

Robert Henri

a biography



Robert Henri, ca. 1897, Photography courtesy of the Everett Shinn collection, 1894–1953, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Born Henry Robert Cozad in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1865, Henri spent a vagabond childhood in locations dependent on the colorful entrepreneurship of his father, John Cozad. He enjoyed a carefree youth in Cozad, Nebraska, a town founded by his father on prairie land acquired from railroad company sales. In 1882 John Cozad was involved in a fatal shooting that tarnished his respected position in the community. Although he was later cleared of wrongdoing, he moved his family away from Cozad and altered their names to avoid public ridicule. Henri became Robert Earl Henri (eventually he dropped his middle name). Proud of his American heritage, Henri insisted his name be pronounced “Hen-rye” rather than in the French manner.

Prompted by an early interest in magazine illustrations, which he copied in his diaries and scrapbooks, Henri entered the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1886 and later studied at the Académie Julian in Paris. Returning to Philadelphia in 1891, he embarked on a long career of painting, teaching, and lecturing that eventually led him to New York. Established there permanently after 1900, Henri continued to travel extensively in Europe and the United States.

A gifted teacher, Henri advocated the painterly brushwork of Diego Velázquez and Frans Hals and the dark palette and unadulterated realism of Rembrandt and Edouard Manet, a combination that lent an American freshness to his work. Champion of the masses and struggling artists, Henri, “the great white knight of American art,” forged a group of painters into The Eight, influential pioneers of realism who clamored for reform not only in art but in the entire structure of the antiquated American academy system. The Eight frankly presented in their paintings the urban working class and their milieu. Their depictions,

neither sentimental nor picturesque, of the back alleys and small shops of New York, often enveloped in soot and smoke, earned for these artists the derogatory nickname “the Ashcan School.”

In his own art, preferring the humanity of the city over its landscape, Henri painted lively portraits of street urchins, immigrants, and “characters.” He particularly enjoyed painting children, their range and character taken from the breadth of his travels. Rapidly executed and capturing the spontaneity of youth, these small portraits account for a large part of his oeuvre.

Images (Left to Right): Robert Henri, *Snow in New York*, 1902, oil on canvas, 32 x 25 13/16 in., Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art; *The Masquerade Dress*, 1911, oil on canvas, 76 1/2 x 36 1/4 in., Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1958 (58.157) Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art; *Pepita*, 1917, oil on canvas, 24 1/8 x 19 15/16 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mr. & Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection (20.3.2)

The people I like to paint are “my people,” whoever they may be, wherever they may exist, the people through whom dignity of life is manifest, that is, who are in some way expressing themselves naturally along the lines nature intended for them. My people may be old or young, rich or poor.... But wherever I find them, the Indian at work in the white man’s way, the Spanish gypsy moving back to the freedom of the hills, the little boy, quiet and reticent before the stranger, my interest is awakened and my impulse immediately is to tell about them through my own language -- drawing and painting in color.

-Robert Henri



Robert Henri
American, 1865–1929

Portrait of Fi
1907

oil on canvas, 24 1/4 x 20 1/8 in.,
Museum purchase, Irving W. Benolken Memorial Fund,
Joslyn Art Museum 1957.14

Portrait of Fi exemplifies Henri’s approach and composition in his portraits of children. Fi, a Dutch girl painted by Henri in Harlem during the summer of 1907, is depicted without setting or props, staring frankly out at the viewer. The direct pose and loose, energetic brushwork are well suited for this open, unaffected portrayal that conveys the warmth and optimism Henri believed so essential to the human condition.

Joining *Portrait of Fi* in Joslyn’s collection is *Consuelo in Black*, painted during a trip to Madrid in 1924. Henri first visited Spain in 1900 and would return there six times between 1906 and 1926. Inspired by the canvases of Diego Velázquez and Francisco Goya, Henri painted numerous portraits of people he met on the street or in cafés, including bullfighters, gypsies, peasants, and musicians. *Consuelo in Black* exemplifies the dark palette and strong painterly gestures he drew from his Spanish predecessors. The striking beauty and intense gaze of his sitter are portrayed with a compelling immediacy. Henri died in 1929, and *Consuelo in Black* was featured in a memorial exhibition of the artist’s work at the The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1931.

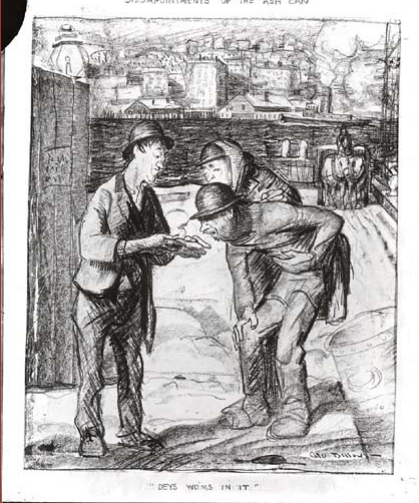


Robert Henri, *Consuelo in Black*, 1924, oil on canvas, 32 x 26 in., Anonymous gift, Joslyn Art Museum, 2012.6

Discussion Questions

- What was Robert Henri’s teaching philosophy?
- How would you describe the Ashcan School style?
- What is the difference between The Eight and the Ashcan School?

The Ashcan School



George Bellows, *Disappointments of the Ash Can* “Dey woims in it” 1882, *Philadelphia Record*, April 1915

Robert Henri, with his extensive formal training, mentored four fellow Philadelphia illustrators: William Glackens, George Luks, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan. They traveled, studied, worked, and shared studios together, and eventually all moved to New York. Under Henri’s guidance, these artists championed a new urban realism that celebrated the vitality of everyday life.

The name of their informal organization, Ashcan School, originated in cartoonist Art Young’s harsh critique that included second generation Ashcan artist, George Bellows, illustration captioned, *Disappointments of the Ash Can*. Their subjects showed the more gritty side of New York and their style included gestural brushwork using a darker palette.

These American urban realists followed Henri’s “art for life’s sake” and their works were hung together in several shows, including one called *The Eight* in 1908.



Ashcan School artists & friends at John French Sloan’s Philadelphia Studio, 1898

Timeline

1865

1865 Robert Henry Cozad is born on June 24 in Cincinnati, OH

1870

1875

Robert Henri, *Spanish Girl of Segovia*, 1912, oil on canvas, 40 3/4 x 33 1/8 in., New Britain Museum of American Art, A.W. Stanley Fund, 1941.07

1880

1879 Moves with family to Cozad, NE (father established town)

1881

Moves with family to Denver, CO & enrolls in public school

1885

1884 Produces his first painting

1886

Enrolls at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

1888

Enrolls at Académie Julian; studies with William-Adolphe Bouguereau

1890

1892 Teaches at the School of Design for Women, Philadelphia

1895

1897 First one-man show, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

1900

1900 Travels to Madrid; copies Velázquez paintings in the Prado; moves to New York City

1904

1904 First sale to a US museum, *Girl in White Waist* purchased by Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh

1905

1908 The Eight exhibit at Macbeth Gallery, Pennsylvania Academy & Art Institute of Chicago (tours seven other cities through June 1909)

1910

1910 Exhibition of Independent Artists held - 103 artists, 631 works

1915

1913 Armory Show opens in New York

1920

1915 Starts teaching at Art Students League of New York

1925

1923 Publishes *The Art Spirit*, edited by Margery Ryerson

1929

1929 Dies in New York, NY on July 12

1930

1931 Robert Henri memorial exhibition, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

1896

1896 Everett Shinn, Robert Henri, and John Sloan, ca. 1896

1902

1902 Teaches at the New York School of Art

1907

1907 Announces the formation of “The Eight”

1909

1909 Opens the Henri School of Art

1918

Robert Henri, *Portrait of Marjorie Henri*, 1918, oil and pastel on paper, 19 11/16 x 12 7/16 in., Milwaukee Art Museum, Maurice and Esther Leah Ritz Collection, M2004.78

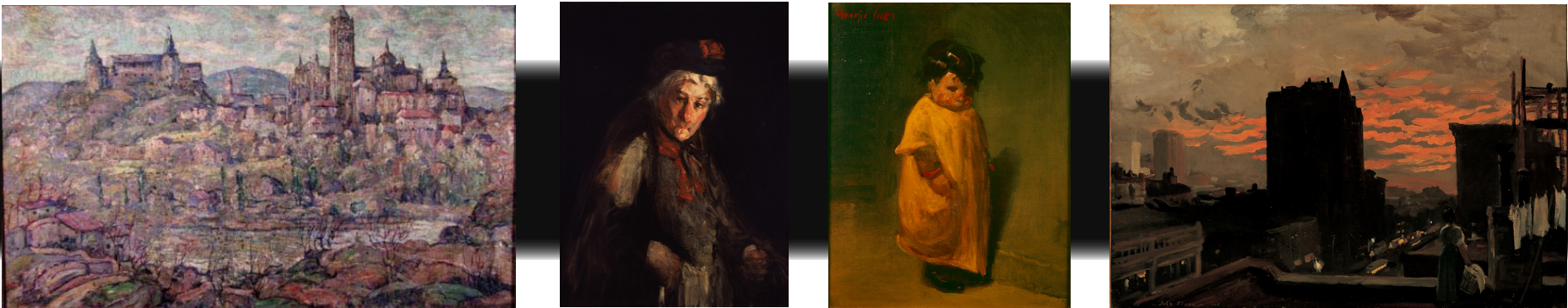
1911

Robert Henri, *The Masquerade Dress* (detail), 1911, oil on canvas, 76 1/2 x 36 1/4 in., Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1958 (58.157) Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Eight



Arthur B. Davies (1862–1928), William Glackens (1870–1938), Robert Henri (1865–1929), Ernest Lawson (1873–1939), George Luks (1866–1933), Maurice Prendergast (1858–1924), Everett Shinn (1876–1953), and John Sloan (1871–1951) will forever be connected due to their participation in the landmark exhibition *The Eight*. It opened in New York’s Macbeth Gallery in 1908 and then traveled to major art institutions. This exhibition was important because it demonstrated artistic individuality as a collective experience.



Images (Left to Right): Ernest Lawson, *Cathedral and Castle, Segovia, Spain*, oil on canvas, 20 x 40 in., Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert L. Reeves, Jr., 1956.418; George Luks, *New Shoes*, 1921, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in., Gift of Mrs. Bertha Mengedohrt-Hatz, 1956.166; John Sloan, *Sunset, West Twenty-third Street (23rd Street, Roofs, Sunset)*, 1906, oil on canvas, 24 3/8 x 36 1/4 in., 25th Anniversary Purchase, 1957.15, all collection of Joslyn Art Museum

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ROBERT HENRI
AMERICAN, 1865–1929

PORTRAIT OF FI
1907, OIL ON CANVAS

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM © OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Museum purchase, Irving W. Benolken
Memorial Fund, 1957.14