

When he was twenty years old, William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) set out to become an artist. That he became one of the most honored and respected American artists of his day was the result of extraordinary talent, determination, and canny self-marketing. However, he kept no known records, daily calendar, list of sitters, or diary; very few letters survive; and, except for early paintings, Chase rarely dated his work. It is only through lifetime exhibition and auction records, and periodicals and books of the period that his paintings can be arranged chronologically, and as a by-product, the original titles of many of the works confirmed.

Chase's earliest landscapes date from his years as a student at the Munich Royal Academy (1872–1877). Somewhat tonal in

**Fig. 1:** William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *Venice, 1877*. Oil on canvas, 22 x 13 inches. Signed "W M Chase" at lower right. Inscribed and dated "Venice 1877" at lower right. Courtesy Oklahoma City Art Museum, Westheimer Family Collection (1991.046).

by D. Frederick Baker

# A Painted Diary

The Landscapes of William Merritt Chase

nature, they mainly record streets and buildings in the small towns where Chase and his fellow students spent the summer months away from the academy. In the fall of 1877, Chase went to Venice with two of his classmates, Frank Duveneck (1848–1919) and John Twachtman (1853–1902). Although ill for much of his time there, he completed several paintings of which *Venice, 1877* (Fig. 1) is a prime example. It wasn't until he returned to New York in 1878 and joined the Tile Club that he pursued landscape painting as a more disciplined pursuit. The club was the first plein-air sketching club in America, and over its ten-year life organized four summer painting expeditions, three to Long Island and one along the Hudson River to Lake Champlain. It was on the second trip to Long Island, in 1880, that Chase painted *A Subtle Device* (Fig. 2), a portrait of himself seated under a jerry-rigged net studio on the beach near Sands Point—the netting device being a means to avoid a plague of mosquitoes. During



**Fig. 2:** William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *A Subtle Device, 1880*. Oil on canvas, 11¾ x 19 inches. Originally signed "Briarius" at lower right. Courtesy the Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, NY, Baker / Pisano Collection (2001).



Briarius was the Tile Club sobriquet used by Chase—the custom being that every member was given a nickname. Based on his many and varied activities, Chase was assigned Briarius, the name of one of the hundred-handed sons of Gaia, Mother Earth in Greek mythology.



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**Fig. 3:** William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *The Outskirts of Madrid*, 1882.

Oil on canvas, 32 x 45¼ inches.

Signed “W M Chase” at lower right. Inscribed

and dated “Madrid/Aug. 1882” at lower right.

Courtesy Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.; gift of Duncan Phillips, B. A. 1908 (1939.265).

The setting is an area just beyond the old city, with a glimpse of Madrid in the background. The scene captures the intensity of the hot summer sun that helped steer Chase toward a brighter palette.

Duncan Phillips was a great admirer of Chase, and the museum in Washington, D.C. that bears his name owns Chase’s great interior *Hide and Seek*, 1888.



**Fig. 4:** William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *The Coast of Holland*, 1884.

Oil on canvas, 59 x 80 inches.

Signed “Wm. M. Chase” at lower left.

Courtesy Frye Art Museum, Seattle.

Museum Purchase, 1979.

This work was painted during Chase’s visit to his friend Robert Blum in Zandvoort. The palette is cool, reflecting the moist climate of the seaside village. When exhibited for the first time in Chase’s retrospective exhibition in Boston in 1886, one reviewer described it as a “scene...upon which any man could well afford to rest his reputation.”



**Fig. 5:** William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *Mrs. Chase in Prospect Park*, 1886. Oil on panel, 13 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 19 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches. Signed “Wm. M. Chase” at lower right. Inscribed “To my friend J. Carroll Beckwith” at lower right. Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Chester Dale Collection, Bequest of Chester Dale, 1962 (63.138.2).

J. Carroll Beckwith (1852–1917) was a fellow artist and lifelong friend. Both artists studied abroad, Chase in Munich and Beckwith in Paris, returning to the United States on the same ship; both taught at the Art Students’ League.

**Fig. 6:** William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *A Visit to the Garden*, 1890. Oil on panel, 14 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 16 inches. Signed “Wm. M. Chase” at lower right. Courtesy Private Collection.

This work is of the northwest section of Central Park, originally designed as an arboretum. In his 1891 article, “Mr. Chase and Central Park,” in *Harper’s Weekly*, Charles DeKay described the nursery depicted in the painting as a place where “flowers are raised for subsequent transplanting to other parts of the park.... Just beyond the locust trees is the winding piece of water called Harlem Lake and on the other side of the heavy foliage in the left center lies the old redoubt.”



these early years, Chase also painted the beach at Coney Island, and the Hackensack River in New Jersey, the latter when he visited the summer home of the Gerson family—specifically to see young Alice Gerson whom he would later marry.

During these early years he taught at the recently opened Art Students’ League in New York during the fall, winter, and spring terms

and spent the summers in Europe, where, in 1882, he painted *The Outskirts of Madrid* (Fig. 3), and in 1884, *The Coast of Holland* (Fig. 4). After his marriage to Gerson, the couple spent a few months living in Brooklyn with his parents. One of his most beloved Brooklyn paintings is his romantic idyll, *Mrs. Chase in Prospect Park*, 1886 (Fig. 5), which captured his wife in a moment of peaceful contemplation.

Chase became the consummate painter of city scenes, especially the parks: “If you want to know of good places to sketch in the vicinity of New York, I think I could easier tell you where they are not than where they are.”<sup>1</sup> After the young couple moved back to New York, Chase painted a number of scenes in Central Park, including the brilliant *A Visit to the Garden*, 1890 (Fig. 6). When this painting was first



**Fig. 7:** William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *Idle Hours*, ca. 1894.  
Oil on canvas, 25½ x 35½ inches.  
Signed “Wm. M. Chase” at lower left.  
Courtesy Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas (1982.1).  
The painting depicts Chase’s wife and two of his daughters, Alice Dieudonné and Koto Robertine, on the beach of Shinnecock Bay. The other woman holding a parasol is possibly Chase’s sister-in-law, Virginia Gerson. *Idle Hours* has a long exhibition history. It was once owned by the art patron Samuel T. Shaw, who lent it to the Interstate and West Indian Exposition in Charleston, South Carolina (1901), where it was awarded a gold medal.



**Fig. 8:** William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *Gathering Autumn Flowers*, ca. 1894.  
Oil on canvas, 21 x 38 inches.  
Signed “Wm. M. Chase” at lower right.  
Courtesy collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.

Seated lower right in the painting is Chase’s daughter, Dorothy Bremond, holding a bouquet of flowers, with her sister Alice Dieudonné behind and farther to the left, kneeling to pick flowers, while their sister Koto Robertine stands in the far background.

shown in the 1891 exhibition of the Society of American Artists (Chase was president of the organization at the time), it was titled *A Visit to the Garden*. Later, however, the title was changed by someone else, to *The Nursery*, by which the work is better known today.

In 1892, Chase moved his family to their newly-built summer home in Shinnecock Hills. The previous summer Chase had opened

the Shinnecock Summer School of Art, located just west of the village of Southampton on the south fork of Eastern Long Island. There he completed what are now considered to be among the most beautiful and endearing paintings of life in America at the end of the nineteenth century; no other artist captured the halcyon days of summer in quite the same way. These paintings also reflect his unerring



ability for integrating the figure into a landscape. Among these iconic works are *Idle Hours* (Fig. 7) and *Gathering Autumn Flowers* (Fig. 8), both circa 1894, and *The Big Bayberry Bush*, circa 1895 (Fig. 9), all featuring his daughters in white summer dresses with colorful bows. They confirm, as much as any paintings of the period can, Chase's key role in creating the American take on French Impressionism; a columnist would later write of his contribution, "Perhaps more than any other, Chase was a representative American artist. In whose landscapes does one better get the tang and thinness and crispness of our air and the whitey brightness of our light?"<sup>2</sup>

The Shinnecock Summer School of Art closed after the summer session of 1902 and for the next several years, Chase conducted summer classes in Europe. From 1907 until

1911, they were held in Florence, Italy, coinciding with his having received a commission to paint a self-portrait for the Uffizi Gallery. In 1913, in Venice, Chase taught his last European summer class. *A Passenger Boat—Venice* (Fig. 10), one of many paintings he completed on that visit, was long thought by scholars to date from Chase's first visit, and had been re-titled *Gray Day on the Lagoon*. But it was, in fact, a work from 1913, and its original title dates to the painting's first appearance in the 1914 exhibition of the Ten American Painters, of which Chase was a member.

In 1914, Chase was invited to teach a summer class in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California. During that summer he visited nearby Monterey, California, where he painted *Monterey, California* (Fig. 11). Earlier that year, a newspaper article described the California

**Fig. 9:** William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *The Big Bayberry Bush*, ca. 1895. Oil on canvas, 25½ x 33¾ inches. Signed "Wm. M. Chase" at lower left. Courtesy the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, Long Island, New York, Littlejohn Collection.

This scene of Chase's three eldest daughters playing among the bayberry bushes also depicts the Chase summer home, designed by Stanford White, in the background. When it was shown in the Kansas City Art Club Exhibition of 1901, it was singled out as "noteworthy for its admirable atmospheric effect, and for the deft description of summer sunshine."

Coast as a “great storehouse of material with which the artists of this country are much too little acquainted...Of all the region, Carmel is the center of art life and interest.”<sup>3</sup> No doubt it was such descriptions that played a role in Chase’s decision to accept the invitation.

The career of William Merritt Chase began in earnest shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War, and lasted until just prior to the United States entering the First World War. The decades between these two events were largely ones of peace and prosperity; the period when the country came of age. Within this nearly half century, Chase recorded his remarkable life on canvasses and panels, painting not the dramatic waterfalls or stormy seascapes, but the quiet pleasures wherever he happened to be. In aggregate, these images can be read as a diary of his life. As he told his students, “Do not try to paint the grandiose thing. Paint the commonplace so that it will be distinguished.”<sup>4</sup> And so he did. [AFA](#)



**Fig. 10:** William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *Gray Day on the Lagoon (A Passenger Boat – Venice)*, 1913. Oil on panel, 12¾ x 18¾ inches. Signed “Wm. M. Chase” at lower right. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; bequest of Ernest Wadsworth Longfellow (37.597).

The illustrations in this article are among the 339 landscapes accounted for in volume 3 of Ronald G. Pisano’s *The Complete Catalogue of Known and Documented Work by William Merritt Chase*, completed by Carrie K. Lane (Yale University Press), with a detailed chronology by the author of this article. Together, they provide a running commentary and visual diary of this artist’s remarkable life. This volume is available through Yale University Press at 800.405.1619 or visit [www.yale.edu/yup](http://www.yale.edu/yup).

**D. Frederick Baker** is a director of the *Pisano/Chase Catalogue Raisonné Project*, a foundation established to complete the life’s work of Ronald G. Pisano (1948–2000).

1. A. R. Ives, “Suburban Sketching Grounds: Talk with Mr. William M. Chase, Mr. Edward Moran, Mr. Leonard Ochtman,” *Art Amateur* (September 1891) 80.
2. “William Merritt Chase,” *The Outlook* 114 (8 November 1916): 537.
3. “The California Coast,” *New York Times* (1 February 1914).
4. Katherine Metcalf Roof, “The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase,” (New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917), 319.



**Fig. 11:** William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *Monterey, California*, 1914. Oil on panel, 15 x 20 inches. Signed “Wm. M. Chase” at lower left. Titled “Monterey, California” verso. Courtesy The Oakland Museum, Calif.