

William Merritt Chase

BY D. FREDERICK BAKER

THE FINAL VOLUME

PREVIOUS PAGE, TOP:

Fig. 1: *An English Cod*, 1904
 Oil on canvas, 30½ x 40¼ inches
 Signed *Wm. M. Chase* at lower left
 Courtesy of Corcoran Gallery of Art,
 Washington, D.C., Gallery Fund 1905

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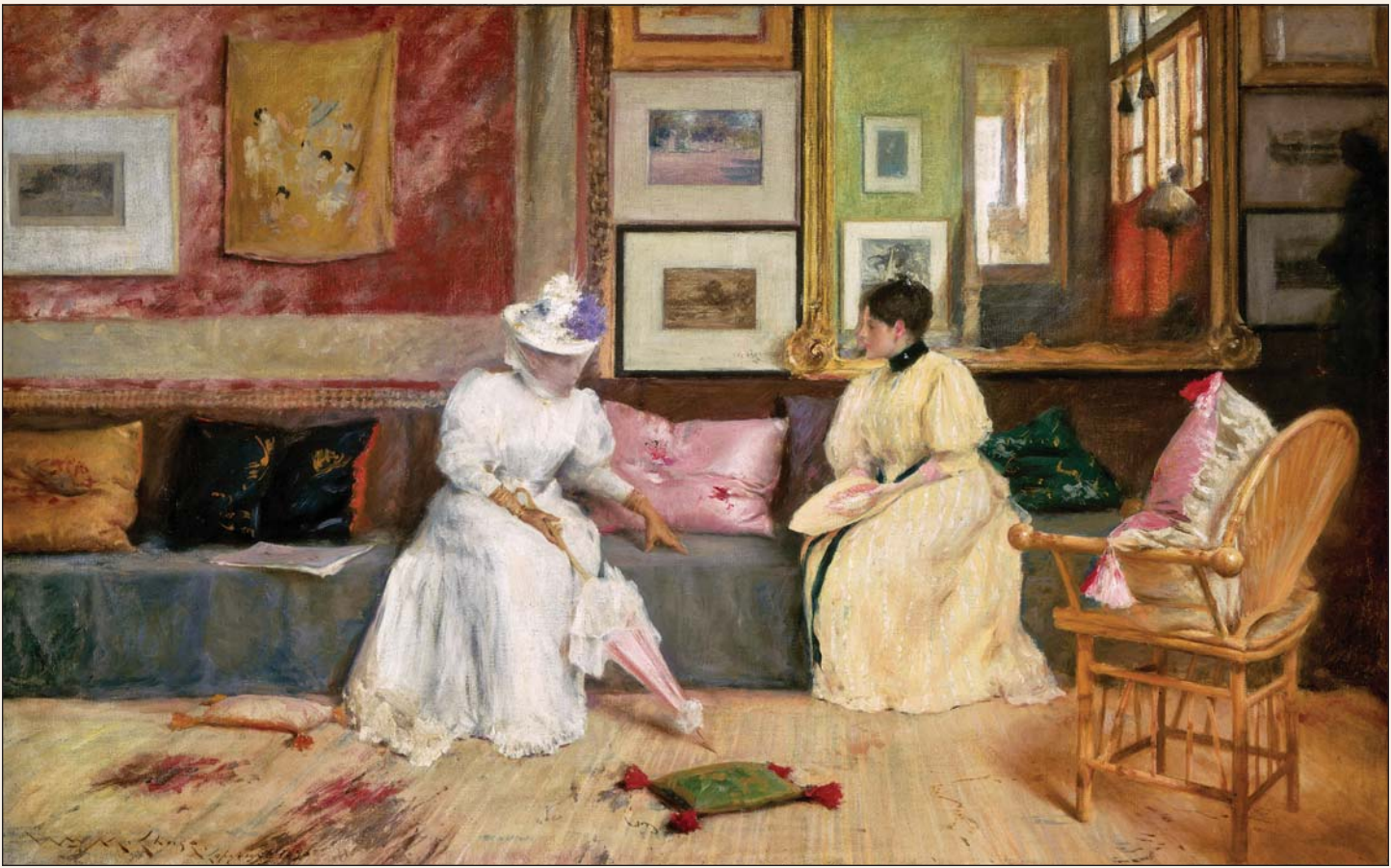
Fig. 2: *Still Life - Brass Bowl*, ca. 1900
 Oil on canvas, 38 x 48 inches
 Signed *Wm. M. Chase* at lower left
 Courtesy of Indianapolis Museum of Art,
 John Herron Fund (03.3)

ABOVE:

Fig. 3: *The Tenth Street Studio*, ca. 1881-1915
 Oil on canvas, 47 x 66 inches
 Courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art,
 Pittsburgh (17.22)

William Merritt Chase: *Still Lifes, Interiors, Figures, Copies of Old Masters, and Drawings*, is the fourth and final volume of *The Complete Catalogue of Known and Documented Work by William Merritt Chase (1849-1916)*. It completes the life's work of Ronald G. Pisano, who worked on the project for more

than thirty years before his untimely death in 2000. These volumes set the record of the remarkable life and work of an American artist remembered as "...a man with the rare combination in qualities of a gentleman, a human being, an artist and a worker. His ideals for art were all absorbing and his beliefs in its power absolutely unshakable...the



ideals for which William M. Chase lived and worked are the eternal truths of the power of art in man's expression in any materials with which he lives."¹

Best known as an instructor and exponent of Impressionism, Chase began his teaching career at the Art Students' League shortly after his return from studies at the Royal Munich

Academy in 1878. In 1891, he opened the Shinnecock Summer School of Art, near Southampton, Long Island, New York. After closing the school in 1902, he began organizing summer schools in Europe, beginning in Haarlem, Holland, in 1903.

In 1904, when he held his summer classes in London, he happened upon a fishmonger from whom he rented a cod fish, which he memorialized on canvas (Fig. 1). Two hours later he returned the cod, still fresh enough to be sold. An apocryphal story? Perhaps, but likely a great sales pitch to the Corcoran Gallery of Art who purchased the painting the following year. Soon, other museums and private collectors wanted a Chase fish still-life

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Fig. 4: *A Friendly Call*, 1894-1895

Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches

Signed *Wm. M. Chase* at lower left

Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.,
Chester Dale Collection (1943.1.2)

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Fig. 5: *The Japanese Print*, ca. 1888

Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches

Courtesy of Neue Pinakothek Bayerische
Staatsgemaldegammlungen, Munich, Germany



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Fig. 6: Keying Up—The Court Jester, 1875
 Oil on canvas, 39¼ x 25 inches
 Signed Will M. Chase at lower right
 Courtesy of Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,
 Philadelphia; gift of the Chapellier Galleries (1969.37)



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Fig. 7: I Think I Am Ready Now, ca. 1883
 Oil on canvas, 32½ x 17½ inches
 Signed W. M. Chase at lower left
 Courtesy of a private collection

painting, and such was the demand that he went on to paint over fifty of them, lamenting at one point, “It may be that I will be remembered as a painter of fish.”² Art collector and critic Duncan Phillips would later write, “And yet when the history of the period is written by a critic yet unborn, it may be that he will write that this same Chase rivaled [Jean-Siméon] Chardin in painting fruits and vegetables and [Antoine] Vollon in painting copper and brass and that [Chase] is unequalled by any other painter in the representation of the shiny, slippery fishiness of fish.”³ Chase of course did paint flowers, fruit and vegetables, and copper

and brass. A notable example is *Still Life—Brass Bowl* (Fig. 2), which shows Chase’s exceptionally fine brush in the Oriental figure, the floral arrangement, and the religious medal hanging over the draped table.

Chase’s career evokes a particular time and place that began in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when certain artists were celebrities and their work eagerly sought after, or at least appreciated, by a growing audience of Americans. Chase’s studio, which was constantly peopled with visitors, students, and family, was the grandest space in the Tenth Street Studio Building, and his painting *The Tenth Street Studio* (Fig. 3) depicts the famous outer studio, described in a *New York Times* article in 1882 as “the great centre of attraction to lady visitors . . . The walls are hung with all sorts of curious tapestries and bric-a-brac, and every nook and



Fig. 8: Copy of Velázquez's *Portrait of the Actor Pablo de Valladolid, Court Jester*, 1882
 Oil on canvas, 80 x 46½ inches
 Courtesy of The Player's Club, New York

corner is crowded with some odd looking treasure which arrests attention."⁴ In his summer home in Shinnecock Hills, Southampton, Long Island, to which he moved in 1892, he decorated his private studio with a similar array of wall hangings and works of art, memorialized in one

of his most beautiful paintings, *A Friendly Call* (Fig. 4). The work won the prestigious Shaw

Prize of 1895 when exhibited in the Society of American Artists Exhibition that year and a gold medal at the Buffalo Pan American Exposition of 1901. Chase also painted quieter moments in the studio, notably *The Japanese Print* (Fig. 5), possibly a portrait of his wife, Alice. One critic noted about Chase's portraits that "the accessories in them add much to their effectiveness."⁵

Earlier in his career, when Chase was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, he sent a remarkable painting, *Keying up—The Court Jester* (Fig. 6), to the 1876 Centennial International Exhibition, Philadelphia, where it won a medal and branded Chase as an up and coming artist of note. Critics were especially dazzled by his use of color, "A noble sense of color is perceptible in all his works, whether in the subtle tints of flesh, or in the powerful rendering of a mass of scarlet..."⁶ A more restrained use of color, though equally dramatic, appears in *I Think I Am Ready Now* (Fig. 7), one of several works of a female figure depicted from the back looking into a mirror.

As was the custom at the time, Chase copied works of the Old Masters, especially paintings by Velázquez—of Chase's forty known copies, sixteen are of Velázquez works. *Copy of Velázquez's Portrait of the Actor Pablo de Valladolid* (Fig. 8) was painted in the Prado in the summer of 1882. The following year it was one of several Chase copies included in an exhibition of copies of Old Masters held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Trained at the Munich Royal Academy to paint directly on canvas without the aid of preparatory drawings or sketches of any sort, Chase did very few drawings meant as works of art in and of themselves. He did complete drawings after a number of his own paintings for use as illustrations in various periodicals and books before the process of half-tone reproduction was in widespread use. Chase and his young family spent the summers of 1888–1889 at Kathleen Cottage, the home of their friends, Mr. and Mrs. Barney Williams in Bath Beach, Long Island. *Kathleen Cottage, Bath Beach* (Fig. 9) was done after his painting *At Kathleen Cottage* for



an article that appeared in the *New York Herald* in 1889.⁷ A more personal drawing of his young son, *Robert Chase Asleep*, (Fig. 10) was done circa 1900 when Robert Stewart Chase was about two years old.

Summing up his contributions to art and humanity, the *New York Times* obituary on October 29, 1916, for William Merritt Chase observed, “Things that would have been lost

he saved for us—unconscious momentary attitudes of children, swift changes of color under angles of light that became different angles in the twinkling of an eye, the rhythms of draperies swung by flickering gusts of wind... The death of William M. Chase removes from the ranks of American artists one whose contribution probably will receive a richer measure of applause in the next century.”

Admiration for Chase’s work did not take as long as hypothesized in *The Times*; his paintings and works on paper have long found a ready and eager audience, and by all indications, will continue to do so well into the future. AFA

The Complete Catalogue of Known and Documented Work by William Merritt Chase: by Ronald G. Pisano, finished by D. Frederick Baker and Carolyn K. Lane, is published by Yale University Press. Volume 1 includes the paintings in pastel, monotypes, painted tiles and ceramic plates, watercolors, and prints. Volume 2 consists of portraits in oil, and volume 3 of landscapes in oil. The files and documents used to complete the catalogue are in the Kellen Archives in the Parsons New School of Design, New York, in a joint ownership arrangement with the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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. Frank Alvah Parsons, “William M. Chase,” *The American Art Student* 1 (Nov.–Dec. 1916).
2. W. H. Fox, “Chase on Still Life,” *The Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* (January 1915): 199.
3. Duncan Phillips “William M. Chase” *American Magazine of Art* 8, no. 2 (December 1916): 46–50
4. “Artists Receiving: Some of the Pictures Exhibited in the Studio Building Yesterday,” *New York Times* (March 5, 1882): 9.
5. *Chicago Times Herald* (November 28, 1897).
6. S. G. W. Benjamin “Present Tendencies of American Art.” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 58, no. 345 (March 1879): 495.
7. “A Brilliant Group of Painters’ Drawings.” *New York Herald* (December 22, 1889).

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Fig. 9: Kathleen Cottage, Bath Beach, 1889
 Pen and ink on paper, 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
 Signed and dated Wm M. Chase
 1889 at lower right
 Courtesy of a private collection

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Fig. 10: Robert Chase Asleep, ca. 1900
 Pencil on paper, 9 x 13 inches
 Courtesy of Robin Chase