



Introduction

by Warren Adelson

The generation of artists of the last half of the 19th and the early decades of the 20th century explored the dynamics of the spectrum of media on paper with an energy and imagination that had not before been seen. It was a period in art history when pencil, charcoal, pastel, watercolor, the etching plate, and the lithography stone took on lives of their own among artists of the avant-garde, and the results of these creative efforts became works of art unto themselves. These works were not studies in preparation for a canvas in oil, as had been common for centuries before, but stood on their own as creations of the modern artist. Just as the “new painting,” Impressionism, adjusted the artist’s way of seeing the modern world, painters were excited with the prospect of pushing the boundaries of other media to create fresh and original imagery on paper in a myriad of ways. For these painters of modern life, spontaneity was a priority and artists labored to make their works seem fresh and alive. John Singer Sargent himself admitted that he worked assiduously in watercolor to achieve the effect of spontaneity, and to make what was painstakingly created appear offhand.

The American Watercolor Society began to hold exhibitions in 1867, and a few years later, the Society of Painters in Pastel rekindled an interest in pastel that had been dormant since the 18th century. Exhibitions of works on paper were held in American galleries, rented halls, and at the National Academy of Design, as well as in special sections of international exhibitions in America and abroad. Museums from New York and Boston to Toledo and Buffalo began to collect drawings, watercolors, pastels, and prints, which local patrons found accessible and affordable for themselves and as gifts to their museums.

For over four decades I have admired and collected works on paper, believing that artistic expression on paper can be more evocative in sensibility and more direct in artistic intent than premeditated canvases in oil. In this exhibition we have assembled a collection of works on paper by some of our favorite American artists. Each, in its own way, is a spokesman for the artist, and in some cases represents the medium for which he or she is most identified today. One senses the artist’s hand and sometimes even their voice in this diverse group of American works on paper, and we invite you to share this experience.

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