

Basic Detail Report



Title: Le Jour du Grand Prix

Date: 1887

Primary Maker: com.galleriesystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e46d

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: Of the hundreds of American painters living in Paris in the late nineteenth century, only one, Childe Hassam, chose the contemporary city as his primary subject. While his compatriots fled to the provinces or sought traditional corners of old Paris, Hassam celebrated the city's modernity, with its broad avenues, newly planted trees, handsome new buildings, and stylish residents. The Yankee artist showed Paris at its most festive in "Le Jour du Grand Prix". The title was a catchphrase during the belle époque. Grand Prix Day was, according to the "New York Times" Paris reporter, "The great national fête, for though the 14th of July be the officially recognized . . . institution, the Grand Prix will ever be, at least for the Parisian, the real holiday."⁽¹⁾ Inaugurated in 1863, the Grand Prix was a 3,000-meter race for three-year-old horses from any country, held at the Longchamp track in the recently relandscaped Bois de Boulogne.⁽²⁾ The final race in the spring season, the Grand Prix marked "the closing week of Parisian society life, after which

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all covers are slipped over furniture and the blinds of all . . . self-respecting persons are let down to show that 'we are out of town.'"(3) In 1887 the Grand Prix was held on the first Sunday of June, about 3:00 P.M. The brilliant sunlight and abbreviated shadows in Hassam's painting indicate a time shortly after noon, when race goers thronged to the Bois. There, people like those Hassam depicted would spend the early afternoon picknicking, sipping Champagne, eyeing one another's costumes, and placing their bets. The races at Longchamp had earlier inspired French Impressionists Edgar Degas and Edouard Manet, who depicted the jockeys and spectators at the track. Hassam also sketched the activity near the track in a pastel, "At the Grand Prix in Paris" (1887; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), and in three other works.(4) But the festivity of Grand Prix day was not confined to the track in the Bois de Boulogne. The coming and going of race goers along the city's broad avenues was as much a spectacle as the race itself. Like a true Parisian, Hassam was attuned to the subtle gradations of status signaled in the fashions and equipages he portrayed. The most prominent vehicle is a road or mail coach, which was popular for the races because it gave its passengers an unobstructed view over the crowd. In the realist novel "Nana" (1880), Hassam's contemporary Emile Zola describes mail coaches "in which the masters sat in the fresh air on the seats and left the servants to look after the hampers of champagne inside."(5) Since it required a stable of at least four horses, plus alternate vehicles for bad weather, the mail coach was an obvious sign of wealth.(6) Furthermore, unlike the victoria (two passengers) and laundau (four) also shown in Hassam's painting, the mail coach was not available for rent. Hassam may have consulted his wife's fashion magazines for help in depicting clothing. Every spring, French periodicals illustrated costumes for the races that were far more elaborate than those for social calls, promenades, or dinners. Like the mannequins in the fashion plates, the women atop the mail coach in Hassam's painting wear pastel dresses and high-crowned, narrow-brimmed hats trimmed with feathers or flowers. Hassam bowed to decorum by depicting the spectators lining the sidewalks in darker colors than the carriage passengers. Etiquette demanded that women pedestrians wear plain costumes, to avoid unwanted attention from strangers, while those riding in a carriage could wear "handsome silks, with elaborately trimmed and sweeping skirts, feathery bonnets, and lace parasols, which would look quite out of place when walking."(7) To capture this fashionable scene, Hassam probably propped his canvas on the seat of a cab. (It may be the cab's shadow that fills the lower right corner of the painting.) "I paint from a cab window," the artist told an interviewer, "when I want to be on a level with the people in the street and wish to get comparatively near views of them, as you would see them as if walking on the street."(8) His method plunges us into one of the most prestigious neighborhoods of Paris, near the Arc de Triomphe, then the city's most famous landmark. In 1854 Prefect of the Seine Georges Haussmann had redesigned the circular place surrounding the Arc, adding seven broad straight avenues to the existing five. Hassam told a friend that the site of his painting was

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the Avenue de la Grande Armée, an extension of the Champs Élysées.(9) However, the angle at which the avenue approaches the Arc suggests that it was actually the Avenue Foch, the broad thoroughfare that leads directly from the place to the Bois de Boulogne. The horse chestnut trees and sidewalk in Hassam's painting were also among Baron Haussmann's legacies. Hassam exhibited "Le Jour du Grand Prix" at the Salon of 1888. For Salon visitors, the sparkling picture recalled a thrilling French victory. The Grand Prix was the focus of intense rivalry between France and England. In the previous twenty-three races, France had won the prize eleven times, England ten, Hungary once, and the United States once. The 1887 race was crucial: France could either increase its lead over Britain or drop back to a tie with its archrival. The odds were two to one on the English colt, Merry Hampton, but in an electrifying upset, the French filly Ténébreuse—a long shot at fourteen to one—took the lead in the last stretch, winning easily by two lengths. "You can imagine the delight of the natives at the defeat of the British champions," the *New York Times* commented.(10) Surprisingly, Hassam re-created the brilliant sunshine of that June afternoon in his Paris studio some six months later. "Just now . . . I am painting sunlight," he wrote to a friend in November 1887, explaining that colleagues who had seen his smaller version of the same subject, Boston's Grand Prix Day, had urged him to paint it larger. "I hope I shall do it as well as the smaller one which I thought was successful in some ways."(11) Hassam made few changes to the composition but brightened the palette and loosened his brushwork. The carefully calculated result marked his first decisive foray into Impressionism. SGL

Bibliography: Adeline Adams, "Childe Hassam" (New York: American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1938); Donelson F. Hoopes, "Childe Hassam" New York: Watson-Guptill, 1979); Kathleen Burnside, "Childe Hassam in Connecticut", exhib. cat. (Old Lyme, Conn.: Florence Griswold Museum, 1988); Ilene Susan Fort, "The Flag Paintings of Childe Hassam", exhib. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1988); David Park Curry, "Childe Hassam: An Island Garden Revisited", exhib. cat. (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 1990); Ulrich W. Hiesinger, "Childe Hassam: American Impressionist" (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1994).

Notes: 1. C. T., "All Paris at the Races," *New York Times*, June 20, 1887, p. 2. 2. Adolphe Joanne, *Paris Illustré* (Paris: L. Hachette, 1867), p. 600. The prize was 100,000 francs, the equivalent of \$20,000, according to "Won by Tenebreuse," *New York Times*, June 6, 1887, p. 5. 3. C. T., "All Paris," p. 2. 4. "At the Grand Prix" (ca. 1887; pastel, whereabouts unknown); "At the Grand Prix" (1888; watercolor and gouache, private collection), and "Four-in-Hand at the Grand Prix, Paris", also known as "Watching the Grand Prix", Longchamp (1889; pastel, private collection). 5. Emile Zola, "Nana" (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 349. 6. I am grateful to Mr. Joseph Vanorio and Mrs. Maureen Sharpe of Greenwich, Connecticut, for providing valuable information on horses and carriages. 7. "Etiquette of Good Society" (London, Paris, and New York: ca. 1880), pp. 77-79; quoted in Valerie Steele, "Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the

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Jazz Age" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 139. 8. Childe Hassam, quoted in A. E. Ives, "Mr. Childe Hassam on Painting Street Scenes," "Art Amateur" 27 (October 1892): 116. 9. Hassam to Miss Rose Lamb, November 29, 1887; in Hiesinger, "Childe Hassam", p. 178. 10. C. T., "All Paris," p. 2. 11. Hassam to Lamb. Dimensions: 37 x 49 1/4 in. (94 x 125.1 cm) Frame: 43 x 55 1/8 x 3 3/8 in. (109.2 x 140 x 8.6 cm)