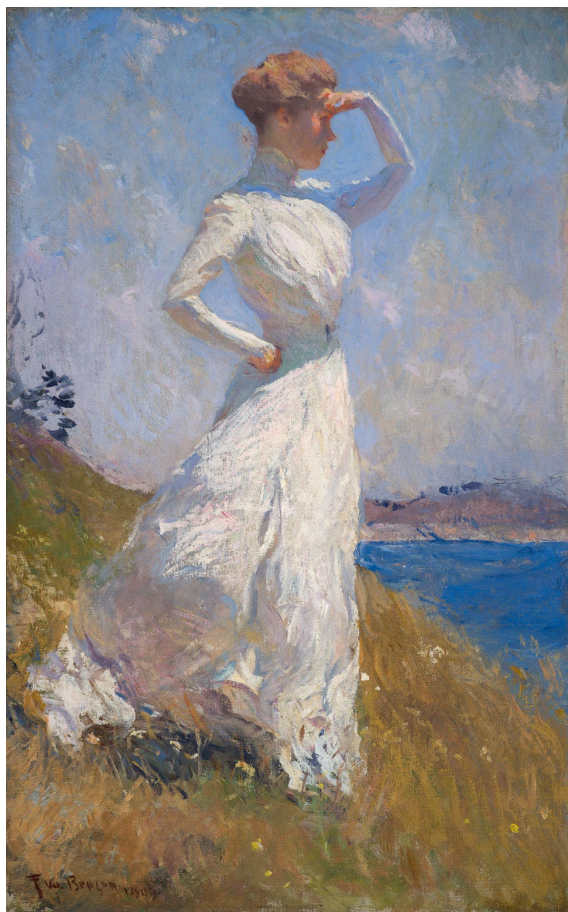


FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**VMFA Announces Upcoming Exhibition *Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France*
Expatriate Artists Led the Transformation of American Painting**



Sunlight, 1909, Frank Weston Benson (American, 1862–1951), oil on canvas. Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, John Herron Fund, 11.1.
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Richmond, Virginia — The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) announced today that the highly anticipated exhibition *Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France* will be on view at the museum from April 16, 2022 to July 31, 2022. The exhibition, which made its debut at the Denver Art Museum, focuses on a group of aspiring artists who, between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, left the United States to train abroad then returned home to become some of the greatest influencers to shape American art.

“*Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France* provides a vivid account of late 19th-century France and the cutting-edge opportunities offered to expatriate artists at that time,” said Alex Nyerges, VMFA’s Director and CEO. “Visitors to the exhibition will see exquisite paintings by some of this country’s foremost artists, created during one of the most complex and transformative periods in American art history.”

This exhibition is organized by the Denver Art Museum and curated for VMFA by Dr. Susan J. Rawles, Elizabeth Locke Associate Curator of American Decorative Arts. *Whistler to Cassatt* will include more than 100 works by celebrated American artists including James Abbott McNeill Whistler and Mary Cassatt, who traveled to France between 1855 and 1913 as part of the first wave of expatriate artists to cross the Atlantic Ocean to Europe. The exhibition also features paintings by renowned artists Cecilia Beaux, Frank Weston Benson, William Merritt Chase, William J. Glackens, Childe Hassam, Robert Henri, Winslow Homer, Maurice Prendergast, Theodore Robinson, John Singer Sargent, Henry Ossawa Tanner and John Henry Twachtman.

“The period between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries brought a kaleidoscope of social, economic and political change that expanded and complicated ideas about democracy, thrusting America into a state of flux and challenging its quest for a national identity. It also gave rise to a question that has plagued historians since the birth of the United States: who and what constitutes the *American* in American art?” said Dr. Rawles.

With its eminent academy, L'École des Beaux-Arts, 19th-century France became the arts mecca of the western world, offering American artists unparalleled opportunities to train and exhibit their works. From the urban studios of Paris to the rural art colonies of Normandy and Brittany, they traveled in communion with their contemporaries, exchanging ideas, exploring new techniques, and adopting new styles and subject matter.

Upon entering a dramatic gallery reminiscent of the historic “Salon,” the most important exhibition of juried works held annually in Paris, visitors to the exhibition *Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France* will relive the experience of late 19th-century art-lovers. Though the academy's preference for classically styled depictions of historical and biblical subjects was championed by many, contemporary painters were not bound by its doctrine. Seeking artistic independence, many American artists began experimenting with technical and thematic conventions. The exhibition highlights that innovative spirit by featuring works in myriad styles including Naturalism, Realism, Tonalism and Impressionism. It also highlights their accompanying aesthetic philosophies. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, for example, was driven by a creed of “art for art's sake” that freed paintings from a moral purpose. His experiments in “tonalism” emphasized the sensory relationship between painting and music.

“The exhibition demonstrates the radicalism of the period. The different art movements percolating in France at the time were responding not only to an academic conservatism but also to the reformative political, social and economic ideas circulating among progressive thinkers,” said Dr. Rawles. “While not all of the technical and ideological components were assimilated by American artists, selective elements of those movements and philosophies united to inform the direction of American painting. We have become so accustomed to styles like Impressionism that we forget how wickedly radical it was, or that a handful of American expatriate painters became the country's first modernists.”

Radical, too, were the American women artists who traveled to France determined to become professional painters. Light is shed on the experiences of women artists — Cecilia Beaux, Mary Cassatt and Elizabeth Nourse — featured in *Whistler to Cassatt*. Although women artists were not permitted entrance to the École des Beaux-Arts until 1897, they could train at private studios and academies like the Académie Julian. In general, these paying academies adopted the same practices as the École and, though separated by gender, allowed women to study from the life figure, participate in weekly competitions, and experiment with a variety of techniques. While Elizabeth Gardner pursued a successful career as an academic painter, becoming the first American woman artist to receive a medal at the Salon, Mary Cassatt explored more avant-garde practices, becoming the only American artist invited to exhibit with the Impressionists. In addition to this studio experience, copy work at the Louvre rounded out an artist's education. It also provided an opportunity to socialize, as women were excluded from café society.

Ultimately, most American expatriate artists returned to the United States where their work faced mixed reception. Sensitivity about national identity nurtured resistance to French influences, and paintings were often discredited as “un-American.” In response, many returning artists emphasized figurative and landscape subjects that celebrated the rising middle class and its burgeoning leisure activities. Heralding this new direction, “The Ten American Painters” turned away from the conservative National Academy of Design and Society of American Artists to pursue their shared preference for Impressionism. “The Eight” and their successors, the “Independents,” followed more progressive impulses, fueling the drive towards modernism.

“In an era fraught with challenges,” said Dr. Rawles, “Frank Benson’s painting, *Sunlight*, seems like an uplifting metaphor for America. A young woman stands high on the horizon under the bright light of a clear day. Peering out across an ocean separating the old world from the new, she braces against adverse winds, yet stands strong. Despite all the tension and discomfort that has accompanied America’s growing pains — both physical and philosophical — her youth and spirit signal optimism.”

For more information about *Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France* and to purchase tickets, visit www.VMFA.museum.

Ticket Information

Tickets for the exhibition *Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France* are now on sale: \$16 for adults, \$12 for seniors 65+, and \$10 for youth 7–17 and college students with ID. The exhibition is free for VMFA members, children ages 6 and under, and active-duty military personnel and their immediate families.

Exhibition Catalogue

Accompanying the exhibition is a catalogue featuring 200 color illustrations and essays by scholars including Dr. Timothy J. Standring, curator of *Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France* and curator emeritus at the Denver Art Museum; Emmanuelle Brugerolles, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts; Dr. Ben Colman, Detroit Institute of Arts; Dr. Randall Griffin, Southern Methodist University; Dr. Suzanne Singletary, Thomas Jefferson University; and Dr. Rawles. This catalogue, published by Yale University Press, will be available in the VMFA Shop and through the museum’s online store.

About the Sponsors

Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France is organized by the Denver Art Museum. The national exhibition tour is sponsored by Bank of America and is sponsored in Virginia by Jane Joel Knox, Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans Exhibition Endowment, Julia Louise Reynolds Fund, Lilli and William Beyer, Dr. Donald S. and Beejay Brown Endowment, Nancy and Wayne Chasen, Dorothy Ryland Garber Claybrook Trust, The Jeanann Gray Dunlap Foundation, Elisabeth Shelton Gottwald Fund, Alexandria Rogers McGrath, Richard S. Reynolds Foundation, Birch Douglass, E. B. Duff Charitable Lead Annuity Trust, Mr. and Mrs. R. Augustus Edwards III, Richard and Jean Hofheimer, William and Pamela O’Connor, Patricia P. Pusey, Anne Marie Whittemore, Mr. and Mrs. William E. Collin, Page and John Corey, Timothy and Tonya Finton, Mr. and Mrs. David R. Frediani, The Rock Foundation, and an Anonymous Donor.

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special

exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 50,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting, and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts has begun its \$190 million expansion and renovation project led by the international architecture firm SmithGroup. Tentatively scheduled for completion in 2026, the project consists of adding a new wing of nearly 170,000 square feet and renovating 45,000 square feet of existing spaces, while maintaining four acres of green space in the Sculpture Garden. Visitors will experience a seamless journey through the collections in the new wing, which will house contemporary art, African art, American art, a new suite of galleries for rotating special exhibitions, and a special-events space. The expansion and renovation will enable the museum to display more art, welcome more visitors, and provide more enjoyment.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804.340.1400 or visit www.VMFA.museum.

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