

My Friend Brien: How the Portraiture of Robert Henri Reflects His
Artistic Philosophies and Influences

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Robert Henri (1865-1929) was one of the most important American teachers and artistic philosophers in the early twentieth century. His rebellion against accepted Academic subject matter and style garnered both praise and ridicule for himself and his close associates. Dubbed "The Eight," or, more derisively, the "Ash Can School" for their realistic portrayal of life in New York City's seamier neighborhoods,¹ Henri and his circle represented a new movement in American art.

Henri's formal art training began in 1886 at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where Thomas Eakins had studied briefly before being dismissed. Inspired by Eakins' example, Henri only stayed in Pennsylvania for two years before traveling to Paris to continue his education. Upon his return from France in 1892 he would teach at the School of Design for Women until 1895 and the New York School of Art from 1902 until 1908.²

Henri brought a new vision to American art. His philosophy, inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and others, was about getting away from the Academic ideals in art - that is, technical perfection, workmanship, and finish - and finding instead a certain attitude within the artist, an expression of emotion, communication from the individual, and the effort to find the "life" within the subject.³ Milton Brown writes,

The realists loved life. Under Henri's guidance "life" became almost an obsession.. .They became suspicious of that type of beauty which was the earmark

¹ Brown, Milton W., "The Ash Can School," *American Quarterly*, 1.2 (1949): 127-134.

² "Biography: Robert Henri, 1865-1929," *National Gallery of Art*, 2008, 24 March 2008, <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/horo_henri.shtm>

Kwiat, Joseph J., "Robert Henri and the Emerson-Whitman Tradition," *Studies in American Culture: Dominant Ideas and Images*, ed. Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Turple (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960) 153-170.

of academic painting. The decorative picture, slick brushwork, academic formulas, foggy estheticism were all denials of what was real and earnest.⁴ For Henri, it was about finding what was new. He wrote to his students, "We are not here to do what has already been done,"⁵ and "Don't belong to any school."⁶ He believed that art schools had the potential to harm more than help students, because teachers imposed their own styles and tastes on young artists, rather than letting their students create new and original works. In his quest for fairness and originality, he and his circle organized jury-free shows (the famous MacBeth Gallery in 1908 as the first) separate from the National Academy in which artists chose which works to exhibit, and no prizes were awarded.⁷

During the artistic explosion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when artists were traveling from all over the world to France to study art, the same problem often occurred when those artists returned home - how do I define myself as an American artist, or a Japanese artist, or a Swedish artist? Henri was no exception to this problem, but over time he felt he found the answer. He believed the very nature of America helped define an American artist versus a European one. "We have neither castles nor courtesans, kings, or other stately people who inhabit them. We have no aristocratic tradition in any area of life so if we want to be authentic we should paint what constitutes our lives,"⁸ he believed. An artist could be an "American artist" no matter

⁴ Brown 131-132.

⁵ Henri, Robert, *The Art Spirit*, ed. Margery Ryerson, 1923, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1930).

⁶ Madden, Edward H. and Marian C. Madden, "Transcendental Dimensions of American Art," *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society*, 32.2 (1996): 154-180.

⁷ Madden and Madden 174.

⁸ Madden and Madden 157.

where he was, because it was the "honesty and sincerity"⁹ with which he painted that would set him apart.

Nowhere was this universal attitude more evident than in Henri's portraits. The artist painted what he called "my people."¹⁰ "His" people could be anywhere; he didn't mean people of a certain geographic location or nationality. He chose to paint people "through whom the dignity of life is manifest,"¹¹ and that could mean the young or old, rich or poor. He admired artists like Goya and Velazquez who showed the truth behind royal pomp, or Manet with his refusal to make things beautiful just to appease the masses. In what might seem counter-intuitive, he greatly admired Ingres for his strict attention to detail. To Henri a portrait must be painted quickly, preferably in one sitting. He wrote,

The brush stroke at the moment of contact carries inevitably the exact state of being of the artist at that exact moment into the work, and there it is, to be seen and read by those who can read such signs, and to be read later by the artist himself, with perhaps some surprise, as a revelation to himself.¹²

In other words, at the moment of creation the artist has something to communicate, but if a painting is labored over for days or weeks, that moment is lost, and so is the communication. Without that essential element, there's hardly any point to creating.

Diego Velazquez was one of Henri's favorite artists, and he wrote of him, "Where others saw a pompous king, a funny clown, a misshapen body to laugh at, Velazquez saw

⁹ Madden and Madden 157,

¹⁰ Henri 141.

¹¹ Henri 142. qtd. in Madden and Madden 164.

deep into life and love, and there was response in kind for his look."¹³ Velazquez' *The Buffoon Calabazas* (figure 1) is a perfect example of what Henri meant. In a painting that could merely depict "a funny clown" or "a misshapen body to laugh at," instead there is a great sensitivity and humanity, and one can see the man's gentle spirit shining through. In Henri's portrait *Dutch Joe* (figure 2), a similar spirit can be seen. The little boy picture could look very silly with his protruding teeth and big grin, but instead Henri brings out his joy and simple, innocent beauty. This portrait was painted during Henri's visit to The Netherlands, and one can also see Rembrandt's influence in the coloring and shading. Henri's reverence for the Baroque masters is evident in almost all of his portraits: most of his subjects are depicted against a dark background with a brightly illuminated face. These two paintings are similar in their substance, as both Velazquez and Henri sought to portray the humanity in every subject.

When it came to depicting a sitter's face, Henri's wrote, "All the features are connected in one expression which manifests the state of mind or the condition of the sitter."¹⁴ Henri's ideas here are evocative of Theodore Gericault and his startlingly realistic portraits chronicling the insane for Dr. Etienne Georget. Gericault's *The Woman with Gambling Mania* (figure 3) depicts a woman with an uneven, despondent gaze. She's bedraggled, and the intense realism is evocative of the Dutch master, Hals (another favorite of Henri). In contrast to this woman's stare is the expression on the face in Henri's *Celestina* (figure 4). Her face is open and inviting, and her eyes shine with life. Neither of these women would have met the standards of beauty then (or now), but both artists infuse them with dignity and character. As Henri demands, both faces represent

¹³ qtd. in Madden and Madden 164. ¹⁴ Henri 14.

the "state of mind or the condition of the sitter." One shows a careworn but content older woman, while the other shows a woman driven mad by an obsession that still haunts her.

Henri believed Edouard Manet to be a new master, and he said of him, "[Manet] followed [his] very individual whims, telling the public in effect, here is what you get, not what you want."¹⁵ Henri believed that what Manet created was truly original, and that he did it for himself, not to please the Academy or the crowds. Manet's *Olympia* (figure 5), one of his most famous works, certainly pleased neither. It was incredibly shocking for its blatant portrayal of nudity, the well-known model's frank stare, and the extreme flattening of the figures and picture plane. Henri's *Portrait of Doris Trautman* (figure 6) recalls some elements of *Olympia*. By 1928, a year before Henri's death and the year *Doris* was painted, Henri had developed a unique style, but compositionally elements of Manet's masterpiece can be seen. Though the subject in Henri's painting has her eyes lowered a bit, she still mostly stares out at the viewer, and the background is dark and flattened, like in *Olympia*. Henri's style is softer than Manet's, giving Doris a more sensual appearance than *Olympia*'s stark, almost washed-out look. He provides more modeling, more contrast between light and dark, and the overall impression is less confrontational and more dream-like. One can see the influence of Manet in this painting, but one can also see that Henri has evolved into his own artist, with his own unique vision - which was his goal all along.

¹⁵ qtd. in Madden and Madden 165.

Finally we come to *My Friend Brien* (figure 7), which was painted in 1913, during Henri's "middle" period. He was still strongly influenced by the Baroque masters, as can be seen in the strong contrasts between light and dark. Typically for his portraits of this period, the background is very dark and the face is very brightly lit. The focus here is primarily on the face. The color palette is somber, favoring greens, blues, and browns, with a dash of red for his untucked shirt, but the face is a bright splash of peach in the middle of all that darkness. What drew me to this painting was the expression on Brien's face. At first glance he seems like a happy little old man, but when one looks closer, one can see that Henri has captured something deeper. Henri wrote, "It is impossible for me to see only what the eye takes in, for the surfaces are only symbols."¹⁶ Truly here he's captured more than just what the eye immediately sees. When one takes a deeper look at Brien's face, one can see a certain wistfulness there, as if he's thinking about the life he's lived with regret. But just like the great Velazquez he so admired, Henri sees to Brien's heart and gives him dignity and grace. Despite his sadness, one does not pity him. That is Henri's gift.

Unfortunately even before his death Henri's popularity and influence waned due to the rise of abstract art. While Henri enjoyed Cubism and some other forms of abstract art, he felt some went too far. Art shouldn't need a road map to be understood, he thought. "All the forms of art are to be a common language."¹⁷ His strict adherence to realism earned him ridicule as the twentieth century progressed, and it's only been in the last decade or so that appreciation for his work has reemerged. By encouraging individualism, creativity, truth, and freedom, Robert Henri helped set unprecedented standards for American art. Every American artist to

follow, even those who would criticize his worship of realism, owes him a debt of gratitude.

¹⁶ qtd. in Madden and Madden 163.

¹⁷ qtd. in Madden and Madden 164.

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