

Lesson Learned

American Art at the Paris World's Fair of 1867

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Abstract Displaying the most impressive recent inventions at the World's Fair of 1867 in Paris, the United States projected a strong idea of a modern country. The board responsible for selecting art works was equally ambitious. Even though the Americans sent their best art to France with the specific goal of showing that their art was as great as their industrial achievements, the exhibition must be considered a complete failure on this ground. Most of the paintings, compared to the European examples, were behind current movements and altogether unimpressive. While American artists did not achieve the recognition they had hoped for, this essay investigates the reasons why the World's Fair was a fundamental turning point for American art. The article also analyzes how the failures at the Paris event gave American artists a vision for improvement, illustrating that in the decades that followed many factors combined to elevate the quality of their works.

Keywords World's Fair. Paris 1867. American Art. American Artists. Art Exhibition.

The World's Fair of 1867 in Paris was visited by 15 million people, almost three times more than the previous exhibition in Paris in 1855 and the subsequent fair hosted by London in 1862. While the Fair was opening its gates to large audiences, a wounded United States was still recovering from the American Civil War (1861-1865) that sought to divide the country. President Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated and the southern states were just beginning the long and arduous steps toward reconstruction. Nevertheless a rebuilding and healing America participated in the Paris World's Fair.

Displaying the most impressive recent inventions and their industrial achievements, the Americans projected a strong idea of a modern country. The board responsible for selecting art works was equally ambitious. It was composed mostly of East Coast collectors who selected a total of 107 works by 49 artists, including some of the most important exponents of American art at the time: Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Winslow Homer, to name but a few.¹

Although the United States sent its best art to France with the specific goal of showing that American art was as great as its industrial achievements, the exhibition must be considered a complete failure on this ground. Most of the

paintings, compared to the European examples, were obviously behind current movements and altogether unimpressive. American artists didn't achieve the recognition they had hoped for and fell short of their countryman's accomplishments in the industrial sections. While observers on both sides of the ocean were highly critical of the Americans' art, they tended to agree that there was great potential yet to be achieved. The Paris World's Fair in 1867 in essence represents a fundamental turning point for American art. In the decades that followed many factors combined to improve the status of art in America. For example, patrons started to vigorously collect European art, particularly modern French painting, which helped American artists to see the need to seek training abroad. The failures at the Paris event gave American artists a vision for doing better in the future. In fact, they had far more positive experiences in subsequent exhibitions, notably the first World's Fair hosted by the United States, in Philadelphia in 1876, and again in Paris in 1878. After 1867 American art started on a more progressive path that would ultimately lead to a revolution in art in the middle of the twentieth century.

When the U.S. Secretary of State Hon. William H. Seward received the invitation for Americans to participate in the World's Fair, the Civil War was just ending. This unprecedented conflict on American soil exploded in 1861, after years of tensions between the northern and southern states over issues mostly related to slavery, industrial-

¹ The department of painting contained 82 works by 41 artists.



Figure 1. Frederic Edwin Church, *Niagara*, 1857. Oil on canvas; 101.6 × 229.9 cm (40 × 90 1/2 in). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund)

zation, commerce, and customs. Just in November of the previous year Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States of America and he guided the country through this internal war and a political crisis, ultimately defeating the Confederate States of America and preserving the Union. The southern states were just starting their long reconstruction when President Lincoln was assassinated, on April 15, 1865.

“By two decrees, dated June 22 and the 1st of last month, the Emperor has ordered that a Universal Exposition of the productions of agriculture, manufacture, and the fine arts should be opened at Paris May 1, 1867” (Blake 1870, 11), L. de Geofroy, minister of France to the United States, wrote to Seward on March 27, 1865. America had participated in three previous World Exhibitions, including the first ever in London in 1851, Paris in 1855, and London again in 1862.² Fairs offered America a stage to show off its industrial productions, to enhance its prestige, to increase exports, and to attract foreign investments. The Paris Universal Exposition gave the United States the further opportunity to project its newfound internal peace and increase its eco-

² With the aim to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the first World’s Fair, the exhibition was set to be held in 1861. Due to international issues, such as the beginning of the American Civil War and the Italian Wars of Independence, the exhibition was postponed by one year.

nomie prosperity. In another letter to Secretary Seward, the American minister to France noted that Napoleon III “had been very much astonished by the marvels of ingenuity and skill which he had observed in the United States, and was anxious to have them more known and appreciated in France” (Blake 1870, 13). Another American in Paris looked forward to the opportunity for the United States to exhibit a wide range of products “well selected, and complete enough to be national”, which, he added, would “produce an impression of surprise analogous to that produced by the disclosures of the war” (Blake 1870, 26-27). He also believed an event of global range would be the perfect place to display an image of the newly re-united country, becoming a catalyst for bright skilled workers willing to emigrate to America. Several journals echoed that consideration. “If it be asked, Why take all this trouble for the French Exhibition?” stated *The Evening Post*. “The answer is: The audience in Paris is the largest, the juries the best to be found, and whoever carries off the award is the champion of the world. We cannot afford to absent ourselves from a contest of this importance nor we can afford to do less than our best”.³

Secretary Seward undoubtedly was convinced by all the arguments about the potential for the

³ *The Evening Post*, 11 December, 1865.



Figure 2. Albert Bierstadt, *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, 1863. Oil on canvas; 186.7 × 306.7 cm (73 1/2 × 120 3/4 in). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Rogers Fund, 1907

American people of an international event on European soil and about the need of a government support. The French Imperial Commission, which oversaw the event, compiled a classification of 10 categories subdivided into 95 classes, that every participating country had to follow. Fine Art⁴ was the subject of the first group.⁵

The US State Department created an advisory committee to select the wide range of entries from numerous applications. William J. Hoppin,

⁴ The first group dedicated to works of art was divided into 5 classes, including paintings in oil; other paintings and drawings; sculpture, die-sinking, stone and cameo engraving; architectural designs and models; engraving and lithography (Blake 1870, 239-41).

⁵ The classification contained 9 other groups, including apparatus and applications of the liberal arts; furniture and other objects for the use of dwellings; clothing, including fabrics, and other objects worn upon the person; products, raw and manufactured, of mining industry, forestry, etc.; apparatus and process used in the common arts; food, fresh or preserved, in various states of preparation; live stock and specimens of agricultural buildings; live produce and specimens of horticultural works; articles exhibited with the special object of improving the physical and moral condition of the people (Blake 1870, 239-41).

a lawyer known for writing on art subjects, became chairman of the art commission. Additional members of the selection committee were prominent names from the New York art world.⁶ John T. Johnston, for example, was involved in the railroad business but he was also a notable art collector and future first president of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Other industrialists on the committee shared Johnston's passion for collecting, including Robert L. Stuart and Robert M. Olyphant. The art dealers Michael Knoedler and Samuel P. Avery and the essayist and critic Henry T. Tuckerman, author of *The Book of the Artists* in 1867, added professional perspective to the committee.⁷ The selection committee had two major parameters: the artworks had to be realized since 1855 and landscapes had to pre-

⁶ *New York Daily Tribune*, 23 January, 1867.

⁷ According to Troyen, in the first phase of the selection process Frederic Church, Jasper Cropsey, and Edwin White had been appointed by the National Academy of Design in New York with the aim to recommend measures for a complete exhibit of the national art in Paris. They also suggested the formation of a selection committee (Troyen 1984, 28).

dominate among all works, a genre where the American artists had reached particular recognition. Those parameters would help guide the commission to select works that could compete most strongly with European art, proving that the work of American artists could be as impressive as the nation's industrial, mechanical, and manufacturing products. Despite the desire to be "complete enough to be national", the entire committee hailed from the East Coast as did all of the artists they selected. Many were landscape painters associated with the Hudson River School, an art movement that reflected the influence of romanticism. Others were identified with the National Academy of Design, a New York institution aimed to promote the fine arts and modelled on the Royal Academy in London. Just a few artists came from beyond New York, including Joseph Foxcroft Cole and William Morris Hunt, both from Boston, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler of Philadelphia.

Three of the most important landscapes chosen by the committee were two by Frederic Edwin Church - *Niagara* (fig. 1) and *The Rainy Season in the Tropics* - and Albert Bierstadt's *The Rocky Mountains* (fig. 2). Church painted *Niagara*, an oil on canvas of impressive dimensions, in 1857 and had a tremendous success on both sides of the Atlantic. For the creation of this painting Church used as reference oil sketches and drawings he realized during previous travels to Niagara Falls. The overall composition guides the viewer's eyes: starting from the left foreground the gaze follows the line of the water diagonally to the right border, and then returns to the left edge, slowly progressing inside to the picture plan. Beyond the impact of the falls, the rainbow and a delicate sky tinted with pinks and violets allow the viewer to see the land on the horizon. All the realistic elements are infused with a profound content. Church doesn't merely paint a dramatic wilderness, he symbolically makes a statement of the unlimited strength and energy of the young American nation. It's a country whose art is "impulsive, erratic, irregular, but yet full of promise and undeveloped power", as one critic put it, a writer who considered *Niagara* "perhaps the finest picture yet done by an American" (Badeau 1859, 123). The same nationalistic message is noticeable in the works of other artists, such as Thomas Cole and John Trumbull. Nevertheless, Church's painting has no equal in displaying an indomitable spirit characteristic of both homeland and country. But it can also be seen as a tribute to modernity and to the ingenu-

ity of people who were trying to dominate wild nature. After its first exhibit in New York, the local *Harper's Weekly Magazine* concluded: "It marks a point in American landscape-painting, and in the history of the Falls in an event as striking as the suspension bridge".⁸ The Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge was built in 1855 to connect the Canadian and American sides of the falls. Church included a faint piece of the bridge in a later painting, *Niagara Falls from the American Side*. Michael Knoedler commissioned that painting and Church completed it in 1867. If Knoedler had intended to select it for the Paris Fair that year, it ended up not being among the entries.

Albert Bierstadt was a German-born painter who emigrated to America with his family when he was just a boy. Although he was associated with the Hudson River School, his interest in the landscapes of the West took him rapidly to embrace a kind of painting that captured the imagination of the American collectors and art critics of the nineteenth century. He became the epic poet of the West and his paintings of enormous dimensions with romanticized landscapes and visions of the "Far West" gave him great success and recognition. *The Rocky Mountains*⁹ is the remarkable result of a trip he took with a government survey to the Nebraska Territory in spring 1859. Colonel Frederick W. Lander headed the expedition, and it was Bierstadt's first trip to the West. He finished the painting in 1863, basing it on the sketches he made during that trip. It depicts an idealized mountain landscape in the Wyoming Range of the Rocky Mountains. An encampment of Native Americans in the foreground is observed from a distance, increasing the romanticized atmosphere of the entire composition. The painting received wide praise. "It is purely an American scene", a *Harper's Weekly* critic declared in 1864, "and may be truly called a historic landscape".¹⁰ Bierstadt communicated the essence of the American West, and although the painting didn't win any medals in Paris, it was one of the few entries from the United States that instilled curiosity among an international audience.

The portrait was the second style where the Americans felt they should excel. Fewer in number than the landscape genre, the portraits the

8 *Harper's Weekly Magazine*, 9 May, 1857.

9 The painting is known now as *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (1863, oil on canvas). The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York.

10 *Harper's Weekly Magazine*, 26 March, 1864.

committee chose included works by Charles Loring Elliott, George Peter Alexander Healy, and others. William Morris Hunt, a painter working in Paris at the time, had already been chosen to exhibit at the Fair but was allowed to add seven portraits to his portfolio. Hunt was one of the few artists in the show who had spent time abroad and who participated in the 1855 Paris exposition. Now, with 12 paintings among the 82 total in the American exhibit, Hunt was the most represented artist from the states. His *Italian Boy*,¹¹ realized in Paris the year before the World's Fair, reclaims the iconic subject of the Italian youth, popular among European and American painters. However, Hunt's composition reflects a knowledge of the French academic manner and the influence of French *peinture*, thanks to which he received some positive notice. Few other works exhibited in the American section showed that kind of European influence. Another exception was James Abbott McNeill Whistler,¹² who lived abroad since he was 21 and was clearly inspired by his European experience. Before moving to London in 1859, he enrolled in the Ecole Impériale and joined the atelier of Charles Gleyre. Whistler showed four paintings at the Fair, including *The White Girl*,¹³ (fig. 3) which had been rejected from two previous official exhibitions in 1862 and 1863 (the Royal Academy Exhibition and the Salon), but included at the Salon des Refusés the same year. This painting, dominated by various white shades in the subject's dress and in the background setting, received mixed reviews, but certainly was among the few American works often remembered in journals and newspapers.

The American exhibition included few historical compositions, an exception were Winslow Homer's paintings of the Civil War. Homer's activity as artist-correspondent during the conflict provided him subjects for his paintings. *The Bright Side*, depicting a group of African-Amer-



Figura 3. James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, 1862. Oil on canvas; 213 × 107.9 cm (83 7/8 × 42 1/2 in). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.: Harris Whittemore Collection

¹¹ The painting is known now as *Italian Peasant Boy* (1866, oil on canvas). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

¹² Randall stated that Whistler desired to display in the American section and it was possible thanks to the intercession of the American agent in Paris, George Lucas, with a member of the selection committee, Samuel Avery (Randall 1979, 26-27). Troyen noticed a certain ambivalence in Whistler participation in the World's Fair. In fact, he displayed his works in the British section in the two following Paris fairs (1878; 1889), but again in 1900 he contributed two portraits to the American section (Troyen 1984, 28).

¹³ Whistler later started to call the painting *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1862, oil on canvas). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

ican slaves resting next to a Union's sibley tent, was painted at the end of the conflict, in 1865. In *Confederate Prisoners at the Front*¹⁴ (fig. 4) Homer shows a group of Confederate officers captured by Brigadier General Barlow, from the Union army. Also on view were some domestic scenes depicting African-American subjects. For example, Eastman Johnson's *Old Kentucky Home* is a characteristic Southern scene showing slave life in an interior yard. The selection for the Paris Fair included only one still life, a canvas by John La Farge. Throughout his career La Farge worked in a variety of media and he reached great recognition as a natural colorist. His numerous travels and his "extraordinarily un-American education" (Foster 1979, 4-37) stimulated his creativity. In 1856 he moved to Paris and joined another American artist, Edward May, to study painting under the guidance of Thomas Couture. That didn't last long. While in Europe he discovered the English Pre-Raphaelite movement and especially admired the works of John Everett Millais and Gabriel Dante Rossetti. La Farge soon returned to America and "recognized [he] needed a training in the practice of painting". In 1859 he settled in Newport, Rhode Island, to study with William Morris Hunt, who had also trained with Couture in Paris, "to try the experiment, and began in a little more serious way than before" (Cortissoz 1911, 110).

The sculpture selection was circumscribed to only four artists who all hailed from the East Coast, and displayed a total of six works. Notably among them, however, was the female artist Harriet Hosmer's *Sleeping Faun*. Hosmer was one of the most recognized female sculptors of the nineteenth century. After studying sculpture in the United States she wanted to continue her education and moved to Rome in 1852.

The painting sections of the Paris Fair included works from 25 countries. Brazil had merely three paintings and France led the way with more than 500 works. The jury consisted of 25 members, 12 from France. The Americans failed to meet the high expectations of the selection committee. "The pictures sent from America are naturally few in number", M.D. Conway concluded in a detailed report of the exposition for *Harper's*: "And hardly the best that could have been selected from the recent works of our artists" (Conway 1867, 248). Frederic Church was the only Ameri-

can to receive a medal. His *Niagara* won a silver, but that was a small consolation, given that the jurors awarded 290 prizes to American products and inventions in other sections of the Fair. In arts France alone won 32 out of the 67 prizes (Leslie 1868, 6). Italy, which like the United States had just come out a period of conflict, presented only 51 works but received four prizes, including a grand medal.¹⁵

Observers had numerous complaints about the American performance at the Fair. The American gallery was poorly laid out, not well illuminated, and confusing because of its proximity to the British space. Although the Paris exhibition was largely held for the first time in the Champ de Mars (fig. 5) and boasted a new format of concentric rings in an ellipse that spanned nearly 119 acres,¹⁶ the space for American art felt inadequate to many people. In his official government report Frank Leslie noticed how the Americans were displayed at "one end of the British gallery" and also along an adjacent pathway next to the Italian exhibit. "This passage", Leslie wrote, "was constantly crowded, so that the lower ranges or tiers of pictures could seldom be seen, or if at all at a great disadvantage. Thus Gifford's *Twilight on Mount Hunter*, Hubbard's *View of the Adirondacks* and McEntee's *Virginia in 1863* were hung in very bad light, while works far inferior had prominent places in the gallery itself" (Leslie 1868, 9). Critics and artists shared similar impressions. "[America] had to content herself with a few empty places in the gallery of the English paintings", stated the critic Mantz, "and a corridor without gaiety and without light, which the public passed through, but where no one stopped" (Mantz 1867, 230; trans. by the Author). Whistler was disappointed for how his works had been displayed in 'dark corridors' and in a letter addressed to the American agent in Paris George A. Lucas wrote that he "won't have them hung where they are" (Mahey 1967, 251).

Another problem was the way that the selection committee overlooked certain painting subjects that some people felt would have worked to the American artists' advantage. For exam-

¹⁵ Italy and Rome participated at the show separately, displaying 51 and 25 paintings respectively. In fact, Rome didn't become part of the recently formed state of Italy until 1870, three years after the Paris World's Fair.

¹⁶ The layout allowed visitors to choose between a 'national approach', touring the different departments of the same country, or a 'topic approach', in which they could view products of the same category from different countries.

¹⁴ The painting is known now as *Prisoners from the Front* (1866, oil on canvas). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figura 4. Winslow Homer, *Prisoners From the Front*, 1866. Oil on canvas; 61 × 96.5 cm (24 × 38 in). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Gift of Mrs. Frank B. Porter, 1922

ple, there were no animal and marine pictures, which could have strengthened the American entry. "Among animals we have a peculiarity in the bison, so little known in Europe", noted Leslie in his report. "And we have also artists who, like [William Jacob] Hays, have spent years in the Far West in the study of its habits and peculiarities, whose large pictures, truthful in drawing and colour, bold and effective, would have been a feature in our collection, and compared favorably with any corresponding works in any of the competing galleries" (Leslie 1868, 14). Others noticed the lack of distinctive American scenes: "There should have been a prairie, a sierra, and some views of New England home life and pioneer life", the *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* declared. And after positively judging one painting that depicted "our autumnal foliage which is not paralleled anywhere in the world", the critic suggested there should have been more of such scenes (Conway 1867, 248). Critics on both sides of the Atlantic negatively commented on most of the works and on a "meagre and unsatisfactory gallery" (Leslie 1868, 16). A French critic

reproached the American painters as "petites artistes!" and defined their works as the proof of "childish arrogance" and "puerile ignorance" (De la Madelène 1867, 2061; trans. by the Author). Another critic complained that Whistler's works were "rather suggestions of power than complete art" (Jarves 1869, 298). George Cochran Lambdin's *The Last Sleep* was recorded as "in the manner of poor romance", and Daniel Huntington's *The Republican Court, Time of Washington* was likewise impugned as "unequal, and no part shows absolute mastery".¹⁷

A recurring criticism concerned the debt of the American art to the English. With few exceptions, such as Church's and Bierstadt's works, "The American school badly trailed the English school", as the critic Ernest Chesneau noted. "Most of the American landscapes are painted in a spirit of convention that surprises, considering the American people seem to be free of so many other conventions" (Chesneau

¹⁷ *The Art Journal*, November, 1867.

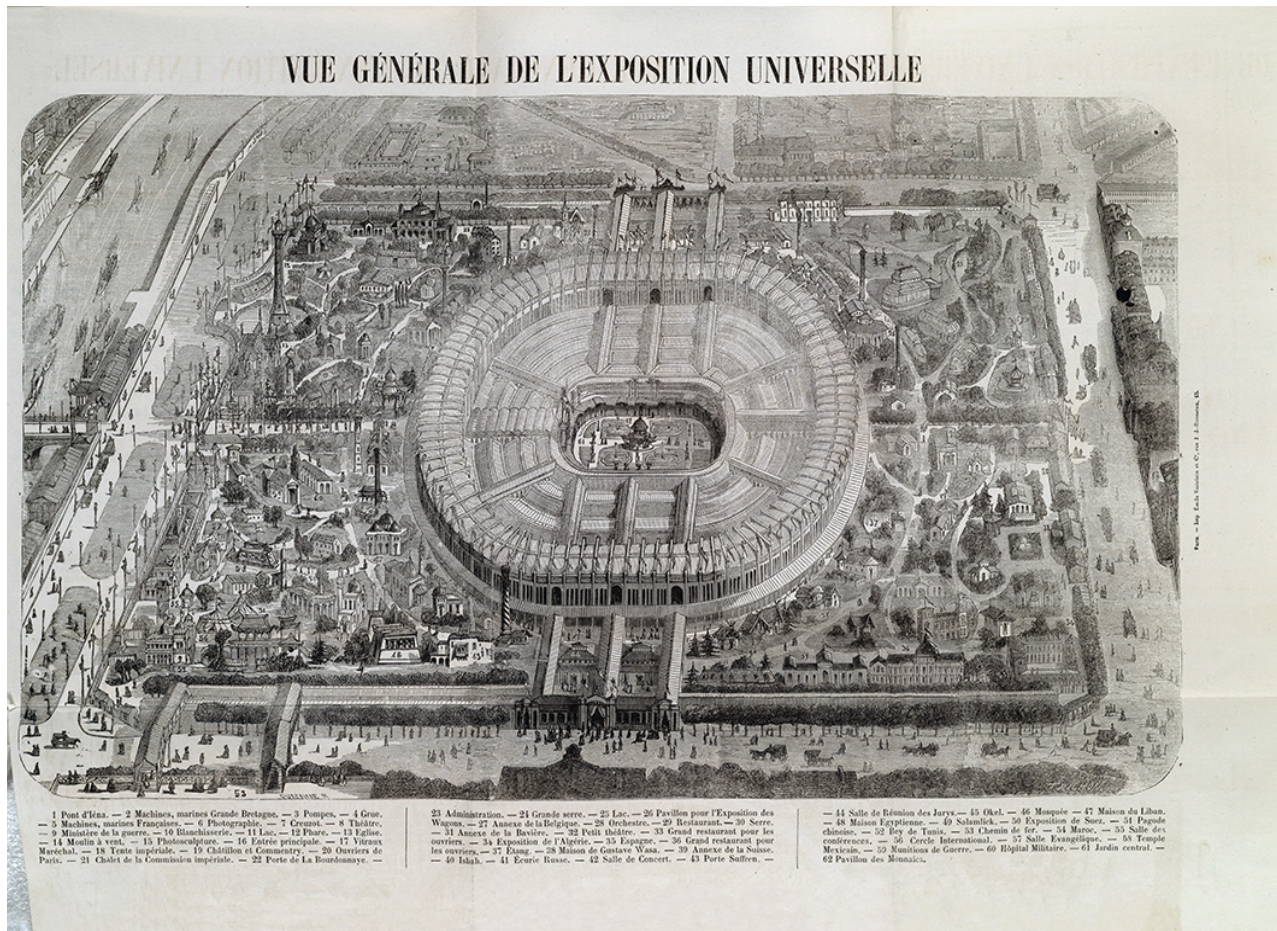


Figure 5. *Vue Générale de l'Exposition Universelle*, 1867. Engraving; 25.2 × 42.3 cm (9 9/10 × 16 2/3 in). John Hay Library, Brown University, Providence

1868, 161; trans. by the Author). Several history paintings presented more evidence that the Americans were influenced too much by British artists and themes. Two examples included Edward May's *Lady Jane Grey gives her Tablets to the Constable of the Tower of London and Goes to Execution*¹⁸ (fig. 6), and the painting of Mary Stuart in Scotland by Emanuel Leutze. *Harper's* was more generous in its review "In landscapes England and America easily lead", its critic wrote, noticing that one major difference was the "vastness and loneliness" of the American lands, which were a major inspiration for the artists (Conway 1867, 248).

Nevertheless, most critics agreed that the prominence of American art was yet to be achieved. The country that already accomplished

remarkable results in other fields would soon have painters and sculptors of equal stature. "In future gatherings of the nations, when the Arts in America shall have obtained further time for development, doubtless the pictures of the United States will obtain alike from Commissioners and critics more ample recognition", *The Art Journal* stated, adding that it was also looking "wistfully for new Art-developments".¹⁹

One major difference between European and American cultures is how each assesses the meaning of failure. Europeans are generally suspicious of failure and perceive it as something to be shameful of. Americans are great believers in giving people a second chance. In many fields, American people accept failure as part of the growth cycle of any enterprise and as a necessary step in a climb to success. Henry Ford went out of

18 The painting is known now as *Lady Jane Grey Goes to Her Execution* (1864, oil on canvas). Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia.

19 *The Art Journal*, November, 1867.



Figura 6. Edward Harrison May, *Lady Jane Grey Going to Her Execution*, 1864. Oil on canvas; 150 × 203 cm (59 × 80 in). Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia: Bequest of Charles Knox Smith

the car business two times, but it didn't prevent him to successfully launch the Ford Motor Company; R.H. Macy failed with his first stores, which closed for a lack of sales. Thomas Edison's early mistakes allowed him to invent his light bulb. And other people whom teachers, employers or commissions defined as mediocre and limited became major artists. For a country that bases its success and its economic model on individual initiative achievement rather than state sponsorship, failure is not a shame, it's part of the process.

For this reason, the American art world embraced the failure in Paris as a valuable learning experience. "The Great Exposition of 1867 at Paris", stated the critic James Jarves, "taught us a salutary lesson by placing the average American sculpture and painting in direct comparison with the European, thereby proving our actual mediocrity" (Jarves 1869, 298). The failures affected not only the artists, but also lenders, critics, collectors, and in a longer term museums.

With the mediocrity of the American art highlighted many wealthy American collectors saw the advantages of buying European art and bringing it back to the States. Some, like William T. Walters, had been doing that for years. But a new class of prosperous Americans emerged after the Civil War and found that French art especially could be a profitable investment. The selection chairman William J. Hoppin and other members of his committee visited the Fair's pavilions and art galleries in town, met French artists, and went on a buying spree. William Blodgett, who by the time of the Fair had already created a complete collection of American masters, rapidly started building what will be remembered as a comprehensive collection of French modern paintings. In several cases, these collections ended up in museums through major donations, some in existing institutions and others specifically opened to hold them. A well-known example is The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, founded



Figura 7. William Merritt Chase, 'Keying up' - *The Court Jester*, 1875. Oil on canvas; 101 × 63.5 cm (39 3/4 × 24 in). Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia: Gift of the Chapellier Galleries

only three years after the Paris exhibition, whose initial collection was a private donation of more than 150 paintings, all by European artists.

American artists didn't take their perceived setback in Paris personally. Many had already reached great recognition in their native country. Nevertheless, a new and younger generation of painters began to recognize the value of studying art and working abroad. As Leslie concluded in his report, the main lesson of Paris was that one's artistic education should take place in Europe: "Among our young artists there are some who show much invention and undoubtedly possess real genius. But, from lack of good art education, never rise above mediocrity" (Leslie 1868, 16). After the World's Fair more and more American painters moved to Europe and Paris became the

fundamental destination. There they found great teachers, inspiration, a vibrant atmosphere, and an international cultural milieu. "Here, technical facility and thematic sophistication were of the highest order", Barbara Weinberg stated in her study of American painters at the fine arts school in Paris. "Numerous independent academies and private teachers were accessible to students".²⁰

The experience of the Paris International Exposition proved that American artists, even some of whom had received great recognition at home, couldn't compete against the best of international art. They were too insular and dependent on a slavish kind of realism and anecdotal themes, as the Europeans were exploring new styles, techniques, and visions for their art. In retrospect the paintings displayed in 1867 were some of the best American works of late nineteenth century. Many of them are today in prestigious museums and represent American art realized by now admired mid-century artists. Yet at the time these paintings were perceived differently. This failure was a blow for the national art's world self-esteem, but it turned into a valuable lesson. Artists, critics, and collectors started to welcome cultural influences from beyond, finding new sources of inspiration. Just nine years later, at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, a new generation of American painters won fresh acclaim. Bierstadt's landscapes continued to impress but his art was increasingly seen as part of the past. Completely different styles and subjects were now gaining the most attention. William Merritt Chase, who had spent years abroad studying in Munich, won a medal with *'Keying up' - The Court Jester* (fig. 7). This portrait, dominated by the subject's red costume against a red background, reflects Chase's German training and reveals a use of colours that would become characteristic of his art. *Elaine* by Tobias Edward Rosenthal, a funeral scene reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelites, was a brilliant product of his European education that some critics found hard to believe it had been realized by an American artist. By the time of the next World's Fair in Paris in 1878 the American selection committee focused more on figurative paintings rather than landscapes. That gave an impressionist portrait artist such as Mary Cassatt a chance to display her works next to older masters such as Church. In addition, American painters who looked beyond typical American subjects sparked new

²⁰ Weinberg, *American Art Journal*, 1981.

enthusiasm among critics. One notable example was Frederick Arthur Bridgman, who presented an Egyptian scene in *The Funeral Procession of a Mummy on the Nile*.

Spurred on by the lessons of 1867 American artists and their patrons began to blaze new ground, a trend that would continue well into the next century. The influence of the French school on American artists strongly increased during the last decades of the nineteenth century. During the Paris World's Fair in 1889 the American paintings section was considered almost an addendum to the French show,²¹ however by the time of the Paris Fair in 1900 a distinctive American school was beginning to develop. Yet it can't be considered a particular national school in the traditional sense of the term, because it was the result of an incredible melting pot of origins, educations, and experiences. The 1900 exhibition reached great recognition, by the beginning of the twentieth century world attitudes toward American art had changed and it was finally recognized on the international stage.

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²¹ French Commissioner Alfred Picard described the American art exhibition in 1889 as a «brilliant annex to the French section» (*Official illustrated catalogue*, xv).

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