

# THE JAMES M. COWAN COLLECTION

*Being a lover of Art, having spent many years in collecting paintings, having found great pleasure and satisfaction in possessing and living with them, it has occurred to me that through these paintings and the gift of them to the city of Nashville, I might be able in my humble way to express to the citizens of that State, to some extent at least, the love and reverence I entertain for Tennessee. And it will be my hope that what has given me pleasure in collecting and studying for a great portion of my life, may prove to be of permanent benefit and afford real pleasure to the friends and citizens and coming generations of the State I love above all others. - James M. Cowan*

With this 1927 statement of intent, James M. Cowan (1858-1930) of Aurora, Illinois, businessman, art collector, and native Tennessean, donated sixty-three paintings to the Parthenon. His only conditions were that the city provide a permanent home for the collection at the Parthenon and that he remain anonymous until his death. The paintings arrived in three shipments in 1927 and 1929 via Grand Central Galleries of New York, which served as Mr. Cowan's agent.

The paintings in the Cowan Collection, all by American artists, span the years 1765-1926. Collecting American art was out of vogue during Cowan's lifetime, when most collectors were buying the French modern masters. In the decades since his donation, however, American painting has become more valued by both scholars and collectors, and the artists represented in the Cowan collection have grown in art historical importance and aesthetic esteem.

The earliest painting in the collection is Benjamin West's *Venus and Cupid*, painted circa 1765 (above). West was born in Pennsylvania, but studied in Europe and spent most of his painting career in England. This painting was his first commission and represents the height of neoclassicism. In 1772, King George III appointed West historical painter to the court and he served twice as President of the Royal Academy, from 1792 – 1805 and from 1806 – 1820. His greatest legacy in America is as a teacher of such luminaries as Charles Willson Peale, Gilbert Stuart, John Trumball, Ralph E.W. Earl and others.



Frederic Church (*The Wreck*, above, painted in 1852) was a painter in the second generation of an art movement known as the Hudson River School, a designation describing American artists who made the American landscape, especially around the Hudson River Valley and Catskill Mountains, their subject. This painting is set off the coast of Maine, and is an exploration of humans' relationship to nature in all its vast magnificence and infinite mystery. It can also be considered an allegorical view of the ship of state as the country rushed toward the conflict of the Civil War.



Some painters in the second half of the 1800s reacted against the precise realism and detail of the Hudson River School. These artists, called Tonalists and represented in the Cowan Collection by George Inness' *Greensward, Durham*, painted with poetic intimacy, and their works often have a blurred effect. Inness and Church were contemporaries, but painted in vastly different styles.

From the 1860s to the 1890s, American artists contributed to the settlement of the American West with their paintings of spectacular western scenery. Albert Bierstadt, Sanford Gifford and Thomas Moran all traveled with explorers, recording the vistas they encountered in paintings that fueled the westward migration. However, of their paintings in the Cowan Collection, only Bierstadt's is of a western subject. Both Bierstadt's *Mt. Tamalpais* (front cover) and Gifford's *Autumn in the Catskills* (left) were painted in the studio from sketches made in the field, but *Mt. Tamalpais* is a loosely interpreted view, while Gifford's is a recognizable view of Kauterskill Clove—one that he painted often with slight variations.

Among the few figural paintings in this collection, Edwin Blashfield's *The New Dress* (over, right) and Elihu Vedder's *L'Improvvistrice* (*Musical*

*Inspiration* (below) were both painted early in the artists' careers. Both depict women, richly attired and framed by an elaborate environment. However, the two artists' styles are very different. Blasfield's painting, with its invisible brushstrokes and attention to minute detail, aims for exacting realism, with its precise and studied rendering of a wide variety of luxurious fabrics and textures. The woman in Vedder's



painting is an allegory, representing the idea of musical inspiration. The brushstrokes are visible and the textures are suggested. In these two examples, the artist's choice of style relates directly to his subject matter: Blasfield wanted to paint actual objects and used a realistic style; Vedder, painting an allegory, selected a looser method.

There are two still-life paintings in the collection (below, right): *Still Life* by Emil Carlsen and *Still Life - Fish* by William Merritt Chase. Both have a very dark background in the style favored by those trained in Munich, Germany. Carlsen's objects are detailed and quite realistic looking; but Chase's fish are painted with broad gestures and very little detail. The viewer's eye has no difficulty in "reading" the objects in the painting, however. The small minnow in the lower right is made of three strokes to build the shape and one large dry brushstroke across that shape to create the silver shine of the fish.



Ernest Lawson was one of a group of artists known as The Eight, whose opposition to the traditional approach of the National Academy and its jury system helped strengthen modernism in the United States. In the painting *Hill and Valley* (left), Lawson's emphasis on strong diagonal lines and geometric brushstrokes reveal his Modernist bent.

Although the paintings in the Cowan Collection are not united by a single school or style of painting, many of the artists knew each other. They encountered one another at artists' colonies and schools, and several had neighboring studios. Benjamin West was very influential on American artists of the 19th century, since he hosted many younger American painters when they traveled overseas to study. Some artists represented in the Cowan Collection taught others; for example, J. Carroll Beckwith studied under Thomas Moran, who encouraged the younger painter to visit Venice. Ben Foster and Leonard Ochtman traveled to Paris together to study in 1898; Ochtman, Ernest Lawson and Emil Carlsen spent summers at the Cos Cob Art Colony in Connecticut. Winslow Homer, William Merritt Chase and Francis Murphy had studios at the Tenth Street Studio Building. Moran, Homer, Chase and Vedder were all members of the same artists' club, the Tile Club. Their relationships with one another and with the work of artists who came before them helped shape the trajectory of American art history.



# Pleasure in Collecting

American Art at the Parthenon  
The James M. Cowan Collection

