, *Personifications & Symbols: An Index to H.F. Gravelot and C.N. Cochin's Iconologie par Figures*, Leiden, MarePress, 2011.



fig. 4
Joshua Reynolds
Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse,
 c. 1784-89
 Oil on canvas, 240 × 148 cm
 The Huntington Library, Art Museum
 and Botanical Gardens, San Marino



fig. 5
Joshua Reynolds
Lady Jane Halliday, 1779
 Oil on canvas, 238.7 × 148.5 cm
 Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire

²²
 'Titania', *Encyclopedia Britannica*,
 18 March 2011, available at [https://
 www.britannica.com/topic/Titania-
 fictional-character](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Titania-fictional-character).

There is a compelling connection between the duchess's figure and one of the characters created by the greatest Anglo-Saxon writer of all times, William Shakespeare. In *Midsummer's Night Dream*, Titania, queen of the fairies, becomes entangled in a series of romantic misunderstandings which are finally resolved thanks to her husband's magic. Titania resembles the goddess Hera.²² In Greek mythology, Hera, as the wife of Zeus, was queen of the gods and goddess of women, marriage, family and childbirth, in sum, of love unions and fertility. The many iconographic elements already discussed and their common symbology representing fertility and immortality firmly establish the link between Duchess Millicent and Titania as female figures with magic powers. Titania was Shakespeare's genial way of interlocking Greek mythology with British lore; Duchess Millicent's portrait, Sargent's way of depicting not only a superwoman, but a British superwoman.

Sargent's painting of the duchess exudes the same ambition as two other equally stunning works: the portraits of Dr Samuel-Jean Pozzi and Madame Pierre Gautreau [figs. 6, 7], which have been regarded by scholars as pictorial reflections on the art of portraiture.²³ Conceptually, all three are Historical Style pieces that render the subject in a grand manner, with little detail to indicate time or place. Formally, Duchess Millicent shares with Dr Pozzi a pyramidal shape created through the use of a diagonal line, in his case introduced by the right slipper, in hers by the edge of the dress underneath the fountain. Moreover, both sitters are rendered in a dominant palette, red in the case of Pozzi, who is surrounded by scarlet curtains, carpet and clothing; green and brown in that of Duchess Millicent, where the hues of nature are echoed by her dress. Regarding Madame X, her likeness set a precedent for scandal when Sargent painted a seductively fallen dress strap on the sitter's right arm. Public uproar forced the artist to paint the strap on her shoulder, but this was not enough for Parisian society to pardon Sargent, and he ended up having to move to London. Both female sitters appear standing with their right hand touching the circular surface of a prop occupying the same space in the painting. But beyond being a portrait sitter and a customer for Sargent, Duchess Millicent was a fellow artist, a British muse and an immortal goddess. Through her portrait Sargent reiterated ideas and patterns that make it possible to insert his art in the history of grand portraiture of the British school. After painting the duchess's image in 1904, Sargent continued cultivating his fame as the best living portrait painter, while Millicent carried on promoting her celebrity grandly.²⁴

23

Juliet Bellow, 'The Doctor Is in: John Singer Sargent's *Dr. Pozzi at Home*', *American Art* 26:2 (2012), 42–67; and Susan Sidlauskas, 'Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent's *Madame X*', *American Art* 15:3 (2001), 8–33.

24

In the catalogue of the Anglo-American Exposition held at White City in London in 1914, Sargent was celebrated as America's 'greatest living artist'. See Lewis C. Hind, *Illustrated Catalogue of the American Fine Art Section: Anglo-American Exposition, 1914*, London, Art Museums Galleries, 1914, 13–21; reproduced in Barbara Dayer Gallati, 'Sargent in London, 1889–1913', in *Sargent: Portraits of Artists and Friends*, ed. Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, London, National Portrait Gallery, 2015, 126.

fig. 6 ↓

John Singer Sargent
Dr Pozzi at Home, 1881
Oil on canvas, 201.6 × 102.2 cm
The Armand Hammer Collection,
Gift of the Armand Hammer
Foundation, Hammer Museum,
Los Angeles



fig. 7 ↑

John Singer Sargent
Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau),
1883–84
Oil on canvas, 208.6 × 109.9 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York, Arthur Hoppock Hearn
Fund, 1916, 16.53

Building empires

Duchess Millicent was a cosmopolite acquainted with world politics, an aspect that is lost in her portrait. The natural setting in which she poses isolates her in the microcosm of a desirable world, the gardens of Stafford House built by Benjamin Wyatt on Berkeley Square in 1820. The thick foliage creates a dark netting that separates the duchess from the modern city that was London, and from the social circles in which she caused a furor. Painted *sotto-in-su* to elongate her tall figure, she appears as the magical queen of her empty territory.

But the Duchess of Sutherland was much more than a nature deity, as the painting would have us believe. She was an engaged citizen with political views of her own. In her travels around the world between 1886 and 1887 she visited India, Burma, Australia, China, Japan, the United States and Canada. In this list, the countries that at the time were, or had previously been, part of the British Empire carry considerable weight. In her travelogue she described Hong Kong as a 'Celestial Empire' and Delhi as a ruined place after having been a flourishing land. She then went on to reflect:

India is certainly a delightful country [...]. The position of Viceroy must be a tremendously responsible one, for literally he is an autocrat, and the good and evil of millions of people are entirely in his hands. The present Viceroy also stands at a disadvantage, the country from a financial point of view being at its poorest [...]. For years past, natives have been receiving as good an education as any Englishman; and consequently they are clamouring for more authority in the management of affairs. These requests are certainly quite reasonable, but untold obstacles stand in the way of granting them [...]. Besides all this, there is always a threatening of Russian invasion; and in a smaller degree the interference of China and France. There is no doubt that at present the country is governed wisely, and the people are at their happiest [...]. Were they left to themselves, and were England not so strenuous in her efforts to keep all classes together by a firm and just rule, Mohammedans would clash with Hindoos; the native princes would arise and strive to extend their dominions; the foreign Powers would be the first to discover and take advantage of our weaknesses – and in a very short time *the greatest empire in the world* would fall into decay.²⁵

In this passage, Duchess Millicent comments on world politics and boasts British might in a chauvinistic fashion unexpected in a cosmopolitan person like herself. Perhaps the fact that she was 20 years old when she wrote it accounts for her naiveté.

Back in England, the duchess moved in elite social, political and intellectual circles such as The Souls, an aristocratic 'gang', as they commonly referred to themselves, which began with the Balfour, Lyttleton, Tennent and Wyndham families and grew through their connections.²⁶ Sargent also had acquaintances in this group, as attested by the portrait of the Wyndham sisters he painted in 1899.²⁷ The society dinners of these groups offered the perfect opportunity to make new connections that resulted in sources of patronage. As Julia Rayer Rolfe explains, 'the ideal society dinner party at the beginning of the twentieth century would have consisted of a combination of aristocrats, politicians, and businessmen, leavened with a few intellectuals and a popular artist, ornamented with a society beauty, or a woman renowned for her wit, and definitely including a musician who would have been expected to perform after dinner'. Sargent was a fine pianist and he often accepted dinner invitations where a musician performed.²⁸ The duchess was active too among the members of the Marlborough House set, a social clique of fashionable people that gathered at the court of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, at Marlborough House.²⁹ Clearly, Sargent and Duchess Millicent moved in interconnected British social circles and likely corresponded in their artistic and literary interests.

Remarkably, the duchess's worldliness and intellectual cultivation are missing from the portrait that crafted her public persona. To offer a compelling contrast, the portrait of Dr Horatio C. Wood [fig. 8], painted by Sargent's fellow American artist Thomas Eakins, presents the sitter in a pensive attitude surrounded by the tools of his trade, his written oeuvre.³⁰ This is one of a series of portraits Eakins started making in 1886 to capture Philadelphia's intelligentsia. The work could not differ more from that of Duchess Millicent, in which there are

26

'The Souls', National Portrait Gallery, <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/group/1230/The%20Souls>.

27

John Singer Sargent, *The Wyndham Sisters: Lady Elcho, Mrs Adeane and Mrs Tennant*, 1899, oil on canvas, 292.1 × 213.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1927, 27.67.

28

Julia Rayer Rolfe, 'Sargent and Lady Agnew', in J. Rolfe et al., *The Portrait of a Lady: Sargent and Lady Agnew*, Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland, 1997, 30.

29

Duchess Millicent inherited her title from an original trustee of the circle. See Jane Ridley, 'Marlborough House set (act. 1870s–1901)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, available online at <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-53154>.

30

Kathleen A. Foster, 'Portraits of Teachers and Thinkers', in *Thomas Eakins*, ed. Darrel Sewel and Kathleen A. Foster, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001, 95–106, 307–15.



fig. 8

Thomas Eakins
Dr Horatio C. Wood, 1886
Oil on canvas, 162.6 × 127 cm
Detroit Institute of Arts, City
of Detroit Purchase, 30.296

neither books nor writing tools, the latter only hinted at by the way in which she grasps a twig, which is akin to the manner in which one holds a pen. As I have argued, the portrait downplayed the duchess's active role in public life to make her more acceptable. By diminishing her intellectual achievements, 'Meddlesome Millie' the activist and published author disappeared from the plane of real life and entered the realm of magic.

But Duchess Millicent's political ideas matter significantly in the context of international relations at the time she sat for the portrait. In April 1904, the United Kingdom and the French Republic signed the geopolitical inter-imperial agreement of the Entente Cordiale to foster Anglo-French collaboration. The intent of the pact was to recognise each other's colonial territories and stop their rivalry for African land. The Entente alienated Germany and set the stage for the two fronts in WWI: the Triple Entente between France, Britain and Russia, and the Triple Alliance between Germany, Italy and Austro-Hungary. Duchess Millicent and Sargent were Francophiles. An American expatriate born in Italy and educated in France, Sargent's cosmopolitanism conflicted and even enraged many in the fin de siècle British art establishment, who wanted to present him as a local artist when exhibiting in international expositions. The conflict exploded when American art critics claimed Sargent as a rightful US citizen in the age of American imperialism. In 1904, Theodore Roosevelt extended the Monroe Doctrine's sphere from the Western Hemisphere to the global stage.³¹ The year in which Sargent painted the portrait Western imperialism was at its peak.

31

See Linda J. Docherty, "'Why Not a National Art?': Affirmative Responses in the 1890s", in *Paris 1900: The 'American School' at the Universal Exposition*, ed. Diane P. Fischer, New Jersey and New Brunswick, Montclair Art Museum, 2000, 96–99.



fig. 9

John Singer Sargent
***The Duchess of Sutherland*, c. 1904**
 Oil on canvas, 86.3 × 73.6 cm
 Private collection

32

Amalia Maureta Checa and Carmen del Ojo Carrera, *La moda femenina en los retratos del Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza*, Madrid, Letras de Autor, 2016.

33

David Cannadine, 'The British Aristocracy in the Age of Sargent', in Rolfe et al., *The Portrait of a Lady*, n. 28, 48–50.

34

Charles Merrill Mount, *John Singer Sargent: A Biography*, London, Cresset Press, 1957, 243.

35

Cannadine, 'The British Aristocracy', n. 33, 48–50.

36

Between 1914 and 1918 the duchess directed a hospital unit called the Millicent Sutherland Ambulance. Duchess Millicent received the French Croix de Guerre, the Belgian Royal Red Cross medal, and the British Royal Red Cross for her war services to these three countries. Ewan, Innes, Reynolds and Pipes, *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, n. 2, 311. Read her war memory, Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, *Six Weeks at the War*, Chicago, A.C. McClurg & Co., 1915.

37

When they were both deceased in 1892, the Fairmount Park Commissioners were appointed the trustees of the collection.

The landed gentry and aristocracy found it difficult to deal with the political tensions and bleak reality of modern life. Rather than come to terms with contemporary events, this elite retreated into the frivolous existence for which the period was named the Belle Époque. Luxury and conspicuous display were all the rage at social dinners and balls in country houses.³² Soon after this interval of 'splendour' languished, so did Sargent's best portrait years. With the progressive sale of large tracts of land to obtain the funds needed to pay for the luxuries of its extravagant lifestyle, this un-landed class also lost its power in urban democracy. What David Cannadine argues is that Sargent painted grand, refined portraits in the early 1900s to provide reassurance to the vanishing aristocracy.³³ Tellingly, the end of this golden age of portrait painting came in 1907, when Sargent abruptly exclaimed: 'Paughtraits [sic], ask me to paint [...] your fences [...], which I would gladly do, but not the human face'.³⁴ Tired of making likenesses, Sargent stopped painting large canvases in oil and from that moment on only made quick charcoal-drawn portraits, besides devoting himself to painting landscapes. During the course of WWI (1914–18) many aristocrats lost their lives in action: their palaces and art collections passed to the hands of plutocratic wealth, and the Belle Époque vanished, as had the aristocratic fortunes.³⁵ Once the conflict was over, Duchess Millicent sold her majestic painting, keeping a smaller bust portrait which Sargent had also painted in 1904 [fig. 9]. With this, the duchess divorced herself from her pre-war public persona.³⁶

Sitter and artist experienced a reunion of sorts in 1922, when following the fall of the aristocracy and the sale of its goods, the duchess's portrait went to hang with another Sargent likeness. The painting entered the Anna H. and William P. Wilstach Collection³⁷ and was put on view in the



fig. 10
John Singer Sargent
Lady Eden, 1906
Oil on canvas, 110.6 × 86.5 cm
Philadelphia Museum of Art,
Purchased with the W. P. Wiltach
Fund, 1920, W1920-2-1

Philadelphia Museum of Art.³⁸ Through the purchase and display of art, the original collectors and their trustees sought to provide a 'source of pleasure and the means of cultivation and refinement of the tastes of the people, be pure in sentiment, and never minister to vulgarity and vice'.³⁹ In this enlightened quest, Sargent's portrait of Duchess Millicent joined that of Lady Eden, painted in 1906 [fig. 10]. The typology of the pictures differs greatly: Eden is sitting and playing cards, Millicent is standing and directing the natural elements at her will; Eden is indoors, Millicent outdoors; Eden looks away, Millicent stares at the viewer. What they share is their freshness and the majestic approach that makes the sitters appear as supernatural beings.

Sargent's monumental portrait of Duchess Millicent presents her as an extraordinary creature: she is larger than life, controls the natural elements and wears the crown of a queen or goddess. Yet, the reason why such a character would have been extraordinary is unclear, if not literally invisible. The duchess's youthful chauvinism, although polished by the cosmopolitanism of her mature years, shines through in the painting's appeal to British cultural and portrait traditions of the past. Her philanthropic activism and literary production are substantiated into the marks of her fabulous character: she is ambitious and does not shy away from it. As in the portraits of Dr Pozzi and Madame X, in the likeness of Duchess Millicent Sargent crafted a new masterpiece in which he fashioned a modern woman that her age would not only accept but also celebrate as an example of 'cultivation and refinement'. It is remarkable that Lady Millicent should have parted with such a masterpiece. Maybe the experience of WWI drove her to recant her imperialist views in an attitude that clashed with the ideas expressed in the portrait. Duchess Millicent was an intellectual heroine and her willing separation from the portrait only confirms this fact. ●

38

For more information on its provenance, see Alba Campo Rosillo, 'Provenance', in Alarcó and Campo Rosillo, *American Art from the Thyssen Collection*, n. 4, 267.

39

Catalogue of the W.P. Wiltach Collection, Philadelphia, Fairmount Park, 1922, xvii.

Looking and being looked at: Richard Estes's telephone cabins

Paula Pérez Arias



Richard Estes
Telephone Booths, 1967
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

Richard Estes's *Telephone Booths* [fig. 1] is an urban scene with four occupied phone cabins in the foreground. Around them and reflected on them we catch glimpses of buildings, shops, signs and motor vehicles – recognisable by their yellow colour as taxis – and other features typical of modern life in New York. Further in the distance it is possible to make out several passers-by and a few mannequins in shop windows, and towering behind them, forming a sort of backdrop, buildings so tall that their façades and roofs extend beyond the upper edge of the support. The most striking aspect of the cityscape is the play of reflections, some of which are clearly defined (on the glass) and others deformed (on the metal surfaces). These mirrorings play a major role in a composition made up of vertical and horizontal lines arranged in grid-like fashion and crowded with details in a sort of *horror vacui* meant to capture a moment in bustling Manhattan, only to distort it in a play of reflections and dualisms.

Now part of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection of American art, this spectacular view of New York was acquired by Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza from the Andrew Crispo Gallery in 1977. Two years earlier he had purchased Estes's *People's Flowers* (1971), and several years later, in 1996, its current owner, Carmen Thyssen, bought *Nedick's* (1970). In addition to these paintings, the baron's descendants own a further two works by the artist: *Self-Portrait near the Oculus at World Trade Center* [fig. 4] and *Hotel Lucerne (Phone-Phone)* (1976). All of these works provide an X-ray of American society of the day, earning the artist immediate recognition for his seemingly naïve and objective manner of capturing the essence of his time.¹

Telephone Booths was painted toward the end of the 1960s, a decade marked by the Cold War in which the United States headed the Western capitalist bloc. The American people feared the outbreak of a nuclear war, espionage and, in general, the presence of foreigners. During those years America was also involved in the Vietnam War (1955–75), which triggered anti-war demonstrations all over the country.

¹

Richard Estes had his first solo exhibition at the Allan Stone Gallery in 1968. The gallery devoted several more shows to him until 1978. After that, museums the world over took the baton, staging exhibitions of his work up to the present day.



fig. 1
Richard Estes
Telephone Booths, 1967
Acrylic on masonite, 122 × 175.3 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, inv. 539 (1977.93)

2
Estrella de Diego, 'Contaminaciones (norte)americanas', in *La pintura de los Estados Unidos de América en el Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza*, Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2012, available at [Contaminaciones \(norte\) americanas](#) by Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza - Issuu.

3
Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

It was a time of great social tension heightened by the many protest marches in favour of civil rights. Reported stories of 'us' and 'them'² masked the constant political conflicts, which were in turn fuelled by conspiracy theories triggered by the McCarthyism of the previous decade. In this context, the painting offers a unique perspective of a polarised nation where the act of gazing becomes crucial amid myriad visual challenges.³

Urban still life

Telephone Booths is an urban still life, a hybrid genre that shuns traditional domestic settings and instead reproduces city features that take on specific meanings, as they do here, to present the metropolis as the backdrop for consumer society. Although Estes's paintings are usually regarded as landscapes, they contain a number of still-life references. Their ability to create a particular atmosphere in a given space links them with Photorealism, despite the artist's reluctance to be associated with this movement. They also share ties, albeit frail ones, with Pop Art, the movement that ushered in a return to figurative painting after two decades of abstraction and whose artists appropriated various references from everyday life. Pop still life infuses objects with new connotations, besides granting them the status of art.⁴ In this picture Estes borrows visual allusions to Pop culture to represent the city. Within the wealth of information rendered in painstaking detail, a distinction can be drawn between objects and signs, the legacy of classical still-life scenes. Both act as symbolic references in the work.⁵

In the painting there are more than a dozen signs, some legible and others indecipherable, but all there for a common purpose: they function as logos. Each alludes to a shop, a brand or a particular symbol that spectators recognise as part of the culture of their time. Prominent among them is the marquee sign of Macy's, one of the biggest chains of department stores in the United States. Macy's was founded in 1858 and expanded all over the country in the 1920s. Its flagship store, built in 1902 in New York at the corner of Broadway and 34th Street, is the one that appears in the picture. It was and is a city landmark. The fact that the phone booths are located at the intersection of streets opposite the store explains why it is possible to see a profusion of yellow cabs both reflected in the metal, as if they were passing in front of them, and through the transparent glass, driving along the street behind them.

4

See Paloma Alarcó, *Pop Art Myths* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2014.

5

These pictograms recall the type of code language employed by spies and, together with the people in raincoats, recreate a scene that seems to be taken from a comic strip. This figure has been linked to phone booths in the popular imaginary ever since.

6

Paloma Alarcó and Alba Campo Rosillo, *American Art from the Thyssen Collection* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2021, 155–65.

Estes used lettered signs, most of which are reflected in the upper part of the phone cabins, to represent the social mass.⁶ It is these signs that speak to us about the type of places they occupy and where the city's inhabitants go.

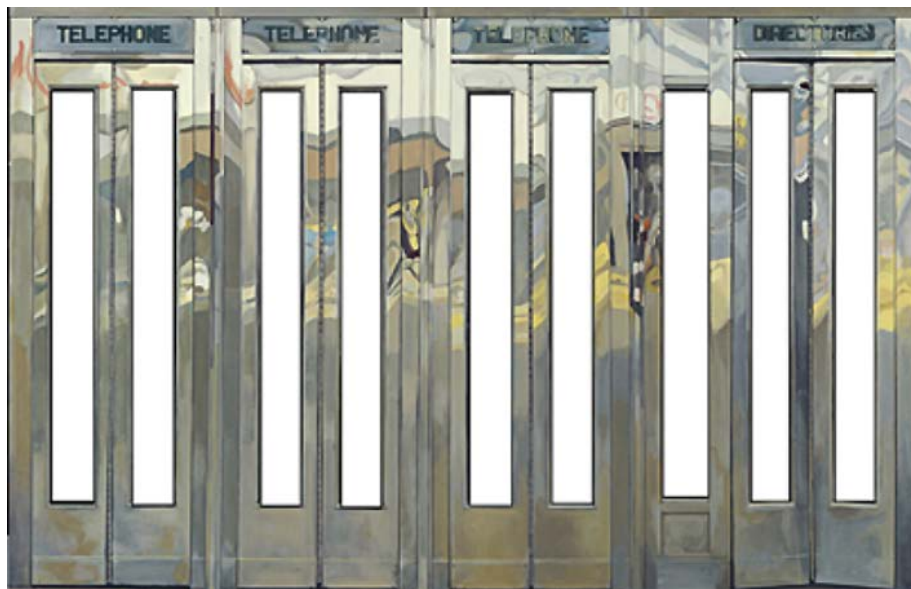


fig. 2
Detail of reflections in a digitally
manipulated image of *Telephone
Booths*

⁷
'Gaze sliding' is the term used by Nico Orengo to describe the oil and acrylic paint Estes uses to achieve the reflective quality in his works. See Sandro Parmiggiani and Guillermo Solana, *Richard Estes* [exh. cat. Reggio Emilia, Palazzo Magnani; Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza], Milan, Skira, 2007, 175.

⁸
According to Karl Marx's fetishisation theory, objects take on an active and independent value while people are objectified and turned into consumer items in Pop Art still life.

If we block out the areas of the picture outside the metal structure of the booths, the resulting image is made up solely of reflections [fig. 2]. These are not separate representations; together they form an overall view that extends across the cabins and features taxis, mannequins and even a traffic light.⁷ This distorted representation of the reflected signs and objects is part of a visual game that vividly conveys the city's atmosphere but also causes bewilderment, since the warped imitation of reality prevents us from distinguishing between object, transparency and reflection.

Together with the reflections mentioned above, the elements in the picture act as signifiers of the urban still life. Take the people and mannequins, for instance, both of which function as objects in the picture. Their purpose is to reproduce the social mass and present the contemporary city as a consumerist dreamland.⁸

9

See Marcia Castillo, 'La construcción de Venus: fragmentación, montaje y despersonalización del cuerpo femenino en la estética vanguardista', in *Representación, construcción, e interpretación de la imagen visual de las mujeres*, Madrid, Achiviana, 2003, 439–56; and Sabina Daniela Stent, 'Women Surrealists: Sexuality, Fetish, Femininity and Female Surrealism' [PhD diss.], Birmingham, University of Birmingham, 2011.

10

Rémy G. Saisselin, 'Still-Life Paintings in a Consumer Society', in *Leonardo* 9:3 (summer 1976), 197–203.

11

Michael Lobel, *Tom Wesselmann*, New York, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2016.

12

To learn more about the male gaze, see Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 1989.

13

Fetish objects are desirable products in that they create an unreal sensation of wellbeing when acquired. Advertising is responsible for this idealised view of objects, to the point of attributing them erotic and sexual qualities in advertisements to make them more appealing. Similarly, the people objectified by advertising also become fetish objects as they display similar qualities.

Mannequins were conspicuously present in avant-garde art, particularly in the works of the Surrealist artists, who used them to depict anonymous, alienated citizens. In Surrealist art, the figure of the mannequin reduces humans to mere lifeless articulable objects, and their presence alludes to the spectator's status as voyeur.⁹ As automatons they bring to mind the still life depicted in Pop Art, since the desirable objects and bodies that usually appear in works of this kind similarly encourage consumption as an idealised and ephemeral way of life.¹⁰ Mannequins belong to the culture of materialism, which the painter raises to the artistic sphere. But in the Pop Art universe, sexual symbolism continued to be explored and bodies reduced to sordidly eroticised forms as a biting satire of consumer society.¹¹ The human figures in Estes's picture do not fit this description, even when they recall these concepts. In general, too, mannequins are associated with women, giving rise to the issue of the male gaze as a form of domination of the female body.¹² Although it can only be conjectured that the figures in the shop windows are female, it seems safe to conclude that here both the people and the mannequins are symbols of the estranged city, indistinct from one another.¹³

Alienation is linked to the representation of society as a whole. In this painting, Estes captures the anonymous social mass in the same way as many American social realist artists, including photographer Walker Evans and painters John Sloan, Alice Neel and Ben Shahn. These artists' works were a source of inspiration for the painter when he set out to depict New York and its everyday atmosphere. The city and all its elements speak for the citizens, as it is they who are responsible for representing society. In their creations all these artists express the medley of cultures and races that has characterised New York City since its origins.



fig. 3

Lee Friedlander***New York City, 1963*****Gelatin silver print, 13.3 × 20.3 cm****The Museum of Modern Art, New York,****322.2000**

The same is true of the photographs taken by another artist. Lee Friedlander's *New York City* [fig. 3] shares a number of elements with *Telephone Booths* such as the telephone, the reflection and the silhouette of an unrecognisable person, in this case Black. As with the Macy's sign, the individual is eclipsed by the projected image, which takes on the role of referent of American society. Like Estes, Friedlander uses reflections to usher in new evocative images, in this instance a television studio where two anonymous people are engaged in dialogue beside an image of Dwight Eisenhower captioned 'United States', and a second image of a person who might be a European political representative (as indicated by the caption 'Europe') and bears a certain resemblance to Walter Hallstein. Unlike Estes, Friedlander uses photography as an artistic technique to destabilise the geometric order of his compositions and establish new associations. Both men depict the city with a great many visual devices that serve to convey a message about American society.¹⁴

14

After WWII a desire to exhibit the average citizen's domestic life emerged in America, which cultural institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art documented as patriotic propaganda. See Beatriz Colomina, *Domesticity at War*, Cambridge-London, The MIT Press, 2007.

fig. 4
Richard Estes
Self-Portrait near the Oculus at World Trade Center, 2017
 Oil on canvas, 96.5 × 139.7 cm
 Borja Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection



In line with the use of reflections as sources of information, it is fitting to mention another much later work by Estes in which the subject is mirrored in a shop window opposite where the viewer is positioned. *Self-Portrait near the Oculus at World Trade Center* [fig. 4] is a throw-back self-portrait in which the artist's face is concealed by his camera. His identity can be made out thanks to the reflection of the camera, which signals him as the maker of the image that has been transformed into a painting. The camera and the artist's eye merge to become a single instrument of artistic creation. Once again, it is the reflection that is responsible for giving messages about the citizen.

In *Self-Portrait near the Oculus at World Trade Center* the reflection is the main subject of the composition and, as in *Telephone Booths*, the inhabitants of the building remain hidden behind a glass wall. From this point of view, the phone cabin could be likened to a bubble, a common element in still-life painting¹⁵ that symbolises fragility and the passage of time. The booths are similarly 'bubbles' that protect people from the gaze of others, though they offer only a temporary shelter whose protection can easily be shattered by opening the door. The possibility of breaking the security provided by the cubicles leads us to wonder who could be watching or listening and, conversely, who could be hiding inside the booths, questions that will be discussed in due course. The bubble link alludes to the concepts of fleetingness and perishability, which are characteristic traits of the consumer society.

15

See Joseph Cornell's *Blue Soap Bubble*, 1949–50, mixed media, 24.5 × 30.5 × 9.6 cm, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 492 (1978.11).

[+info]

In *Telephone Booths* the phone is as important as the booth. The word 'telephone' comes from the combination of the Greek roots 'têle' (far) and 'phōnē' (voice), indicating that it is an artefact which makes possible communication between two people separated by distance. Although the principal object in the work is an instrument of communication, there is no evidence here of a relationship between the people in the painting, let alone any sign they are engaged in conversation with someone on the other end of the phone. They stand in the cabins anonymously, with no indication of dialogue between them. Nor can we glimpse the telephone itself: the only image of the device is hinted at in the booth at far right and even then it is not clearly visible. In this way communication, in a work where the word 'telephone' is part of the title, appears to be cut off.

In short, the urban still life interacts with the viewer, not through the people but through the objects that tell us about the society in which they exist. Estes has arranged the elements in *Telephone Booths* on a large scale, as if he wanted to pull us inside the picture plane, yet at the same time he has obscured our view, discarding the idea of a passive spectator. Signs, motor vehicles in motion and other reflected objects make up a cityscape that speaks of New York society and establishes a distance from the individual subject. Each of these details warns of the perishability of consumer goods, the lack of communication between people and the characteristic transience of the metropolis, attesting to the frenzied rhythm of city life.

Dualism

The presence of a series of clashing concepts in the painting causes confusion and disorientation in the viewer. Dualisms such as objects which appear to be both inside and outside the booths at the same time, figures that can be human or manmade, the perceptible lack of communication in spaces designed to facilitate dialogue, and the signs mentioned earlier all imbue the work with a high degree of complexity. The fact that Estes introduces bewilderment and mystery in

fig. 5
Detail of the sign on the far left cabin
of *Telephone Booths*



his cosmopolitan cityscapes makes it necessary to carefully examine every detail, even if one of the intentions of Photorealism is to capture reality better than the human eye.

In terms of the composition of the picture, the coexistence of the grid pattern with the curved lines in the reflections is one of the dualities that affect the way the work is viewed. The straight lines show a city landscape structured chiefly by the rectangular booths and the black railings that run across the image behind them, parallel and perpendicular to the physical margins of the picture. This pattern is broken by the undulating lines of the reflections that mar the naturalist image, as they draw attention to the failure of the artifice and add to the confusion of the work.

Another dichotomy is that between object and reflection. A bewildering detail in this respect is the fact that the white inside the letter 'O' of the 'TELEPHONE' sign on the booth at far left is purely a reflection [fig. 5], whereas the plaque on which the letters appear does not display any gleams, even though the rest of the plaques seem to be made of metallic material.¹⁶ Indeed, although reflections are powerfully present in the picture, this one seems to have lost its reflective ability; it is completely at odds with the play of representations and reflections.

The contrast between reflection and objective representation in Estes's oeuvre has been the subject of much discussion among scholars. Conservator Jessica May has made a notable contribution on the subject of the purity of the cities expressed in reflections¹⁷ by pointing to the minimisation of the human presence to prevent it interfering with the idea of neatness, of the pared down city.

16

On the plaque one can see that initially the artist wrote the letters of 'Telephone' from back to front and subsequently painted over them the final letters in the right direction. It is still possible to make out an 'O' before 'tele' and a 'T' after 'phone'.

17

Jessica May and Patterson Sims, *Richard Estes' Realism: A Retrospective*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014, quoted in Parmiggiani and Solana, *Richard Estes*, n. 7, 13.



fig. 6
Richard Estes
Diner, 1971
 Oil on canvas, 101.7 × 126.8 cm
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture
 Garden, Smithsonian Institution,
 Washington D.C.

What is shown here, however, is a series of cubicles whose lower metallic surfaces have lost their gleam, whereas the upper sections continue to shine. The process whereby brightness is dulled signals deterioration, which is also present in the booth at far right whose door is ajar, possibly because it is broken. The half-open door likewise introduces another dichotomy between open and closed, inside and outside. It is worth comparing these dualisms with those that appear in a later work by the painter entitled *Diner* [fig. 6], which also features phone booths with noticeable scratches on their doors and rubbish of some kind at the right-hand corner of the diner. This is another example of antagonism, one that documents the presence of humans, a characteristic of the image of the bustling city understood as a place of transition and change.

Dualism is found yet again in the figures in *Telephone Booths* and in the difficulty of distinguishing between people and mannequins. This is due to the fact that, as mentioned earlier, they both serve the same purpose: to evoke a timeless world as mere objects. People represent the human, real and 'living' realm, whereas mannequins embody the other side of the coin – the artificial, fiction and the inert. By making

fig. 7

Frames from the short film
The Mechanical Monsters,
directed by Dave Fleischer,
1941



them indistinguishable, Estes blurs the boundaries between opposites. The impossibility of telling them apart may be associated with the tension experienced during the Cold War in the United States, especially as a result of the 'witch hunt' led by senator McCarthy between 1950 and 1954 to find Communist sympathisers across the country. Fear of Soviet espionage, the infiltration of Communism, double identity and the unknown marked American society, and this was reflected in mass culture for decades. It was not until the 1960s that many socio-political issues of the 1940s and 1950s were digested and materialised by artists.¹⁸ Estes explored the themes of lack of identity and individuality in many of his works, and *Telephone Booths* is no exception.

18

See Diane Waldman, *Roy Lichtenstein* [exh. cat. New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art; Montreal, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal], New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1993.

19

Other Pop artists from Andy Warhol to Roy Lichtenstein have incorporated the figure of Superman into their works as an iconic feature.

20

See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aleAQyWzAbI&t=308s>.

Estes's oeuvre is fully in keeping with the popular culture of the period. The mysterious people inside the booths appear to be clad in raincoats, garments that conjure up the image of secret agents, popular characters in post-war comic strips and films. The cabin itself is also an object of popular culture associated with secrecy, the possibility of concealment in full daylight, a refuge inside the crowded public space of the city. The image of Clark Kent changing into Superman¹⁹ inside a phone booth [fig. 7], a comic-strip icon that was taken up by various Pop artists, exemplifies this idea. Similarly, the booth is the place where the distinction between public and private, between the known and the hidden, becomes blurred.²⁰

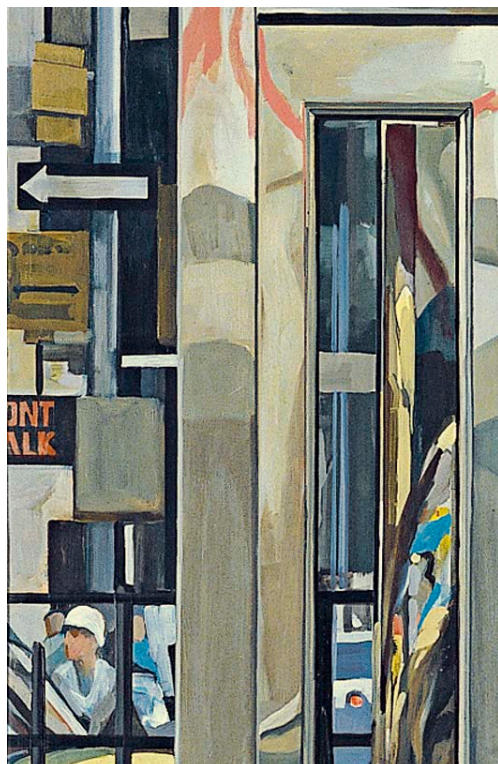


fig. 8
Detail of traffic signs
in *Telephone Booths*

Language, too, can underscore duality. Notable among the group of lettered signs in the picture is the marquee of Macy's, the famous American luxury department stores, on the right. Through the glass of the booths at the other end it is possible to make out the sign of the variety store F. Woolworth. Both establishments are identifiable to American viewers but they catered to people at opposite ends of the economic spectrum. This contrast highlights the heterogeneousness of the city.

Like language, symbols are a system for communicating. In *Telephone Booths*, an arrow on a signpost indicating the direction of the traffic can be made out on the left of the canvas and, beneath it, following the vertical line of the composition, a red traffic light instructs pedestrians to stop: 'Don't Walk' [fig. 8]. These two signs, one an icon, the other written words, represent two different languages, one pictographic and the other alphabetic. They furthermore contain opposite messages: move on and keep still. The traffic light in particular is a world in itself, as the traffic seems chaotic and fast moving, typical of big cities, and like the rest of the diffuse dualisms in the work warns of constant change and heightens the unsettling effect of this urban still life.

Gaze and scopic drive

The phone booth is a typical prop in detective fiction, in which the main characters, spies and undercover agents, are part of mass culture. Stories of this genre were very popular in the throes of the Cold War, a period in which social fears of conspiracy were rife. But above all there was wariness about 'others' infiltrating 'us'. One could venture to say that these feelings are aroused by the incognito figures in raincoats that appear to be on the verge of making a phone call in the painting. Here the unknown encourages us to look closer to discover the enigmatic nature of the characters.

In 2014 Estes commented in an interview conducted by David Ebony: 'My basic thought is that it could be the ugliest thing in the world, but somehow you can make an interesting painting of it'.²¹ Indeed, the artist succeeds in drawing attention to an everyday scene and turning it into something attractive to the spectator. The appeal of Estes's works lies chiefly in the play of reflections, but in *Telephone Booths* viewers additionally feel the desire to gaze at and listen to the people hiding behind the cabin doors, to encroach on their privacy and discover their secrets. Probably what is happening inside the cubicles is a trivial phone call, but it is the lack of certainty that makes the beholder yearn to find out what is going on.

It is inevitable to link this interest to what psychoanalysis calls the scopic drive, an impulse that transforms the need to see into a desire to gaze and be recognised in the gaze, which is related to the need for knowledge. It springs from the tension caused by unfamiliarity with an image and can be satisfied by gazing. Though not fully applicable to Estes's work, in the sense that the need to 'be recognised in the gaze' is not a feature of the painting, doubt as to what is going on inside the booths triggers this drive to know.

The uncertainty over whether the characters are making an innocent phone call or possibly doing something else links up with the abovementioned image of Superman, a good example of a popular icon who uses phone booths for a purpose other than their usual one: to conceal his other identity. In this case the scopic drive kindles the desire to find out not only what the people in the painting are doing but also who they are and why Estes has endowed them with such a mysterious appearance. Owing to the insecurity stemming from conspiracy fears and concern about the concept of 'them' in the society of the time, the gaze becomes an instrument of discernment that is essential for getting about the city. In such a changing place as New York, sharp wits become politicised cognitive tools, that is, mechanisms for discovering everything that can escape perception. Estes creates an everyday setting where he challenges viewers to put their visual abilities to the test. The intention is to prime their perception, train their gaze, which is why the painting is pleasing on account of all it shows, but also challenging insofar as it requires spectators to put into practice their visual abilities.²²

21

'The Eye Man: An Interview with Richard Estes by David Ebony', 2014, available at: [The Eye Man: An Interview with Richard Estes by David Ebony](#) - Yale University Press.

22

On the subject of American *trompe l'oeil* paintings with educational aims, see Bellion, *Citizen Spectator*, see n. 3.

fig. 9
Richard Estes
CD, 2014
 Oil on panel, 34.3 × 48.9 cm
 Marlborough Gallery, New York

fig. 10
Richard Estes
The Eye Man, 2014
 Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 152.4 cm
 Collection of Elliott and Marlys
 Badzin, Minneapolis, courtesy
 of Marlborough Gallery, New York

Scopic drive, as mentioned earlier, goes beyond the desire to see; it also encompasses the need to be seen. However, in *Telephone Booths* none of the characters look out of the picture plane toward the viewer. This is because all the figures are faceless. Indeed, neither the mannequins nor the people are given faces, either because they are not rendered in detail or because they are standing with their back to the viewer. Painting the face amounts to painting the act of looking. According to psychoanalytical theories, it is the gaze that activates the relationship between object and subject and generates identity. That is why the mannequins are indistinguishable from the people, who become objectified on being deprived of a face.²³ With no face to gaze at and gaze back at the viewer, both the figures in the picture and the viewers become denaturalised. Negation of the gaze is an allusion to death, as the drive to look is not satisfied and the subject is denied.

Not only does the absence of that gaze thwart the scopic drive but the materials of which the booths are made, glass and metal, are in themselves elements that contribute to rejection, as they do not allow viewers to explore inside the booths. Although the still life draws spectators into the scene, it also distances them.²⁴ Faced with the impossibility of distinguishing the people in the painting or being recognised in their gaze, viewers become dehumanised and alien in the familiar city setting.

In a later painting by the artist entitled *CD* [fig. 9], the observer's gaze is again constrained, and therefore so is their perception, through the scaffolding that fragments the image in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish between reflection, real object and the interior of the building. The artist seems to want to achieve an effect opposite to the traditional painting device of *repoussoir* whereby a human figure with its back to the viewer on one side of the foreground directs the spectator's gaze towards the centre of the image, drawing the viewer into the scene. In this case the opposite occurs: the observer does not feel 'included' in the scene as the criss-crossing scaffolding obscures their vision.

23

The gaze in turn creates an effect of a panopticon as a means of continuous monitoring that eventually subdues the individual.

24

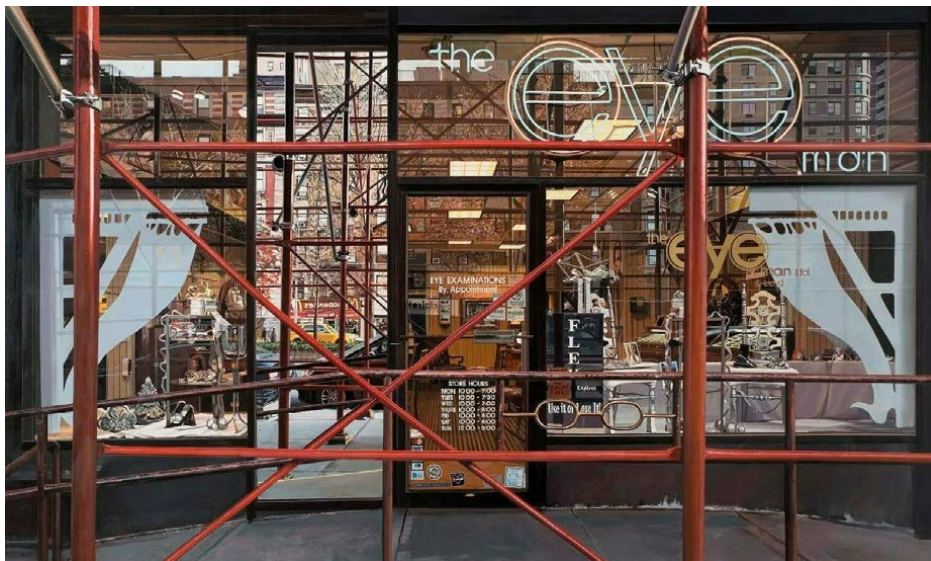
The sight of the reflection in the booths of the signs that are supposedly located behind the spectator triggers the feeling of being inside the picture plane. See Guillermo Solana, *Richard Estes: obra reciente* [exh. cat.], Barcelona, Marlborough, 2017, 173.

fig. 9

Richard Estes
CD, 2014
Oil on panel, 34.3 × 48.9 cm
Marlborough Gallery, New York

fig. 10

Richard Estes
The Eye Man, 2014
Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 152.4 cm
Collection of Elliott and Marlys
Badzin, Minneapolis, courtesy
of Marlborough Gallery, New York



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This work is inspired by French rococo artist Jean-Antoine Watteau's painting *The Shop Sign of Gersaint* (1720–21), oil on canvas, 163 × 308 cm, Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin.

Continuing along these lines, in *The Eye Man* [fig. 10],²⁵ dating from the same period as the previous work, the scaffolding reappears, this time in red, again obstructing our gaze. In this case the bars of the scaffolding partially cover the window of an optometrist's office and eyeglass store whose sign reads 'the eye man'. The artist thus completes the game of rendering the gaze useless and obstructs perception by fragmenting the image of an establishment specialising precisely in the sense of sight.

Similarly, in *Telephone Booths* the glass wall, the position of the people inside the cubicles with their backs to the viewer and the chaotic combination of reflections and transparencies serve a purpose contrary to that of the concept of *repoussoir*: to exclude the gaze. Besides failing to satisfy the scopic drive owing to the absence of visual contact between the painted figures and the viewers and the many dualisms in place, the scene triggers bewilderment. All this adds to the unsettling sensation that is roused by the raincoat-clad figures and causes the viewer to experience contradictory feelings of attraction and repulsion towards the telephone cabins.

On viewing this work the spectator has the sensation of time stood still and of an instant captured from a distance. Although city life has ground to a halt, the image is nonetheless confusing, as it is difficult to define what or who we are looking at, impeded by all the dualisms and elements discussed above. The result is highly paradoxical, as this bewilderment is what makes the work fascinating and, despite all the obstacles, spurs us to keep on gazing at it. In this painting focused on telephones, communication is performed by objects and reflections and there is no relationship whatsoever between characters and viewers. *Telephone Booths* urges us to reflect on the current need to educate an active audience with a critical eye in a present characterised by a huge increase in visual content, advertising and instant images. ●