

WALTER MACEWEN: A FORGOTTEN EPISODE IN AMERICAN ART

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Despite having produced an impressive body of work and having been well-received in his lifetime, the career of nineteenth-century American expatriate artist Walter MacEwen has received virtually no scholarly attention. Assimilating primary-source materials, this thesis provides the first serious examination of MacEwen's life and career, thereby providing insight into a forgotten episode in American art.

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CHRONOLOGY

- 1860.....Born February 13th, Chicago, IL
1877.....Went to Munich
1881.....Moved to Paris
1883.....Joined artist's colony in Egmond ann Zee, Holland
1885.....*Sylvia*
1886.....*The Judgment of Paris*
Paris Salon, honorable mention
1888.....*The Ghost Story*
Courtship
1889.....*Dutch Children*
1890.....*Absent One on All Soul's Day*
Exhibition, Opening of the New Galleries, Art Institute of Chicago
c. 1890.....*Crying boy*
Boy's Head
Chess Players
Dutch Lacemakers
London, silver medal
1891.....City of Berlin, gold medal
The Sisters
1892.....*The Witches*
1893.....Chicago World Columbian Exposition
Juror in Paris
National Jury at Chicago
Murals in Fine Arts Pavilion
Debut of *The Witches*
1894.....Universal Exposition, Antwerp, medal of honor (grand prize)
Winter Exposition, San Francisco, medal of honor
1895.....*A Dutch Family*
Sunday in Holland
1896.....Chevalier's Cross, Legion of Honor of France
1897.....Munich, small gold medal
A Magdalen
1889.....*Pieter Van Wint*
February 8, married Mary Ella Ward
1900.....*A Study*
c. 1900-01.....*Bell of 1810*
Bell of 1870
An Ancestor
Miss Phyllis
Lady in a Black Hat
1901.....Munich, large gold medal
1902.....Vienna, medal
Art Institute of Chicago, prize

1903.....Associate member, National Academy of Design, New York
Philadelphia, Lippincott prize
1904.....St. Louis Exposition, medal
1905.....Liege, medal
1906.....*Vanity*
1908.....Liege, Belgium, gold medal
Office of Legion of Honor of France
1909.....Chevalier Order of St. Michael, Belgium
1910.....*The Secret*
1912.....*The Interlude*
1915.....*The Green Jar*
Pan Pacific Exposition
1919.....National Academy of Design, prize
c. 1919.....*Uncle Jim*

INTRODUCTION

This project began as a simple assignment during my first art history course while an undergraduate student at the University of Texas at Arlington. Students in the class were invited to write a visual analysis on a work of their choice located in any local museum as an extra credit opportunity. I first looked at a Peter Paul Rubens at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth and immediately realized I had no idea of what a visual analysis involved when all I recognized were beautiful angels, cherubs, and clouds and understood nothing else about what I was looking at. It was early in the semester and unsure now of how well I would fare in this subject, I decided I might really need those extra points so decided to attempt the assignment again. This time I went to the Dallas Museum of Art. As I walked through the American Hall, past works from such renowned artists as Frederick Church, Robert Henri and John Singer Sargent, I came upon *The Witches* (Fig. 1), a monumental, oil on canvas painting by the American expatriate painter Walter MacEwen (1860-1943).¹ I was awestruck with its size, emotionally charged subject matter, and painterly execution. Even the museum's docents admitted that, for the very same reasons, the piece was particularly favored by their patrons and staff over the adjacent works.² I studied the piece for awhile and began to see elements in the work that related to the terms my professor used in class; one-point perspective, balance, use of space, etc. I visited *The Witches* regularly over the following two months. Every visit raised a new question; who are these people

¹ Owned by the Graham Devoe Williford Estate, Fort Worth, TX, *The Witches* had been on loan to the DMA for several years.

² Docent Mary Brinker explained in an October 2007 interview that the DMA staff regularly included *The Witches* in their tours, seminars and workshops because they commonly agreed that the piece served as an excellent example when instructing patrons and students in the traditions of academic history painting.

represented here, what do their expressions mean, why did he use that color there? I did not know so sought answers from various sources. When content with what my research revealed and no new questions arose, I presented my professor with an analysis he called “superb.” As you will come to understand further into this project, I came away from my encounter with Walter MacEwen and his *Witches* with a solid grasp on the basis of academic art and a profound understanding of the role vision plays in artistic creation.

So impressed with his work, I sought to learn more about Walter MacEwen. I naturally assumed that his career had at some point received the same scholarly attention as his respected contemporaries, but found instead that the published information available on his life and career was limited to short critiques in several exhibition catalogs, brief recognition in literature devoted to American art colonies abroad, and honorable mentions in reviews and interviews associated with major artistic events in which he was merely a supporting participant. Even so, that information did imply that, by the turn of the twentieth century, MacEwen’s work was as well received and his reputation as highly regarded as those artists we now think of as modern day masters. Why then, after having achieved such a significant degree of professional success, has MacEwen slipped away into obscurity leaving him virtually unknown to today’s historians, collectors and other art enthusiasts? Feeling indebted to MacEwen for his contribution to my art education and believing that others like me would benefit from knowing about his work, I went in pursuit of an answer to this question. My quest began in the art files of *The Witches* in the Dallas Museum of Art’s library. The DMA’s files held two short excerpts on Walter MacEwen. Both were from literature about past

World Fairs, but did prove to be valuable resources when reconstructing the social, historical, and cultural context within which MacEwen worked. Most importantly was a reference to the Smithsonian Institution Research Information System³. That provided me with a list of MacEwen's known holdings which ultimately led to several research trips and a wealth of primary text and raw data held in the art files of other museums and art institutes. In the end, following my process of locating his work and assimilating the primary-source materials found with it and various other collections, this thesis provides the first serious examination of MacEwen's life and artistic career. In so doing, I intend to bring both, recognition to an artist who had once received international accolades and provide insight into a forgotten episode in American art. And, as a marked representation of his professional accomplishments, I will also consider the formal and iconographic elements of *The Witches*. The purpose of this thesis is, therefore, to acquaint the reader with the life and career of Walter MacEwen, to share what is known about him by simply telling his own story.

³ The Smithsonian Institution Research Information System (SIRIS) is the Smithsonian's online catalog which allows users to search across 1.8 million of the Institution's library, archive, and research holdings.

EARLY YEARS

Walter MacEwen was born to John and Elizabeth MacEwen on February 13, 1860 in Chicago, Illinois.⁴ There he attended preparatory school at the Lake Forest Academy then, in the fall of 1876, entered Northwestern University at Evanston, Illinois where he studied business and accounting while working off hours as a clerk at his father's contracting company. It seems his father, a Scottish-born manufacturer and builder, was cultivating MacEwen to eventually enter the family business. One day a panhandler entered the office in search of a handout. MacEwen extended him a ten-dollar loan and took an artist's box of paints and brushes as collateral. When the man did not return to redeem his property MacEwen began experimenting with the supplies and by the spring of 1877, decided that painting was his true vocation.⁵

⁴ MacEwen's date of birth has also been reported as February 11, 1860 but remains unverified since his birth records were lost in the Chicago fire of 1871. Prior to 1885, there are discrepancies in many of his other dates as well. Those cited within this work are consistent with those most often reported.

⁵ As stated in a typed copy of MacEwen's obituary from the New York's *Herald Tribune*, Saturday, March 20, 1943 on file at the Telfair Academy of Arts, Savannah, GA.

SOCIAL CLIMATE

By the mid-nineteenth century, art schools were burgeoning across the United States. When considering a suitable venue for professional training, MacEwen had several things to consider, the first being simple logistics. Chicago did not establish its own institution until 1879, therefore he would have to leave his hometown and his father's employ to move forward with his plan. Then there were the social changes following the Civil War and Reconstruction which were putting new demands on aspiring artists.

The dramatic rise in the production of iron, steel, and western commodities such as lumber, oil, and precious metals increased the demand for improved transportation. Railroads expanded significantly, bringing the most remote parts of the country into a national market economy. Agrarian towns grew into large cities and America emerged as an industrial giant with a society transformed by a new class of wealthy industrialists and prosperous middle class. As transatlantic transportation and communications improved, Americans began to turn their attention from internal events to an active participation in international affairs and overseas expansion.⁶ From the many great fortunes created during this time emerged a new class of American aristocracy who sought ties to Europe to validate their social importance. Genealogy, the practice of tracing one's ancestral line, became a popular pastime as families with new money sought to link themselves to those in Europe with old roots. They surrounded themselves with European antiques and accoutrements. Implying that these individuals were faux-aristocrats and not the blue-bloods they aspired to be, that their cultured

⁶ Mary Beth Norton, David M. Katzman, Paul D. Escott, Howard P. Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson, William M. Tuttle, Jr., and William J. Brophy. *A People and A Nation: A History of the United States Brief Edition Vol. B.: Since 1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984), 327.

appearances were mere veneers and not inherent qualities, Mark Twain called this era “The Gilded Age” (1878-1889).⁷ MacEwen found himself on the cusp of the movement.

American collectors were seeking works from French academicians and Barbizon landscapists luring an increasing number of American artists to study abroad. Many went to Paris just to learn how to emulate the French painters whose works were attracting these post-Civil War collectors. Prospective patrons aside, the city was an irresistible magnet to both students and established artists. As a result of the Second Empire building, Paris was more beautiful than ever and a virtual storehouse of old art treasures. Accommodations were very affordable and the French authorities offered tuition-free art education and supported their resident artists with organized venues for exhibition. The Paris Salons generated purchases and commissions and their system of honors and critical debate served to enhance the reputation of those artists involved in them.⁸ It was well worth the time and effort spent to study in Paris, but the city did have its drawbacks. The city’s overall artistic atmosphere, including its readiness to support new and creative ideas, perpetuated the bohemian lifestyles that were perceived by many as undermining the moral fabric of its artists. The mother of Julius Garibaldi (Gari) Melchers (1860-1935), who later became a protégé and lifelong friend to MacEwen, called the Parisian studios “dens of iniquity.”⁹ Melchers was forbidden to study there as may well have been the case with young MacEwen. At just 17 years of age, he entered the Akademie der Bildenden Künste München, also known as the Munich Academy.

⁷ Judith Freeman Clark. *America’s Gilded Age: An Eyewitness History*. (New York: Oxford, 1992), xi–xii, 42.

⁸ *Americans in Paris 1850-1910, The Academy, the Salon, the Studio, and the Artist’s Colony* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma City Museum of Art in association with the University of Washington Press, 2003), 8, 27.

⁹ George Mesman. “The Student Years: Dusseldorf and Paris” in *Gari Melchers: A Retrospective Exhibition*, organized by Diane Lesko (St. Petersburg, FL: Museum of Fine Arts, 1990), 49.

ARTISTIC EDUCATION

The Munich Academy cultivated the emulation of seventeenth century Dutch painting. Much of the art produced during this time was for ordinary citizens, therefore, artists found suitable subjects within their own surroundings. Artists of the Dutch Golden Age strove to develop an expertise in a single genre. Portraitists worked at describing their subjects in a manner that not only rendered a realistic likeness but also spoke of their attributes and stations in life. Scenes of everyday life were named after their depictions and everyday Dutch landscapes were favored over the fantasy landscapes of the past. History painters concentrated on rendering the emotions of their main characters as they focused a scene on one crucial moment of the story. Dutch still-life painters were unrivalled in their imitations of reality. In Munich, MacEwen was receiving an education that was rooted in rigid academic principals while placing great emphasis on naturalistic light and the illusion of space as well as anecdotal figure painting. But, he was an impatient student.¹⁰

¹⁰ Judith Kiers and Fieke Tissink, *The Golden Age of Dutch Art: Painting, Sculpture, Decorative Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 27, 37, 59, 69, 75, 83, 169, 195.

CONTINUED EDUCATION

The Munich Academy had a structured system of progression in place that did not allow him to begin his training with his choice of classes and professors. MacEwen felt himself accomplished enough to move ahead, but was not allowed to do so. Preferring to study on his own instead, he left the Academy after his first year. This move most likely led to private supplemental instruction, but there is no record of with whom he might have studied. Apparently MacEwen did not overestimate his talent. In 1880, the Academy awarded him the silver medal for his artistic proficiency. He was advancing quite nicely in Munich. Still, like so many other artists whose careers began outside France, MacEwen was eventually drawn to Paris. He relocated there in 1881 where he continued his training at the Académie Julian with Tony Robert-Fleury (1837-1912).¹¹

Robert-Fleury was highly regarded for his historical compositions and portraits, and the students from his atelier moved up quickly through the ranks of young artists striving for recognition. He is credited for training a great number of the best-known painters of the twentieth century. Eventually he became president of the Société des Artistes Français who, in the same year as MacEwen's arrival, began to oversee the Salon.¹² It is understandable that until this point MacEwen had made decisions typical of other artists working towards a successful career, but after four years of navigating the system MacEwen had developed some very personal preferences with regards to the

¹¹ Telfair Academy of Art

¹² Jane Turner, ed. *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 26 (New York: Grove's Dictionaries, Inc., 1996), 455.

content of his work, therefore, while training at the Académie Julian, he simultaneously studied with Fernand Cormon (1845-1924).¹³

Cormon was also an academic painter of historical subjects, but because he was particularly attracted to scenes of bloodshed, death, and grief drawn from epic poems and religious narratives, he was sometimes criticized for the perceived sensationalism in his art.¹⁴ Under Cormon's tutelage, MacEwen developed an uncanny gift of interpretation in his paintings. That, the impression left upon him by his initial training, and an attraction he held for light filled interiors prompted MacEwen to break away from the mainstream education of the academies. Some three years later he joined Gari Melchers and George Hitchcock (1850-1913) in the fishing village of Egmond aan Zee, Holland.

¹³ Ibid, 455.

¹⁴ Jane Turner, ed. *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 7 (New York: Grove's Dictionaries, Inc., 1996), 859.

ARTIST COLONY

How the three men originally connected is somewhat vague. Although studying at different academies, MacEwen and Melchers were both training in Germany at the same time. Melchers was still at the Königlich-Preußische Kunstakademie (Royal Prussian Academy of Art) in Düsseldorf, some 600 kilometers northwest of Munich, when Hitchcock arrived there in 1879. Then, in 1881, all three artists left Germany to join the Académie Julian in Paris. It is likely that Hitchcock and Melchers were already developing a plan to eventually migrate to Holland when they met MacEwen in Paris. By sheer proximity, they were already familiar with the area. Egmond was only 96 kilometers north of Düsseldorf. To develop their perception of nature, Düsseldorf students were encouraged to carry a sketchbook wherever they went and to supplement their studies with frequent sketching trips. Melchers' surviving sketchbooks indicate he had already spent time in and around Egmond.¹⁵ Much like MacEwen, Melchers and Hitchcock were drawn back to the basics of their training. Some scholars suggest that they were already established in Egmond, residing together in a studio home on the Torenduin (tower dune)¹⁶ when MacEwen arrived in 1884, but all unanimously give credit to all three men for founding the American artist colony there. The move proved to be a pivotal decision concerning their careers. Already quite accomplished in the depiction of Dutch genre, the three painters attracted so many other artists that by 1900 the colony was recognized as the Egmond School.

¹⁵ Several of Melchers "Düsseldorf" sketchbooks are archived at Belmont, The Gari Melchers Estate & Memorial Gallery in Fredericksburg, VA. None are dated and none contain sketches made after plaster casts or works of the Old Masters. See *Gari Melchers: A Retrospective Exhibition*, 53, footnote 11.

¹⁶ *Gari Melchers: A Retrospective Exhibition*, 53-58.

INFLUENCES AND PREFERENCES

MacEwen, Melchers, and Hitchcock never severed their ties with Paris. They eventually all kept studios there, but while they shared ideas and subjects, it was Egmond that inspired their major works. Hitchcock's personal style compelled him to paint his subjects, preferably a transcendent female, in outdoor settings (Fig. 2). Both Melchers and MacEwen painted male and female subjects but preferred them set in naturally lit interiors. Melchers' *The Pilots* (Fig. 3) and MacEwen's *The Judgment of Paris* (Fig. 4) are excellent examples of how similar their work was.

Having studied from the works of old Dutch masters, both paintings are reminiscent of Johannes Vermeer's *Couple Drinking Wine* (Fig. 5) by depicting ordinary individuals seated around a table that is positioned near a windowed wall. The figures in Melchers' and MacEwen's paintings appear to be casually gathered. Each group is situated with a single male figure holding a pipe that is somewhat isolated to the right of the remaining subjects. All of the subjects are seated in straight-back wooden chairs and several are occupied with mundane activities. Two of MacEwen's women hold mending in their laps and one of Melchers' men is building a ship's model. The floors are earth-toned stone and a splash of brilliant white light comes through the half-curtained windows to light up the tabletop.

The similarities in composition and technique are so numerous that one is drawn to conclude that these artists were emulating each other's work when, in fact, the differences in themes are just as striking. MacEwen's piece is, as the title implies, a contemporary Dutch peasant scene based on a tale from classical Greek mythology. The myth concerned a beauty contest in which the Trojan prince Paris must choose one

of the goddesses – Hera, Athena, or Aphrodite – to receive the coveted golden apple. The ensuing jealousies resulted in the Trojan War. By substituting contemporary figures, MacEwen called attention to the modern relevance of the myth's moral lessons.¹⁷

MacEwen's piece is particularly similar to Vermeer's in that the upper portion of his windows are meant to describe the landscape and foliage beyond but clearly resemble the stained glass in Vermeer's window. MacEwen's tablecloth mimics the diamond motif border of Vermeer's as well as references the Dutch's talent for making lace. The same vibrant red is seen in all the women's costumes. Melchers' piece is a contemporary portrait of sailors that are sharing a relaxing moment together at a local inn. There are no complicated strategies or subliminal messages at work in this painting. Melchers has simply painted exactly what he saw. Sharing similar training to produce similar works inspired by a common locale, MacEwen's career began to parallel that of Melchers' and they soon developed a thriving personal and professional relationship.

¹⁷ Carolyn Kinder Carr and George Gurney, *Revisiting the White City: American Art at the World's Fair* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art and National Portrait Gallery, 1993), 171.

PATRIOTISM

MacEwen was one of a growing contingent of Americans working abroad. Expatriates they are called because they chose to live and work in a foreign land. They should not to be confused, however, with those who denounce their allegiance to their native country, as this was certainly not the case for Walter MacEwen. He always considered Chicago his home and returned to vote in every political election, frequently bringing a number of his works with him to either sell or include in a one-man-show. His work began to sell and a list of regular patrons began to grow. In 1890, the Art Institute of Chicago mounted an exhibition to launch the opening of their new galleries. One such gallery, room fourteen, was devoted entirely to MacEwen. Of the fifty-nine paintings shown, eleven were owned but lent for the event by prominent local businessmen. Over half are verified by title or existing images to be of Dutch influence.¹⁸

MacEwen's reputation was growing as a painter of Dutch peasants and villagers but he believed those subjects reflected American qualities which he often referenced in his compositions. For example, in *The Ghost Story*, 1888 (Fig. 6), MacEwen has arranged a group of Volendam women, identified so by the distinctive caps they wear, around a central figure who has command of their attention. She is telling them a ghost story. The three spinning wheels in the room are all empty suggesting that the women are wasting valuable time spinning tales instead of yarn. Viewed from a different perspective though, one might conclude that MacEwen was alluding to the unchanging life cycles in rural cultures by representing the females at all stages of life; young, mature and elderly. By the 1880s, after having been popularized in Henry Wadsworth

¹⁸ Art Institute of Chicago, *Catalogue of Paintings Exhibited at the Opening of the New Galleries* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1890), 16-20.

Longfellow's poetry and displayed in numerous centennial exhibitions, the spinning wheel had become a potent symbol of American's colonial past. The spinning wheels point to the disappearing customs paralleled in Dutch and American history. In his discussion, *What is American in American Art*, Lloyd Goodrich wrote:

The intrinsic values of art lie in its universal and timeless elements. But national character has an importance like that of the individual artist's personality in relation to his art. The essentials of Man's art come from his inborn gifts, his inner life and his relations to his world. Influences from other art cannot create his art; but they can change it, can help it to grow or the reverse.¹⁹

When later asked by journalist W. Lewis Frazier how he perceived his own work MacEwen replied:

...naturally a fellow, given a chance, wants to show what he can do, and nothing ought to be slighted...The one thing a painter can't help doing...is to put himself into his pictures; and in the same way he can't help putting his nationality into them.²⁰

At the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris, MacEwen received a silver medal for *The Judgment of Paris*. Melchers was awarded one of two grand prizes for *The Sermon* (Fig. 7).²¹ Although both artists were now receiving international acclaim for their naturalistic genre compositions of Dutch peasant life, American artists as a whole did not fair well at the exposition.

¹⁹ Lloyd Goodrich, "What is American in American Art? Common denominators from the Pilgrims to Pollock" in *Art In America* 51, no. 4 (August 1963), 24.

²⁰ W. Lewis Fraiser, "Decorative Painting at the World's Fair: The Works of Gari Melchers and Walter McEwen" in *The Century Magazine* 95, no.1 (May 1893), 21.

²¹ Annette Blaugrund, *Paris 1889: American Artists at the Universal Exposition* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990), 21-23.

PUBLIC RECEPTION

By the mid-1880s, the American colony had grown to be the largest in the Paris art community. While widely praised for their salon exhibits some critics interpreted the American's success as a challenge to France's supremacy in art. French students at the *École des Beaux-Arts* went so far as to publish complaints that foreigners, primarily American, were displacing native artists. Antonin Proust, the 1889 Exhibition's commissioner-general of fine art, abusively commented that the Americans had certainly patterned themselves after famous French masters as their rooms were comparable to excellent French galleries. Subsequently, American painting was dismissed as imitative and without a national character. Maurice Hamel wrote in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* that:

American artists possess the skill of assimilation, quickness of hand, and the taste for sensational effects, but their aesthetic gymnastics are not balanced by original invention, passion, and deep reflection. In the end, they prefer to emulate the superficial aspects of European art rather than establish a new point of view.²²

Native American artists were further demeaned as critical review still held the work of the expatriates as superior to theirs. Intent on changing this consensus, Chicago's City Council began their campaign to host the next world's fair just two months following the opening of the 1889 Exposition in Paris.²³

Originally intended to open in May of 1892, the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition was so named to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the voyage of Columbus to the Americas. Through art, the fair planners wanted to present the United States' progress from simple beginnings to a nation advanced in art and industry and

²² Ibid, 77.

²³ Carr and Gurney, 63.

capable of managing international affairs.²⁴ The organizing committees of the 1893 World's Fair intended to take center stage by promoting the United States as a nation advanced in art and industry and capable of managing international affairs.²⁵ More than 3,800 letters of recruitment were sent to American artists and architects to participate in the event. Aided by their strong ties to Chicago,²⁶ MacEwen and Melchers were chosen to sit on the French Advisory Committee, the panel whose responsibility it was to determine which of the oil paintings submitted from Parisian artists would be accepted for exhibition at the fair, and were commissioned to paint typana murals for one of the Fair's exhibition halls.²⁷

The 1860s and 1870s had realized great technological advances but had also seen many social, political, and religious conflicts. Within artistic production, a resurgence of academic classicism brought about a "national" style, known as the "Colonial Revival", an emotional, spiritual, and intellectual attitude that manifested in domestic architecture and interior designs, including a vogue for American antiques.²⁸ As a testament to the progress of culture in America, this "national" style prevailed in the largest collection of American art ever assembled in one place, but as the predominant expression of their goal to project national unity and universal brotherhood, the fair planners chose the Beaux-Arts style for their architectural signature. Having already achieved a reputation for structural innovation with balloon-frame skyscrapers, the planners turned to the past rather than the future for inspiration. Where London had the

²⁴ Ibid, 13.

²⁵ Ibid, 10-15.

²⁶ McEwen was born and raised in Chicago and Melchers' own personal and professional interest in Chicago had grown via his prominent art patrons.

²⁷ Ibid, 71.

²⁸ Axel Axelrod, *The Colonial Revival in America: A Winterthur Book* (New York: Norton, 1986), 241-242, 251, 261.

Crystal Palace in 1851 and Paris the Eiffel Tower in 1889, Chicago built an immense complex of white plastered, Beaux-Arts exhibition palaces on a 686-acre site in Jackson Park, seven miles south of downtown Chicago. Daniel Burnham (1846-1912), was the chief architect and designer of Chicago's "White City" while Francis D. Millet (1846-1912) was appointed to chair its decorations (Fig. 8).²⁹

Millet trained under John La Farge (1835-1910) who, in 1876, painted the immense interior of the Trinity Church in Boston. It has been suggested that La Farge's work triggered a demand for "imperial classicism" in architecture that, due to the scale of the buildings, called for decoration. Until then there had been no work of this kind in America.³⁰ Working together, MacEwen and Melchers produced four forty-foot canvases to decorate the southern corner pavilions of the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building (Fig. 9).³¹

The scenes in their panels were dictated by the overall theme of the park and, of course, meant to be appropriate for their designated building, but it appears the two artists coordinated their efforts so one's work would complement the other's. One of MacEwen's two panels was *Music* (Fig. 10). It depicts a procession of women and young boys playing musical instruments, perhaps in a plaza dedicated to such events as the statue in the scene holds a lyre. The parade is moving from the left side of the canvas to the right where a legion of men carrying spears can be discerned in the shadows. The women may be sending them off or welcoming their return but, the piece was definitely intended to be the companion of Melchers' *The Art of War* (Fig. 11) or,

²⁹ Carr and Gurney, 12, 20.

³⁰ Milton Brown. *American Art to 1900: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), 548, 561.

³¹ *Art Treasures From the World's Fair* (Chicago: The Werner Co., 1894), 135 & 137.

more commonly referred to as, *The Chase*, which depicts a procession of ancient huntsmen. Either title is suitable as the men in question carry both weapons and slain prey. In the foreground is a man in tow by two leashed dogs. Behind them, on a white horse, rides a man of definite significance. He wears a laurel wreath and carries a scroll in his right hand. If placed side by side, MacEwen's to the left of Melchers', they would appear to be the two halves of one scene. The panels were executed in the grand manner; everything is outlined and filled in with broad strokes of simple color. Again, their handling of medium affirms their degree of compatibility. With the exception of MacEwen's acanthus leaf borders surrounding his panels, either man could have painted all four works.

In May 1893, the month the World's Fair opened in Chicago, W. Lewis Frazier published an insightful article in *The Century Magazine* in which he interviewed both MacEwen and Melchers as they worked together on the two sets of lunette murals. Because the men worked on the paintings in a studio rather than on site, Frazier had an opportunity to interview them. He seemed particularly taken with MacEwen's personality; calling it a temperament which "...led him to the gentle, the poetic, to the more feminine of the arts," and commended MacEwen on his diligence in executing his work himself rather than delegating aspects of the job to his assistant.³² Frazier also mentions that MacEwen and Melchers painted their lunettes on canvas; alluding to the fact that their paintings would not be lost as would those by other artists that were painted directly on the wall. Although magnificently designed, all of the fair buildings

³² W. Lewis Fraiser "Decorative Painting at the World's Fair: The Works of Gari Melchers and Walter McEwen" in *The Century Magazine* Vol. 95. no.1 (May 1893), 21.

were temporary structures.³³ There is no evidence that the lunettes are still in existence but the temperaments that Frazier noticed in the works may have been an early indication that, even though the two artists worked well together, they were both also able and possibly hoping to achieve recognition independently of one another.

Milton Wolf wrote that not one of the Exposition's mural painters was a Raphael, but also admitted that by the late 1890's some very impressive murals projects were being produced in America.³⁴ Among those was the Library of Congress. On each end of the Northwest Gallery is a large lunette: *Peace* at the south end and *War* at the north, both by Gari Melchers.³⁵ In the vestibule of the House reading room are nine lunettes, one at each end of the corridor and seven along the west wall. These were painted by MacEwen and represent the Greek heroes Paris, Jason, Bellerophon, Orpheus, Perseus, Prometheus, Theseus, Achilles, and Hercules. MacEwen also included borders on these works in which he added the depicted hero's name above the image.

³³ Ibid, 21.

³⁴ Milton Brown, 561.

³⁵ John Y. Cole. *On These Walls: Inscriptions and Quotations in the Buildings of the Library of Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1995), 68.

THE WITCHES

At the 1893 Exposition, MacEwen and Melchers also sat on the National Jury of American artists at Chicago and were invited to exhibit.³⁶ As a juror, MacEwen was not allowed to compete in the exhibitions, only show. Still, he submitted four paintings. Three were of his renowned naturalistic genre compositions of Dutch peasant life and the fourth was *The Witches*, a monumental history painting.³⁷

From the mid-nineteenth century, American artists made rapid progress in art but history painting was a perpetual problem for them. The twenty history paintings exhibited at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia were ill received. The country was still relatively young and continually changing. Critics suggested that America simply had yet to produce a great historical painter when in truth the country did not want to be reminded of its brief and unpicturesque past.³⁸ Consider George H. Boughton's *Pilgrims Going to Church* (Fig. 12) shown at the Centennial. The title implies that Boughton intended the piece to be nostalgically uplifting but it still made viewers uncomfortable to think that the Pilgrims depicted here had to travel armed and in numbers for the sake of safety. Artist and critics alike began to regard the traditional theory and practice of history painting as outmoded for an increasingly modern nation.³⁹ Despite this consensus, MacEwen created *The Witches* specifically for this event. Of the four paintings he exhibited, it was the only one completed after 1889 when plans for the Chicago Fair were well under way.

³⁶ Carr and Gurney, 10-15.

³⁷ Ibid, 167.

³⁸ William Ayers, ed., *Picturing History: American Painting 1770-1930* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 177-197.

³⁹ Ibid, 177-197.

The Witches made its public debut in the Fine Arts Palace at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Breaking with his traditional genre painting, it was the only piece that depicted an American scene rather than those of Dutch influence for which he had become popular. Its monumental size, approximately 6½ feet by 10 feet, combined with a renewed interest in America's early history during the 1880s and 1890s, made *The Witches*, inspired by the 1692 witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts, one of the most talked about pieces among the exposition visitors and a perfect choice of subject for this event.⁴⁰ A formal analysis of *The Witches* identifies MacEwen's training and the influences of the mentors who greatly directed his personal style of painting. Better still, it offers an insight into his motives and vision for creating the work.

As history records it, the story of the Salem witch trials began in the home of Samuel Parris, the village's first independent minister. His daughter and a resident niece began exhibiting very strange and unexplainable behavior. For no apparent reason they would fall to the floor in what resembled seizures. They explained the incidents as tormenting attacks inflicted by witches. Parris pressured names from the girls, and subsequently a mass hysteria swept the community. His Caribbean slave, Tituba, was implicated. She had, in fact, been telling the girls stories of the fortune telling and black magic that was practiced in her homeland. More young girls and women were "stricken" as the hysteria mounted. When indicted, Tituba confessed to the crime and gained herself a reprieve, but she turned on the other suspects, bearing testimony to events that had only happened within the realms of her imagination. In all, nineteen people were condemned and executed before the local clergy rallied to stop

⁴⁰ Carr and Gurney, 167.

the senseless killings. Years later, one of the accusers would publicly confess to the hoax perpetrated on Salem village.⁴¹

The saga of the Salem witch trials is, in itself, enough to evoke strong emotion in any individual, but those that emerge upon viewing this painting do so solely at the masterful hands of Walter MacEwen. In *The Witches*, MacEwen paints his interpretation of the arrest and jailing of the first three victims of the Salem witchcraft accusations. The scene is easily recognized and the story herein reveals itself upon simple examination. The life-size figures entice the viewer to take a closer look. The scene is set in a Puritan jail cell, where the first three suspects of a growing list of accused were held in custody. MacEwen places the three women in chains and a fourth woman pleads with a young prisoner while the town fathers look on. The man in the right corner of the cell wears a waistband that identifies him as clergy. Most likely he represents the Reverend Parris. The other two men carry staffs, symbols of their authority, represent two of the town elders.

Working with oils on a stretched canvas panel, MacEwen constructs the scene from the picture plane out. Beginning with the basic shapes of geometry, he builds the confines of the cell with distinct horizontal and vertical lines forming the stone wall and door opening. Slightly diagonal lines, running in both directions, form the grid of the stone floor and add depth to the space. At the point where these two planes merge MacEwen uses sharp contrasts in light and dark colors to further enhance the illusion. The eye follows implied horizontal lines along the heads and feet of the painting's subjects. When combined with subtler implied vertical lines, rectangles are formed that

⁴¹ Bryan F. Le Beau, *The Story of the Salem Witch Trials* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998), 60-71.

define the subject matter and order the use of space. The three standing females represent the largest of these rectangles and fill the foreground of the painting. The next set of rectangles denotes the middle of the space occupied by the seated woman and the men standing just inside the room. Highlighting is used to bring the viewer's attention to specific elements of the scene but, for the most part, the colors in this area are darker and less modeled. The rectangular doorway serves as part of, and framing for, the painting's background, which consists of the wall and those individuals standing outside the cell. Deep shadows are incorporated to obscure the area where the wall and floor meet. These shadows, combined with the flat, unshaded color of the doorway figures, serve to complete the third dimension of space inside the cell. The pale colors outside the doorway alludes to yet another dimension of space, but are of such an insignificant amount that they only serve to define the doorway figures.

The composition is divided into symmetrical halves by an implied line that runs vertically through an iron ring anchored to the back wall of the cell. A triangle is formed by another implied line that can be traced from the same ring to each skirt of the female prisoners, Sarah Osborne (sitting), Sarah Good (standing to the left), and the slave Tituba (standing to the right) and back again. Although the numbers of figures vary from three on the left side to more than four on the right, the separate masses are equally weighted. The horizontal line that runs across the waists of the pleading woman and Sarah Good forms a cross when it intersects the vertical line that separates the two women. Again, balance is maintained when the yoke and peplum of Tituba's bodice forms an "X" across her bosom. The oval faces of the men become triangular in shape

when framed with their hats and hair as opposed to those of the women, whose caps and hairstyles mold their faces into more circular shapes.

The subjects of MacEwen's *The Witches* are convincingly realistic in proportion, color, and detail. He paints them in very somber colors, using lighter shading to illuminate the cell. The brightest of the white-on-white highlights appear on the women in the foreground and becomes subtler towards the middle dimension of the painting. The deep shadows cast on the cell's floor serve to balance the effect. MacEwen blends and smooths the paint in the middle and background of the painting, but gets bolder and more aggressive with his brush on the front three figures. The final touches of highlights are brushed on but resemble palette knife painting because of their texture and density.

Other classical elements include the traditional iconography. All the men depicted here are wearing broad-brimmed hats and carrying staffs, both of which have been associated with the Pilgrim, or person on a pilgrimage, since medieval times. Sarah Good wears a red cape, the color of martyrdom.⁴² She was the only one of these three women to actually be executed. She also wears lace ruffles instead of cuffs on her sleeves. Had this young woman actually worn lace ruffles during Puritan times she would have been viewed as somewhat brazen. Puritans believed in plain clothes to such a degree that fines were levied for the wearing of ribbons, lace, jewels, shoe buckles and other frills.⁴³ Good and her family had fallen on hard times and were destitute at the start of the witchcraft hysteria. She had succumbed to begging for

⁴² Santa Barbara Museum of Art. *Iconocom, Cross-cultural Iconography for the Community* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1973), 67.

⁴³ Ruth Turner Wilcox, *Five Centuries of American Costume* (New York: Scribner, 1963), 104-112.

handouts and shelter from her neighbors and we have historical testimony to her angry outbursts following refusals of charity. MacEwen added the lace to identify Good as a person whose behavior deviated from the norm, thus sealing her fate.

The cell's source of light is not revealed to us, but we can see by the proximity of the shadows that it does not come through the open door, but shines from directly overhead, indicating something spectral. From a religious perspective, light has always been associated with the source of life and all that is good.⁴⁴ MacEwen's light appears to target the two Sarahs, suggesting that good infers innocence. Tituba stands at its periphery.

Focusing on the finer details of this painting brings attention to the emotional aspects of this work. "V" shapes are scattered throughout the scene in collars, cuffs, and pleats. Diagonal lines appear in the arm positions of the subjects and the staffs carried by the town fathers. Swirling lines form the chains that dangle from the women's wrists and puddle on the floor, the wisps of loose hair at the young girl's neck, and those escaping from the pleading woman's cap. Subtle curving lines form the dark circles under Sarah Good's eyes.

MacEwen used body language to talk to the viewer. The arm positions of each character emphasize facial expressions. The Reverend Parris exhibits apprehension. He will eventually publicly apologize for his role in the Salem witch hunts. His comrades grip their staffs and swell with arrogance and condemnation. Weak and distraught, Sarah Osborne collapses in a chair. History records that she was indicted but never made it to trial. Elderly and frail, her health failed and she died while still in jail. The contemptuous Tituba looks on as a friend begs Good to redeem herself with confession.

⁴⁴ Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 20.

Hand on hip, she has traded sides and is now an indignant accuser. MacEwen did not depict Tituba as a dark-skinned Caribbean. The racial unrest of his time would never have tolerated it.⁴⁵ The scorn in her expression and the defiance in her stance tells the viewer that the accusations brought against this woman are most likely well founded. She has the air of a troublemaker.

Sarah Good confronts the viewer with an expressionless face, save the dark circles beneath her tired eyes. Her husband made condemning inferences about her and her four-year-old daughter, Dorcas, who was also arrested and examined for witchcraft. Dorcas' confession would also implicate her mother. Good's arms hang limp at her sides as she resigns herself to her fate. Her gaze draws the viewer into the cell, as was MacEwen's intent. His desire was that you experience this event, not merely view a rendering of this specific point in time and space.

With respect to academic tradition, MacEwen built a life-size history painting on a solid, classical foundation of color, line, structure, and use of space. He then breaks with that same tradition by involving subjects who are far less than idealized nobles and has a central figure of questionable character directly engaging the viewer with a beseeching stare that brings the scene to an emotional level. MacEwen goes to great length to involve the viewer in the action. Relying strictly on visual image to tell the story, he carefully incorporated items commonly associated with the times to send subliminal messages in lieu of the written or spoken word. The metaphors and body language are masterfully used to reiterate his interpretation of this event. As he worked on the details of this painting, specifically drawing on his experience as a genre painter,

⁴⁵ Philip Jenkins, *A History of the United States* (New York: St. Martin's, 1977), 192.

MacEwen transcended this emotional dimension to incorporate yet another form or trait into his work. H. W. Williams Jr. came very close to describing this trait when he wrote:

The genre painting's source of strength is the rapport between seer and seen, calling for the establishment of a bond of sympathy---based on a familiar response to the human situation presented...it involves not only what an artist sees, but his personal, subjective way of seeing.⁴⁶

As he recounted this story, MacEwen was not convinced details alone would be enough to insure the viewer would perceive the scene as the truth, but believes he will if he can relate to it on a personal level.

MacEwen's choice of color palette, flair for a naturalistic representation, and other compositional strategies are all very reminiscent of other renowned artists of and slightly before his time. In 1872 Max Liebermann (1847-1935) completed a large canvas executed in the Munich tradition. The work is titled *Women Plucking Geese* and depicts a room full of peasant women doing just that. When compared with MacEwen's *The Witches* (Fig. 13), the similarities are undeniable. MacEwen's piece was painted twenty years after Liebermann's, yet MacEwen's stone walls and straw-littered floor, costumes and haggard faces, and the vaguely described background subjects owe so much to Liebermann's work that the two men could have worked side by side, conferring with every stroke as their brushes dipped paint from a mutual palette. The element that sets MacEwen's work apart is the bright white-on-white highlighting and his manipulation of light to illuminate the room.

The French art historian and critic Théophile Thoré (1807-1869) wrote, "Art changes only through strong convictions, convictions strong enough to change society

⁴⁶ Hermann Warner Williams Jr., *Mirror to the American Past, A Survey of American Genre Painting: 1750-1900* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 16-17.

at the same time.”⁴⁷ From the 1840s on, avant-garde artists increasingly recognized and depicted the plight of the poor and the dispossessed. Certain aesthetic characteristics and uses of subject matter in *The Witches* might well owe themselves to the radical ideas of those men. For instance Gustave Courbet (1819-77) painted commoners on a grand scale (Fig. 14) and it was Édouard Manet (1832-83) who first turned the face of the lady of questionable character to make eye-to-eye contact with his viewer (Fig. 15).⁴⁸ The anatomically correct posture of Tituba, the light splaying across the back of the seated Sarah Osborne, the vague features of the town fathers and the intense facial expressions of each woman could easily have been influenced by the work of Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) (Fig. 16).⁴⁹ As illustrated, many of MacEwen’s techniques and compositional choices were shaped and influenced by his contemporaries and their predecessors, but he commanded an incredible insight that was a byproduct of his particular temperament. This is best understood by comparing the work of MacEwen to that of his Egmond protégé George Hitchcock.

MacEwen and Hitchcock both produced works titled *A Magdalen*, Hitchcock in 1887 while still in Egmond, and MacEwen during a visit to Munich nearly ten years later. Traditionally the name refers to the redeemed prostitute of Biblical times who has historically been portrayed in a saintly manner as she became a follower of Christ. Hitchcock maintains that theme (Fig. 2) but MacEwen approaches the subject from an entirely different perspective. His *Magdalen* (Fig. 17) is still fallen and seeking salvation. MacEwen was inspired to create this work upon attending a Christmas Eve midnight

⁴⁷ Cited in Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Random House, 1989), 1.

⁴⁸ John Kissick, *Art: Context and Criticism* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984) 323-24, 331-33.

⁴⁹ Robert Rosenblum and H.W. Janson, *Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1984), 357-58.

mass at St. Michael's church in Munich. He noticed a beautiful and richly dressed young woman enter the church and humbly place a lit taper on the pew she then knelt behind in prayer. MacEwen was so taken with the scene that when the woman left he followed her out only to see her being driven away in a carriage. The woman could have come from the highest station in society but MacEwen read another meaning into the humility and anguish he saw in her expression and posture.⁵⁰ Hitchcock's title spoke of who his subject was while MacEwen's implied what she was. Prostitutes had become constant points of reference for artists in nineteenth-century Paris (Fig. 18). The influence of MacEwen's training in France is apparent in the stylized description of his *Magdalen's* features (inset Fig. 17), which alludes to her sexuality. When the *Chicago Times-Herald* reviewed MacEwen's *A Magdalen* it was hailed as "the greatest picture yet painted by the Chicago artist...replete with refined imagination and subtle insight into character."⁵¹ MacEwen's *Magdalen* marked the pinnacle of his career.

⁵⁰ Art Institute of Chicago. *Half a Century of American Art* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1939), 32.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 32.

CONTEMPORARIES

MacEwen was working during a time when things moved and changed very quickly in art communities. To maintain any degree of success in his field, an artist had to continually strive to create a demand for his work. This meant keeping himself abreast of new innovations in the industry and a willingness to bend to the demands of the public. By the time MacEwen made his first trip to Paris, many of his contemporaries were beginning to transition into Impressionism while others were already leaving the movement to explore even newer ideas. Consider the career of another American expatriate, Mary Stevenson Cassatt (1844-1926); an ideal example of an artist embracing new ideas to stimulate public attention. Although she entered the art industry several years before MacEwen, her career shared many points in common with his and on occasion even intersected it. Today, most remember her for her depictions of the mother and child, her name is all but a household word while MacEwen's accomplishments remain unrecognized. To examine her career for similarities and differences with his will help explain why this is.

Mary Cassatt had studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, but her career was uneventful until she permanently settled in Paris in 1874. It was at the French Academy Salon that year that she first saw a bold pastel of ballet dancers by Edgar Degas. As he also noticed her entry, Degas invited her to join the Impressionists, she accepted, and they subsequently became close and lifelong friends.⁵² Cassatt encountered Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints through the Impressionists artists she exhibited with in 1877 and began producing her own prints as

⁵² *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, Vol. 1, A-F (Radcliff College, n.d.), 303-04.

early as 1879.⁵³ Believing that it provided good discipline and was the best type of training for improving draftsmanship, she had studied printmaking with Carlo Raimondi in Parma in 1872. These were her first and foremost reasons for taking up the medium and why she was particularly interested in the dry point and soft ground techniques.⁵⁴

There had not been any more exhibitions of the Impressionists group after 1886. In 1889, a group of *peintres-graveurs* (painters-printmakers) began to organize exhibitions at the Durand-Ruel Gallery in Paris, also the primary dealer of the Impressionists. Cassatt intended to exhibit at the annual exhibition of 1891, but the *peintres-graveurs* formally organized themselves into the Société des Peintres-Graveurs Français that year and ruled that foreign-born artists would not be admitted. Exclusion from the new group brought about Cassatt's first solo show. She, as well as Camille Pissarro, opened on the same day as the Société des Peintres-Graveurs Français in adjacent galleries at the Durand-Ruel.⁵⁵ At dinner that night, Cassatt found herself the brunt of much teasing from her friends about her act of "retaliation," but two very significant things came from her Durand-Ruel show; she gained the necessary confidence to make another important career altering decision two years later and her style of painting began to move away from the Impressionist to something more solid in form.⁵⁶ In 1890, the eighteenth-century Japanese master printmaker Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806) exhibited more than one hundred of his woodblock prints and illustrated books at the École des Beaux-Arts. He frequently portrayed women with children, but in

⁵³ Elliot Bostwick Davis, "Mary Cassatt's Color Prints. (renowned 19th-century woman artist)" in *Magazine Antiques, Act.*, 1998. http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1026/n4_v154/21218080/print.jhtml.

⁵⁴ Suzanne G. Lindsay, *Mary Cassatt and Philadelphia*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 78.

⁵⁵ Frederick A. Sweet, *Miss Mary Cassatt: Impressionist from Pennsylvania* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 118.

⁵⁶ Lindsay, 78.

several portfolios he represented the daily lives of women and young girls (Fig. 19).⁵⁷ Cassatt visited the exhibit and in that same year began creating her greatest contribution to printmaking with a series of ten color aquatints. She openly admitted that the Japanese print show had made a profound impression on her and that she was attempting the color prints hoping for some of the same effects they had accomplished.⁵⁸ Their techniques were different of course. The Japanese woodcuts relied on a different block for each color and another for the line. Cassatt's prints also required multiple plates but the type of line produced by etching or drypoint was finer than that of the wood cut and color applied through aquatint was not as intense.⁵⁹ Cassatt's suite of color prints, generally known to connoisseurs as "The Ten", comprised her most daring explorations of intimate subject matter drawn from scenes of women in everyday life.⁶⁰ At the time Cassatt began printmaking she was already realizing a substantial amount of success with her oil and pastel paintings but, following "The Ten", her style began to crossover from one medium to another. In 1880, she painted her first version of *The Child's Bath* (Fig. 20). Here her brushstrokes are loose with only a suggestion of lines and patterns through out the composition. For instance, the pleating of the mother's skirt and the ruffles on her morning jacket are just hinted at. The stripes of the chair's upholstery are vague shadows and the patterns in the wallpaper are completely indescribable. The water in the washbasin on the tabletop is barely discernable from the patterns in the bowl's decorations. In the colored print of

⁵⁷ Ibid, 78.

⁵⁸ Sweet, 122.

⁵⁹ Sweet, 118.

⁶⁰ Patricia Junker, Barbara McCandless, Jane Myers, John Rohrbach, and Rick Stewart, *An American Collection: Works from the Amon Carter Museum* (New York: Hudson Hills Press Inc., 2001), 130.

1891 by the same name (Fig. 21), Cassatt has emulated the Japanese elements of flat, shallow space, large areas of unmodulated color, and ornamental patterns. The scene is tight and controlled. By the time she painted yet a third version of *The Child's Bath* (Fig. 22), she had begun to incorporate those same Japanese applications of space, color, and patterns. Again, her brush has become more controlled and her figures more solid. She has also begun to change the viewer advantage point from straight forward to one slightly elevated above her subjects.

In early 1892, Berthe Honore Palmer, a Chicago socialite, collector and the chairperson of the Board of Lady Managers of the 1893 Columbian Exposition acquired a set of Cassatt's prints. Within months Cassatt was laboring in virtual isolation in Bachivillers, France, about ten miles from Eragny, on a 58-foot mural for the Women's Building of the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition. It was the project that made Mary Cassatt an American painter, not that she had ever considered herself as anything else. She had lived in Paris most of her adult life and had seldom returned to the States. When both of her parents and a sister grew elderly and infirm, Cassatt brought them to live with her where she cared for them until their deaths. This responsibility and the fact that she did not tolerate sea travel very well forbade her from extensive travel. Her opportunities to promote her work in the United States were very limited and when one did avail itself her work had not been received very well. Cassatt insisted that "I am an American...clearly and frankly American."⁶¹ On those rare occasions that she visited her homeland to see family, encourage interest in her art, and promote the development of art schools in the United States, she was always saddened by the lack of enthusiasm

⁶¹ Stephen May, "Modern Woman: Mary Cassatt " accessed at <http://www.antiquesandthearts.com/archive/cassatt.htm>, 7.

for her work.⁶² Simultaneously, MacEwen was enjoying very favorable reception of his work. Yet, some years after her death Cassatt's cannon of work elevated her to the status of an icon while MacEwen was eventually forgotten. There were several things that may have ultimately given her that advantage over MacEwen. It is evidenced that the cannons of both artist's were impressed upon by their training and the work of their mentors, but Cassatt's adaptations in her medium and subject matter were very progressive compared to that of many of her contemporaries. She was also fortunate to have aligned herself with other avant garde artists of her time. Those connections would have prompted more opportunities for visibility and recognition. Lastly, although she was disappointed with her works reception in the United States, that public as a whole may not have been ready for her progressive ideas. Still, her work was earning the attention and respect from other American artists who were committed to her eventual success.

After Melchers' marriage to Corrine Mackel in 1903, he became actively involved in procuring works of art by other American expatriate painters for acquisition by a variety of American organizations, regional art museums, and private collections.⁶³ Corrine's family founded the Telfair Academy in Savannah, Georgia. When Melchers permanently returned to the United States in 1915, MacEwen, who was still residing between Egmond and Paris, acted as his liaison during these arrangements. Many of the works they negotiated were paintings and pastels by Mary Cassatt. Due in part to the comradeship of MacEwen and Melchers, Cassatt's work is held in over ninety

⁶² Ibid, 7.

⁶³ *Gari Melchers: A Retrospective Exhibition*, 154.

museums, galleries, and art institutes around the world today.⁶⁴

Perhaps further impressed by Cassatt's work, the mother and child theme became of favorite of Melchers. In 1892, the same year he, MacEwen, and Cassatt were readying their murals for the impending world's fair, he painted *Mother and Child with Orange* (Fig. 23). Here Melchers gives less attention to detail and modeling of color than in his previous work. Over the next fifteen years, he repeated this theme in another dozen or more works.⁶⁵ At the time that Cassatt's scenes were becoming more structured, Melchers' was moving in the exact opposite direction. His *Mother and Child* dated 1905-1908 (Fig. 24) is little more than a line drawing with areas of color scribbled in. The medium used here, a mixture of watercolor, charcoal, and pastel, lends itself to this type of composition, but Melchers often sought and achieved the same effect with oil on canvas. On the other hand, MacEwen's work stayed consistent with his training, but not because he was not interested in exploring something new.

MacEwen continued to paint Dutch peasants in their simple, daily routines then sent the finished pieces to exhibitions throughout Europe and the United States, but perhaps he recognized a problem. Although his work had been heralded as among the best produced in his time, that time was passing and he would have to be more innovative with his art to continue to compete with his peers. At the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1900, MacEwen exhibited another life-size Dutch genre painting and portraits, subjects he had not presented before.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ The original correspondence relating to these and other business transactions that MacEwen managed for Melchers is archived at Belmont, The Gari Melchers Estate & Memorial Gallery in Fredericksburg, VA.

⁶⁵ *Gari Melchers: A Retrospective Exhibition*, 65-66.

⁶⁶ Diane P. Fischer, ed., *Paris 1900: The "American School" at the Universal Exposition*. (Montclair, NJ: Montclair Art Museum, 1999), 200.

Among his growing list of regular patrons were commissions by prominent families for portraits. His painting of *Miss Phyllis* (Fig. 25), now owned by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, is one of only a few of his known extant portraits. This piece is important to this study in that it exhibits subtle, stylistic changes that suggest MacEwen had become concerned with redefining his oeuvre.

Miss Phyllis may have been commissioned to commemorate the subject's coming of age as the salutation used indicates she is single and her left hand is void of the traditional wedding ring. She is seated with her back to a mirror and holds a black hat in her lap. It is safe to assume that Miss Phyllis' beautiful facial features are due to her youth and natural endowments and not to any stylization on MacEwen's part. MacEwen did carefully model her features to render them very realistic and maintained his skillful control over paint and brush throughout the entire image. What sets the scene slightly apart from his earlier work is the use of color variations in the subject's dress rendering a satin-like sheen to the garment, as well as, the mirror image of his subject. Neither of these visual elements are significant indicators that MacEwen was attempting something progressive with this particular portrait. In fact, MacEwen had also dressed his *Magdalen* in rich fabrics, but a theory emerges when *Miss Phyllis* is compared to another of MacEwen's portraits, *Lady in a Black Hat* (Fig. 26).

The same subject, wearing the same attire, sat for both of these paintings. At first glance one is compelled to think that MacEwen did not finish the work. The details of the subject's face and hair are very distinct while from the chin down her costume is simply implied by broad strokes of color that are not even carried to the edge of the canvas. It does appear to be unfinished, yet what is represented does not resemble

something preparatory. Although these flat areas of color are minutely defined with some shading there are no visibly distinct boundaries present to indicate that this area of the portrait was still in its sketch phase. It appears that MacEwen was experimenting with the loose brush of the Impressionists, but all his later work indicates that he did not take to it. Instead, he turned his attention to the mirror image.

TRANSITION

This visual element of painting a subject from the back was not new to MacEwen. Most likely inspired by the Swedish artist Casper David Friedrich (1774-1840), MacEwen had incorporated it into many of his scenes from the beginning of his career. Best known for his allegorical landscapes, Friedrich was an important figure in the nineteenth century German Romantic movement. The primary focus of his art was nature, but he often set human figures with their backs to his audience into his scenes. Dwarfed in comparison to his expansive landscapes, Friedrich's figures gaze at nature evoking a subjective, emotional response from his viewers to the natural world.⁶⁷ In many of Friedrich's compositions though, his human subjects are a more integral part of the scene and their response to nature is his only focus. As seen in *Woman by the Window* (Fig. 27), Friedrich has removed most references to nature by staging the female indoors. She stands at an open window beyond which is a faintly described shipyard; the mast of one boat can be discerned just above and to the right of her head. The viewer has some idea of what she is looking at, but is left to speculate on why. Although the messages in MacEwen's compositions were more straight-forward, a scene such as this one may well have inspired MacEwen's most progressive attempt to develop a personal hallmark with his painting.

In 1900, MacEwen began a series of paintings that launched the "cosmopolitan"⁶⁸ phase of his career. Each depicts a full-length socialite contemplating her own image in a mirror. These studies remained distinct, his brush tight and

⁶⁷ Christopher John Murray. *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760-1850* (New York; London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), 338.

⁶⁸ The term "cosmopolitan" is not used here to describe a new movement that MacEwen entered, rather the level of urban sophistication and worldliness of his subjects.

controlled, but he did lighten his palette to bright whites and pastels to create the beautiful fabrics he so skillfully imitated. What MacEwen did in these works was to reverse the position of his subject. Instead of viewing her posed with her back to the mirror, he turned her around to face her own image.

Vanity (Fig. 28) might have been another debutant's portrait, but the painting's title seems inappropriate for that purpose. As was the case with *Lady in a Black Hat*, the titles to these works add a little mystique, but are somewhat misleading. They are, in fact, portraits; many very similar to others by design but not part of any series. MacEwen created, then recreated several versions of this scene. Ranging in size from 3 feet by 2 feet to as large as 7 feet by 3 feet, these pieces were probably commissioned and custom sized to fit the needs of his patrons. Most often one painting's subject would be identical to another with only slight changes to the facial features and the color of her Empire costume. MacEwen would also correct the furnishings around the subject; another indication that these paintings were patron specific.

Commissioned work, especially portraits, were the mainstay of many artists of the day so that aspect of their trade was very competitive. An artist had to be very innovative to have his work preferred over another's. For a few years, MacEwen's mirror image was his edge, but it did not earn him any extraordinary prestige. It may, however, have proven to be a lucrative sales tactic at a time when he might have needed the work the most. In 1889, the year before he embarked on his Cosmopolitan campaign, MacEwen took a wife, Mary Ella Ward.

LATER YEARS

MacEwen's cosmopolitan phase lasted about six years after which his work, for lack of a better description, simply mellowed. After 1910, his production began to slow. There was still the occasional Dutch genre and exposition, but his interest seemed to be given over to contemporary scenes, many of which may have been inspired by his family. When MacEwen painted his daughter's portrait (Fig. 29) is not documented, but she clearly posed for his painting *Young Girl Reading by the Window* (Fig. 30) while still a child. Although she is depicted in real time, her setting of the draped table and curtained window is an atavism to MacEwen's earliest work. It is a though his art has come full circle.

Having developed arthritis in his hands, MacEwen retired from painting in 1920. He remained in Paris where he dabbled in printmaking and continued to oversee Melchers' European business interest. With the onset of World War II, he and his family were forced to permanently return to the United States. They settled in New York City in 1940 and were still there when MacEwen died in 1943.

CONCLUSION

Walter MacEwen's art was shown world wide, including every Paris Salon since 1885 until his retirement, earning him over thirty prestigious awards and appointments.⁶⁹ He represented the United States in international expositions, painted portraits of powerful people and murals for famous buildings. Why, then, in light of such distinguished accomplishments, did the world all but forget about him after his death?

The first answer is simple. Even though his career spanned in excess of thirty five years, MacEwen did not produce an impressive volume of work. On October 6, 1939, he wrote a casual letter to Daniel Rich, Director of Fine Arts at the Art Institute of Chicago with which he enclosed lists of his major works, exhibitions, and commendations. This list of credits indicates that MacEwen's work was well received, but the list of his major works referenced less than two hundred paintings.⁷⁰ That is a very meager amount of work compared to the production of his contemporaries, specifically that of his cohort Melchers. During the same time span, Melchers produced over nineteen hundred paintings which are still housed at Belmont, plus those now in the possession of other institutions.⁷¹

Second, even though each of MacEwen's paintings may have stood alone as an impressive accomplishment, the collection as a whole reflected little diversity and was not stylistically innovative. Unable to escape the confines of a conservative academic training, MacEwen's work was outmoded as he completed it and the reputation of this

⁶⁹ Documented correspondence from Walter MacEwen to Daniel Rich, Director of Fine Arts, Art Institute of Chicago, October 6, 1939; art files of Walter MacEwen, *A Magdalen*, Chicago Institute of Art, Chicago, IL.

⁷⁰ Art files of Walter MacEwen, *A Magdalen*, Institute of Art, Chicago, IL.

⁷¹ *Gari Melchers: A Retrospective Exhibition*, 151-158.

once internationally acclaimed celebrity was becoming obscure before his career ended.⁷²

While studying in Paris, Graham Devoe Williford became particularly fond of the work of the American artists who had studied and worked in Europe. During the late 1950s he began to collect the works of those artists he favored, but whose styles were no longer popular with art connoisseurs and the public in general. By his death in 2006, he had accumulated more than one thousand American paintings and decorative art pieces. *The Witches* is now on tour with close to sixty additional works of art from the Williford estate. Many of these paintings have been individually displayed in major museums throughout the country, but hopefully *Graham Williford's America* will eventually incite a renewed appreciation for the work of Walter MacEwen and other forgotten American artists like him.⁷³

In the meantime, I intend to share this project with every organization that has contributed to its happening. As I have mapped it in this document, my trajectory is now linked with MacEwen's own; therefore, my research is ongoing. There are numerous holdings with accompanying art files I have yet to view. He has living descendants I hope to interview. When other individuals see his work, they too will wonder about Walter MacEwen. I will consider this project a success when my work is there to answer their questions.

⁷² Joanne D. Catron, director of Belmont, the Gari Melchers Estate & Memorial Gallery and the leading authority on Melchers came to the same conclusion about his career in her museum booklet, *True & Clear: the story of Gari Melchers*, 23.

⁷³ *Graham Williford's America*, Tyler Museum of Art exhibition brochure.

APPENDIX A
LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1.....Walter MacEwen, *The Witches*, c.1892, oil on canvas, 79 x 118¾ in., Graham Williford Foundation for American Art, reproduced in Carolyn Kinder Carr and George Gurney. *Revisiting the White City: American Art at the World's Fair*. (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art; National Portrait Gallery, 1993), 167, Plate 64.
- Figure 2.....George Hitchcock, *A Magdalen*, c1887, oil on canvas, 62½ x 80½ in., Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.
- Figure 3.....Gari Melchers, *The Pilots*, 1887, oil on canvas, 67¾ x 83½ in., Frye Art Museum, Seattle, WA.
- Figure 4.....Walter MacEwen, *The Judgment of Paris*, c1886, oil on canvas, 36¼ x 50¼ in., Tennessee Wesleyan College, Athens, TN, reproduced in Carolyn Kinder Carr and George Gurney. *Revisiting the White City: American Art at the World's Fair*. (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art; National Portrait Gallery, 1993), 171, plate 68.
- Figure 5.....Johannes Vermeer, *Couple Drinking Wine*, c1658-1660, canvas 65 x 77 cm, Galerie Dahlem, Berlin, reproduced in Pierre Couthion. *Dutch and Flemish Painting* (New Jersey; Chartwell Books, Inc., 1983), p. 144.
- Figure 6.....Walter MacEwen, *The Ghost Story*, 1887, oil on canvas, 47¼ x 75¼ in., Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH.
- Figure 7.....Gari Melchers, *The Sermon*, 1886, oil on canvas, 62¾ x 86½ in., National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC, reproduced in Gari Melcher. *Gari Melchers: A Retrospective Exhibition* (St. Petersburg: Museum of Fine Arts, 1990), 20, plate 2.
- Figure 8.....Drawn by A. Castaigne, *The World's Fair – Looking north from Lion Fountain*, reproduced in W. Lewis Fraiser. "Decorative Painting at the World's Fair: The Works of Gari Melchers and Walter McEwen" in *The Century Magazine* Vol. 95, no.1 May, 1893), 2.
- Figure 9.....Photograph of Gari Melchers and Walter McEwen discussing Melchers' mural, *The Arts of War*, for the Liberal Arts Building of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893, Belmont, the Gari Melchers Estate and Memorial Gallery, Fredericksburg, VA.
- Figure 10.....Walter MacEwen, *Music*, 1893, canvas tympanum mural, 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, IL, reproduced in *Art Treasures from the World's Fair*. (Chicago: The Werner Co., 1894), 135.
- Figure 11.....Gari Melchers, *Arts of War*, 1893, canvas tympanum mural, 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, IL, reproduced in *Art Treasures from the World's Fair*. (Chicago: The Werner Co., 1894), 137.

- Figure 12.....George H. Boughton, *Pilgrims Going to Church*, 1867, oil on canvas, 28¼ x 51½ in. (70.6 x 128.7 cm), New York Historical Society, New York, reproduced in William Ayers, *Picturing History: American Painting 1770-1930* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1993), 179, fig. 121.
- Figure 13.....Max Liebermann (1847-1935) *Women Plucking Geese*, 1871-1872, oil on canvas, 46½ x 67 ¾ in., Staatliche Museen, East Berlin, reproduced in Richard and Caroline Brettell, *Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1983), 43.
- Figure 14.....Gustave Courbet, *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849-50, oil on canvas, 10'3 3/8 x 21'9 3/8 in. (3.13 x 6.64 m), Musée d'Orsay, Paris, reproduced in Frederick Hartt, *Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 910, fig. 32-10.
- Figure 15.....Édouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass (LéDejuner sur l'Herbe)*, 1863, oil on canvas, 7 x 8 ft. (2.13 x 2.64 m), Musée d'Orsay, Paris, reproduced in Frederick Hartt, *Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 921, fig. 33-2.
- Figure 16.....Thomas Eakins, *The Biglen Brothers Turning the Stake*, 1873, oil on canvas, 40¼ x 60¼ in., Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH, Reproduced in Robert Rosenblum and H.W. Janson, *19th-Century Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1984), plate 58.
- Figure 17.....Walter MacEwen, *A Magdalen*, c. 1896, oil on canvas, 54½ x 42 in., Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.
- Figure 18.....Henri Gervex, *Rolla*, 1878, oil on canvas, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux, reproduced in Hollis Clayson. *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1991), 81, plate 45.
- Figure 19.....Kitagawa Utamaro, reproduced at www.sushiran.com/etcetera/gallery/images/utam2.jpg
- Figure 20.....Mary Cassatt, *The Child's Bath*, 1880, oil on canvas, 100 x 65 cm., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, reproduced in Judith A. Barker. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman* (Chicago: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 28.
- Figure 21.....Mary Cassatt, *The Child's Bath*, 1890-91, drypoint and aquatint on cream laid paper, 32.1 x 24.7 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, reproduced in Judith A. Barker. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman* (Chicago: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), plate 56.

- Figure 22.....Mary Cassatt, *The Child's Bath*, 1893, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 66 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, reproduced in Judith A. Barker. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman* (Chicago: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), plate 72.
- Figure 23.....Gari Melchers, *Mother and Child with Orange*, c1892, oil on canvas, 29 x 19 ½ in., Belmont, The Gari Melchers Estate and Memorial Gallery, Fredericksburg, VA, reproduced in Diane Lesko. *Gari Melchers: A Retrospective Exhibition* (St. Petersburg, Florida: Museum of Fine Arts, 1990), plate 7.
- Figure 24.....Gari Melchers, *Mother and Child*, c1905-1908, watercolor, charcoal, and pastel on paper mounted on board, 24 x 18 ½ in., Belmont, The Gari Melchers Estate and Memorial Gallery, Fredericksburg, VA, reproduced in Diane Lesko. *Gari Melchers: A Retrospective Exhibition*. (St. Petersburg, FL: Museum of Fine Arts, 1990), plate 18.
- Figure 25.....Walter MacEwen, *Miss Phyllis*, c1900, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in., Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA.
- Figure 26.....Walter MacEwen, *Lady in a Black Hat*, c1900, oil on canvas, 32 x 25 ½ in., reproduced at www.askart.com.
- Figure 27.....Casper David Friedrich, *Woman by the Window*, 1822, oil on canvas, 18 3/8 x 14 5/8 in., Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, West Berlin.
- Figure 28.....Walter MacEwen, *Vanity*, 1906, oil on canvas, 40 x 24 in., reproduced at www.askart.com.
- Figure 29.....Walter MacEwen, *The Artist's Daughter*, n.d., oil on canvas, 22 x 18 in., Belmont, The Gari Melchers Memorial Gallery, Fredericksburg, VA.
- Figure 30.....Walter MacEwen, *Young Girl Reading by the Window*, c1910, oil on canvas, 21 ½ x 18 in., reproduced at www.askart.com.

APPENDIX B
LIST OF ADDITIONAL WORKS

The following list of works has been compiled through various sources such as the Smithsonian Institution Research Information System, exhibition and auction records, etc. At this writing, these pieces remain undated, therefore, could not be correlated in MacEwen's chronology.

Path Through the Orchard
Two Young Ladies
Un dimanche en Holland
Girl Looking in a Mirror
Head of a Young Dutch Girl
Les Amateurs
Grandmother and Child
Young Girl Reading by the Window
Girl Standing With Book
Before the Mirror
Girl Reading Near a Window
A Quiet Moment
A Friend of the Court
The Secretary
The Shepherdess
The Letter
At the Burgomaster's

Woman with a Fan
Flying Kite
Interior: Two Women
Elegant Lady in Evening Clothes
Lady with Red Hair
Composing a Letter
Dutch Interior
The Notary
The Old Guard of the House of Orange
The Scribe
Two Girls Netting Fish in a Creek
Woman Regarding Her Own
The Yellow Robe
Idyll of Summer
At the Window
Confidences

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