



Portrait as Final Manifesto: William Merritt Chase's Self-Portrait of 1916

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William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) presents his entire philosophy of painting in *Self-Portrait* (1916; Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee). (Fig. 1) Perhaps more than any other painting in his extensive repertoire, and particularly because it represents the work of his final year of life, this self-portrait serves as an emblem of Chase's life-long commitment to quality, eclecticism, and dignity for the vocation of the artist. When examined, therefore, in light of his training, experience, and philosophy, the portrait indicates Chase as the leader of a most important school of American art that championed a dialogue with the art of Europe and past generations as a tenet of a national and contemporary style.

Much of the discussion among artists and critics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America revolved around the desire to define a style that could be considered completely and uniquely American. That which many considered European in its style or subject, traditional or contemporary, was rejected in this attempt to create a homegrown style. Chase, however, believed that the influence of contemporary European ideas would serve to strengthen the development of an American art that was, by its very nature, a conglomeration.¹ American art required eclecticism—a blending of old and new styles—and his own style can be characterized as a composite of European and American ideas molded to suit his own purposes.²

With its darker palette and visible brushstrokes, this particular self-portrait shows much of Chase's intense love for the Old Masters of Dutch and Spanish painting. This appreciation stems from his early training in Munich, where Baroque artists such as Velazquez, Hals and Rembrandt were especially emulated, and a warm dark palette was favored over the bright jewel-tones found in Renaissance painting.³ In particular, Chase's method of drawing quickly with paint directly onto unprimed canvas, results in a sketchy style similar to that found in Hals' *Malle Babbe* (1633-35), an engraving of which Chase owned.⁴ He clearly references the tradition of these artists in his composition of the portrait as well. He paints himself, the sitter, immediately in the foreground so that his body dominates the canvas. His bust-length figure reaches all the way to each edge of the canvas, forming a near-life-sized figure.⁵

(1) Frans Hals, *Malle Babbe* (detail), 1633-35 (Staatliche Museen, Berlin). Reproduced here from <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>

This simplified composition, however, serves also to situate Chase in the company of contemporary American artists like James Abbott McNeil Whistler, who championed a style in which subject matter was secondary to aesthetic—or formal—qualities such as composition and color. Whistler and the school of Aestheticism strongly opposed other American sensibilities that focused on the subject as a means to convey moral messages and painting methods that insisted on mimicking the real world. The act of painting with skill was everything to Chase and the Aesthetes, for as Chase declared, "it is never the subject of a picture which makes it great, it is the brush treatment, the color, the form. There is no great art without a great technique back of it."⁶

Chase constantly insisted that any work that be considered good art ought to be well made and of the highest quality, rather than realistic or morally inspiring, and he certainly applied that philosophy in producing this "highly organized and yet natural" portrait of himself.⁷ His beard contains qualities of gray, allowing its coloring to contrast with the crisp white of his stiff collar. Furthermore, the mustache color differs from that of his beard just enough to create the space in which his mouth occurs. The flesh-tones in his face range from the bright, near-white spot on his temple to the deep



brown in the shadow of his left side. Flecks of pink and yellow play into the elderly cheeks, which he has worked to create a sagging feel in the skin and to define his ear.



Chase's technical skill announces itself most poignantly in the subtle rendering of his pince-nez and the attached ribbon. (Fig. 2) On the right of his face (according to the viewer's perspective), which is almost completely in shadow, one delicate black stripe emerges from the deliberately lightened background, as though the artist simply dragged his brush downward slowly and the ribbon materialized. The spectacles, which appear as delicate wire-framed glasses from a distance, are in fact described in only a few thin flicks of the artist's brush in white paint. The brushstrokes, often visible and deliberately indicating the artist's hand, create a dynamic composition in which each important detail receives appropriate attention without the smooth brushstroke-less style found in other Americans' work.

This painterly brushwork is part of what earned Chase the distinction among contemporaries as an Impressionist. In truth, however, this label is somewhat naïve and perhaps refers more directly to his style in landscape which incorporated a lighter, more colorful palette, informed as much by his experience with the bright Venetian tradition as by his encounters with Parisian modernism. In his effort to incorporate European ideas into distinctly American practice, Chase spent a lot of time in Paris working with the Impressionists, as well as with Whistler and other expatriates, and he found special inspiration in the work of Alfred Stevens who shared the belief that "one should learn to draw with the brush."⁸ He frequently took groups of students to Europe and encouraged American patrons to buy contemporary European art.⁹ To label him an Impressionist, however, even in the American school, is inappropriate. Chase saw Impressionism as an appealing style that fit into his Aesthetic sensibilities and did incorporate some technique as part of his own eclectic style.¹⁰ He did not aim for a shallow appropriation of what might be stylish, or claim anything as stylish simply because it was European. He asserted, rather, that an artist cannot truly be great unless his art is demonstrably informed by a familiarity with the ideas and methods of international art and produced with no less than the highest skill in technique.

His emphasis on technical skill supported his argument against the obsession with subject matter that motivated his American contemporaries, and those immediately preceding and succeeding his career. The Hudson River School, for instance, with which Chase had to compete from very early in his career, promoted the painting of large views from nature in an attempt to evoke Christian ideas. This picturesque sensibility emphasized America's wildness and God's majesty in large, dramatic works full of minute detail. Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand led this school before 1850, as did Frederic Edwin Church and Sanford R. Gifford in Chase's own time.¹¹ Chase occupied a studio for a time in the same Tenth Street Building in New York with these latter two artists. His moving into their building seems to hint at his intention to replace them and their art as what would be considered truly American.¹² Given the Hudson River School's obsession with the *subject* of nature for their work, Chase and his colleagues acted with the deliberate intention of revising both the art and the profession of the artist by shifting the focus away from the subject of nature to a devotion to the pure act of creating a painting.¹³ They wanted attention to materials, color and composition to reign in their work and not to be ruled by a demand for picturesque subjects. Furthermore, they broke off any association with The National Academy in New York, for it was also unreceptive to work that did not fit into the realistically rendered, subject-based tradition in American art up to that point.

Toward the end of his career, Chase encountered another group of artists who made their name based on a very specific subject matter. Robert Henri and the Ashcan school, also known as The Eight, brought portraits of the lower strata of industrial society into the forefront of American art.¹⁴ Chase actually admired Henri's talent and the two shared similar painting styles, but Chase obviously rejected the Ashcan School's focus on a specific subject to legitimate their art. Henri in turn opposed Chase's apparent aversion to emotion and meaning as an impetus for his work.¹⁵ Chase stood firm in his stance acquired early in his Munich education that the subject of a work is simply a vehicle for good painting; it emerges as a combination of line, form and color. The reason to paint is to paint, a subject—whatever it may be—is simply what allows painting to happen. Chase and his colleagues separated themselves from other dominant schools not only in style, subject and philosophy of painting, but also in their philosophy on the artist's position in society. They viewed the painters of the Hudson River School as falling into the trap of the craftsman producing for a demanding public. They therefore rejected the image of the simple artisan.¹⁶ They also turned up their noses at the notion that an artist was to resemble the eccentric, "velvet jacket garret dwellers" of Paris' Latin Quarter, and the Eight's portrait of the artist as common man and laborer.¹⁷ The push for an American art as defined by technical skill, worldly education, and the luxury to paint for the sake of painting became a way of life for Chase's circle. The argument implicit in their immaculate dress and stylish social behavior was that the artist has no need to stand out "under the popular stigma of chronic pauperism," no need to suffer for his art, because America is growing as a society which can support quality production.¹⁸ Even the semantic distinction of "artist" over "worker" and "studio"

over “workshop” was crucial to them, for in their view the artist was most certainly not a worker, not a laborer, he was absolutely high class.¹⁹ As Chase himself claimed in an interview with Walter Pach, “The profession of the artist is one of the most ancient that we know, and...the most dignified.”²⁰

Portraits afforded this Aesthetic school an opportunity to portray “something of a corporate appearance among artists,” according to Sarah Burns, so that “through dress, accessories, and demeanor they also managed to suggest a secure and superior status.”²¹ Nothing is more clearly evident in this self-portrait than Chase’s self-defined distinction as a member of his most dignified profession. His colleagues and students all knew him to command a presence as the result of his daily dress; every piece of writing describing the man includes the details of his appearance: always in a suit, a scarf threaded neatly through a unique ring around his neck, a pince-nez perched on his nose and affixed to his jacket with a black ribbon, and a flat brimmed top hat surmounting his neatly groomed pointed beard and prominent mustache. He was even known to have painted while wearing his finest clothes, demonstrating his belief that work clothes indicating a uniform of labor were unnecessary for the truly refined American artist.²² All of these artists were conscious of the impact their personal appearance could have on an audience as they became increasingly public figures in society, and Chase made sure that the Dandy sensibilities were as apparent in his own dress as in his work, emphasizing a gentlemanly quality.²³

Not only did this dress serve to give a degree of dignity to the artist and his profession, but it also clearly demonstrated his awareness of world trends extending beyond painting style. A recent exhibit at the Tate Britain in London briefly explored the depiction of the artist as a Dandy, laying claim to the artist as a connoisseur of the finest in fashion.²⁴ This style, which originated with English gentlemen in the early nineteenth century, moved to France and then to America through artists like Chase who spent time abroad. The Dandy “aspired both to physical elegance, verbal wit and social distinction”—certainly the staples of Chase’s own society of painters in New York. This image is visible in countless self-portraits, including Whistler’s own *Brown and Gold: Self-Portrait*,²⁵ and was popular among the French, English and American expatriates. In aspects of visual form, these portraits evoke once again the conventions of Northern European Baroque masters who also wished to exert their own dignified position in society through the latest fashions of dress and simplified backgrounds against which their own forms could stand out.

The conventions of this late-nineteenth-century international style championed a lack of complicated detail. Those subtleties Chase did include in his portrait allude even further to his trademarks as a prominent figure in this school of thought. The type of scarf he wears, if not explicitly visible, implies the ring holding it, a rather unusual style. He also depicts his signature lapel flower with just a few dashes of white paint. Most poignantly, however, is the absence of any indication that this is, in fact, a portrait of an artist. Chase did do several portraits of himself at work,²⁶ but here returns to his opposition to conventions that portray the artist as anything other than a distinguished gentleman. He depicts his profession in the sheer skill with which the portrait is executed, and despite his insistence on “art for art’s sake,”²⁷ he does use this portrait as a final manifesto on his beliefs in the dignity of the profession and his own image as an emblem for that ideal.

1. Kessler, Jane. *William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri: American Master Painters*, exh. cat. (The Center for the Arts, 1986), 4.

2. William Howe Downes, “William Merritt Chase, A Typical American Artist,” *The International Studio* 39 (December 1909); quoted by Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 23.

3. Kessler, *Chase and Henri*, 2.

4. Cikovsky, Jr., Nicolai. “William Merritt Chase’s Tenth Street Studio.” *Archives of American Art Journal* 16, no. 2 (1976), 38. *Malle Babbe* (1633-35) by Frans Hals is in the collection of the Staatliche Museum, Berlin.

5. The painting measures 20.25”x16.5”

6. Perriton Maxwell, “William Merritt Chase: Artist, Wit and Philosopher.” *The Saturday Evening Post* (November 4, 1899); quoted in Pisano, Chase, 17.

7. Bryant, Keith L. *William Merritt Chase: A Genteel Bohemian*. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1991) 129.

8. Bryant, *Chase*, 133.

9. Bryant, *Chase*, 4.
10. McCann, Jr., Clarence David. *The Ripening of American Art: Duveneck and Chase*. exh. cat. (Mobile: The Fine Arts Museum of the South, 1979), 17.
11. Cikovsky, "Studio," 10.
12. Cikovsky, "Studio," 10.
13. Cikovsky, "Studio," 9.
14. Ronald G. Pisano, *William Merritt Chase*. (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1986), 11.
15. Kessler, *Chase and Henri*, 6.
16. Cikovsky, *Studio*, 11.
17. Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 23-24.
18. Burns, 23-24.
19. Cikovsky, "Studio," 11, 13. Cikovsky points out that later on, the Ashcan school would reverse the distinction exactly and deliberately.
20. William M. Chase, "The Import of Art: An Interview with Walter Pach." *The Outlook* (June 25, 1910). Quoted in Pisano, *Chase*, 32.
21. Burns, *Modern Artist*, 35.
22. Pisano, *Chase*, 32.
23. As Burns points out, "The fact that the painter had elected to wear gentlemanly dress confirms his keen awareness of the power of appearances. By donning conventional costume he enhanced his credibility before the public." *Modern Artist*, 35.
24. The room guide for *Degas, Sickert and Toulouse-Lautrec, 5 October 2005-15 January 2006*, Room 5, names this portion of the exhibition "Elegance and Decadence in Portraiture: the 1890's" and includes a quotation from contemporary critic Louis Vauxcelles describing the English artist Sickert as "a singular dandy, distant and seductive at the same time."
25. *Brown and Gold: Self-portrait* (about 1895-1900) was included in the Tate London show but is in the permanent collection of the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, UK.
26. *Portrait of the Artist (Self-Portrait)*, c. 1884; *Self Portrait: Artist in his Studio*, 1916.
27. Kessler, Jane. *William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri: American Master Painters*, exh. cat. (The Center for the Arts, 1986), 4.