The Harnett Collection of American Painting

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 1984 Joel and Lila Harnett became continuing donors, enabling the Marsh Gallery to bring to the University of Richmond community an exciting series of exhibitions of the work of major contemporary artists. On behalf of the Marsh Gallery, the faculty of the Art Department, and Dr. F. Sheldon Wettack, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, I wish to extend thanks to the Harnetts for their vision and generosity.

For their help in bringing about this exhibition, I also wish to thank Dean F. Sheldon Wettack; Charles Johnson, Ephraim Rubenstein, and Mark Rhodes and Linda Brown of the Art Department; Dorothy Wagener of the Office of Communications; the UR Cultural Affairs Committee, and the J. Thomas Lecture Fund.

Elizabeth Langhorne-Reeve
Director of the Marsh Gallery

Cover: Edward Hopper, Sugar Maple, 1938
THE HARNETT COLLECTION OF AMERICAN PAINTING
The Marsh Gallery, University of Richmond, January 10-26, 1989

Joel Harnett, a 1945 graduate of the University of Richmond, discovered his interest in art when he met his wife, Lila. She had studied painting at the Art Students League in New York City. As a young couple they shared a love of art and of the collecting of art. Today with great generosity they share their collection, the fruit of some thirty years of intelligent and loving discrimination, with Joel’s alma mater.

Both diversity and coherence, in addition to a striking level of quality, characterize the Harnett collection. Having to limit themselves in some fashion, they decided early on to collect only American artists. Their preference has been for art with a referential content and what Lila Harnett describes as a “nourishing” substance. More specifically, they have sought out artists with an individual, even singular vision, prominent among whom are Charles Burchfield, Reginald Marsh, Edward Hopper and George Tooker. This criterion makes for diversity: the imaginative “Gothic” landscapes of Burchfield, the acutely observed urban bustle of Marsh, the lonely light-filled spaces of Hopper, the quiet intense psychological dramas of Tooker. The depth in which they collect the work of these men lends their collection a satisfying coherence, even as they continue their fascination with singular vision in individual works by artists of a younger generation, such as Pearlstein, Beal and Birmelin.

The first work the Harnetts ever bought was a Burchfield drawing done in 1920 as a study for the painting Factory Town Scene, now in the Newark Museum. Burchfield is an American master of watercolor, and as John Baur has said, is the last genuine pantheist in a tradition that stretches back to the early nineteenth century— to Emerson and Cole. In the watercolor Cicada Song in September, 1956, for instance, he renders the vibrating spirit of nature and sound of the cicada’s song in his linear, rhythmic patterning of the evergreen forest.

Becoming fully engaged in the adventure of collecting, the Harnetts followed all of Burchfield’s work as it came into John Clancey’s New York gallery. They began to seek out, as they have also done for Hopper, Marsh and Tooker, key examples of the distinctive facets of an artist’s vision. Burchfield’s watercolor Passing Shower in June, 1917, was done in the year that he himself called his “golden year,” when he first hit his full strength as an artist. In a surprisingly bold composition he depicts a rainstorm moving over rooftops. Burchfield loved the changing moods of nature and its seasons. Whereas in Cicada Song the day is hot and the sun is streaming through the trees, cold winter light characterizes both Swamp Apparitions, 1962, a full blossoming of his pantheist vision, and the comforting Pussy Willows by Moonlight, painted as a Christmas present for his wife in 1964.

Again exemplifying the Harnetts’ success in finding key examples of an artist’s vision, Edward Hopper’s etching Evening Wind, 1921, is one of the finest impressions of this print ever made. The wind, coming in through the open window, blows the curtain, as light flows over the nude girl in that display of light and dark planes that so fascinated Hopper. His love of American light is also central to his depiction of the urban landscape in Manhattan Bridge and Lily Apartments, 1926, and of the rural New England meadow in Sugar Maple, 1938. These two watercolors, a medium in which Hopper often worked, are exemplary of the urban and rural genres which made Hopper famous as a painter of the American scene in the 1920s and ’30s.

Another American Scene painter whose singular vision the
Charles Burchfield, *Pussy Willows by Moonlight*, 1964
Harnetts have pursued is Reginald Marsh, who celebrates people in urban New York, in such quintessential images as the May 31, 1931, etching Tenth Av. at 27th St., a final state, and the 1952 drawing of a Coney Island scene On the Beach, Eyes Examined, done in 1946 in tempera, possesses the humor that characterized Marsh’s own person. Lila Harnett tells the tale that even in the middle of a conversation Marsh would get his sketch book out. In the gallery questioning his dealer John Clancey — “Did you sell any of my pictures?” “What’s this?” and “How’s that going?” — he would be all the while looking out the window into the street, sketching constantly. He went out to the Coney Island beaches, would roll up his pants, put a handkerchief, knotting it at the four corners, on the top of his head to protect himself from the sun, and would stand there knee deep in the water — sketching the bathers who gathered around.

In 1943-45 George Tooker studied at the Art Students League with, among others, Reginald Marsh. “Reginald Marsh was a marvelous teacher, a wonderful artist and man.” While building on the American revival of Renaissance techniques of draughtsmanship, composition and execution emphasized at the League, Tooker found his own and singular artistic voice. Examples of his art constitute another very strong part of the Harnett collection. Tooker works in the painstaking medium of egg tempera, usually completing only one or two paintings a year. Two such works are the Harnetts’ Gypsies, 1968, and Ward, 1970-71. The exquisite precision of his figuration is inflected by a slightly surreal and modern psychological vision. He explores the human attempt to communicate, even as it is encased in an atmosphere laden with silence and unsettling echoes. The eyes in the drawing The Sleepers are open; the young man in the lithograph Voice listens — through a barrier; the two women in Gypsies confront us — with their mystery.

Both extending and rounding out the Harnetts’ collection is a sequence of individual pieces by a variety of artists, among whom are Balcomb Greene, Michael Mazur, Philip Pearlstein, Jack Beal and Robert Birmelin. This sequence focuses on a range of realist and figural art done from the 1960s through the present. While the Harnetts have collected a small number of abstract works, for instance by Paul Jenkins and Fangor, they are clearly drawn to work that has a discernible subject matter. Interestingly, they own a figural painting by Balcomb Greene, who was prominent in the American Abstract Artists group of the late 1930s but who later rejected non-objective abstraction in favor of the cubistically shattered figures of such a work as Cafe, 1963.

Although the works of the 1960s to the present seem diverse, echoes and resemblances appear when one studies the collection. Greene’s Cafe, 1963, shares its urban jostle with Marsh’s Tenth Av. at 27th St., 1931. Mazur’s View onto Garden with Blue Chair, 1973, echoes the light-filled spaces of Hopper. Pearlstein’s Reclining Nude and Piano Stool, 1968, echoes the strong figural style of Tooker, but with the psychology taken out. This 1968 painting is an early distillation of the New Realism in which the artist’s eye registers a female nude and a piano stool with the same dispassionate objectivity. On the other hand, a pronounced reintroduction of allegory into figural composition marks Beal’s Temperance and Gluttony, a 1977-78 pastel. Much as Beal’s pastel offers a vivid contrast to the lusty and simple joys of Marsh’s On the Beach, so the urban sidewalks depicted by both Marsh and Greene provide a thought-provoking backdrop to Birmelin’s up-to-the-minute image of urban anomy, Street Crossing — The Red Headed Woman, 1985. Threads weaving through the Harnetts’ collection continue to multiply, and reward our attention.

Elizabeth Langborne-Reeve is on the Art and Art History faculty of the University of Richmond, and is the Director of the Marsh Gallery.
CHECKLIST
Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.

1. Edward Hopper
   *Evening Wind*, 1921
   Etching on paper
   6 3/8 x 8 1/4 inches

2. Edward Hopper
   *Sugar Maple*, 1938
   Watercolor on paper
   14 x 20 inches

3. Edward Hopper
   *Manhattan Bridge and Lily Apartments*, 1926
   Watercolor on paper
   14 x 20 inches

4. Charles Burchfield
   Study for *Factory Town Scene*, 1920
   Graphite, ink and wash on paper
   6 x 8 inches

5. Charles Burchfield
   *Swamp Apparitions*, 1962
   Watercolor on paper
   40 x 30 inches

6. Charles Burchfield
   *Passing Shower in June*, 1917
   Watercolor on paper
   18 x 22 inches

7. Charles Burchfield
   *Cicada Song in September*, 1956
   Watercolor on paper
   40 x 33 inches

8. Charles Burchfield
   *Pussy Willows by Moonlight*, 1964
   Watercolor on paper
   41 x 33 1/4 inches

9. Reginald Marsh
   *Tenth Av. at 27th St.*, May 31, 1931
   Etching on paper
   8 x 11 inches

10. Reginald Marsh
    *Eyes Examined*, 1946
     Tempera
     30 x 20 inches

11. Reginald Marsh
    *On the Beach*, 1952
    Chinese ink on paper
    22 x 30 inches

12. George Tooker
    *Sleepers*, n.d.
    Graphite on paper
    16 x 22 inches

13. George Tooker
    *Ward*, 1970-71
    Egg tempera on gesso wood
    19 3/4 x 29 1/2 inches

14. George Tooker
    *Gypsies*, 1968
    Egg tempera on gesso wood
    23 x 23 inches

15. George Tooker
    *Mirror*, 1978
    Lithograph
    20 x 16 inches
16. George Tooker
   *Voice*, 1977
   Lithograph
   11 x 9¾ inches

17. Michael Mazur
   *View Onto Garden with Blue Chair*, 1973
   Oil on canvas
   35½ x 31½ inches

18. Balcomb Greene
   *Cafe*, 1963
   Oil on canvas
   40 x 50 inches

19. Philip Pearlstein
   *Reclining Nude and Piano Stool*, 1968
   Oil on canvas
   44 x 36 inches

20. Jack Beal
    *Temperance and Gluttony*, 1977-78
    Pastel on paper
    32 x 39 inches

21. Robert Birmelin
    *Street Crossing — The Red Headed Woman*, 1985
    Acrylic on canvas
    18 x 24 inches
THE HARNETT COLLECTION OF AMERICAN PAINTING
January 10-26, 1989

Tuesday, January 10
7:30 PM Introduction by Lila and Joel Harnett
Lecture on Edward Hopper by Gail Levin, Baruch College, City University of New York
8:30 PM Opening Reception, Marsh Gallery

Thursday, January 19
4:00 PM Film, "Burchfield's Vision."
Rm. 207, Modlin Fine Arts Center

MARSH GALLERY
Modlin Fine Arts Center
University of Richmond, Virginia 23173
804/289-8276

Hours: Tues.-Fri. 12:00-4:00 PM
Sat. and Sun. 1:00-5:00 PM