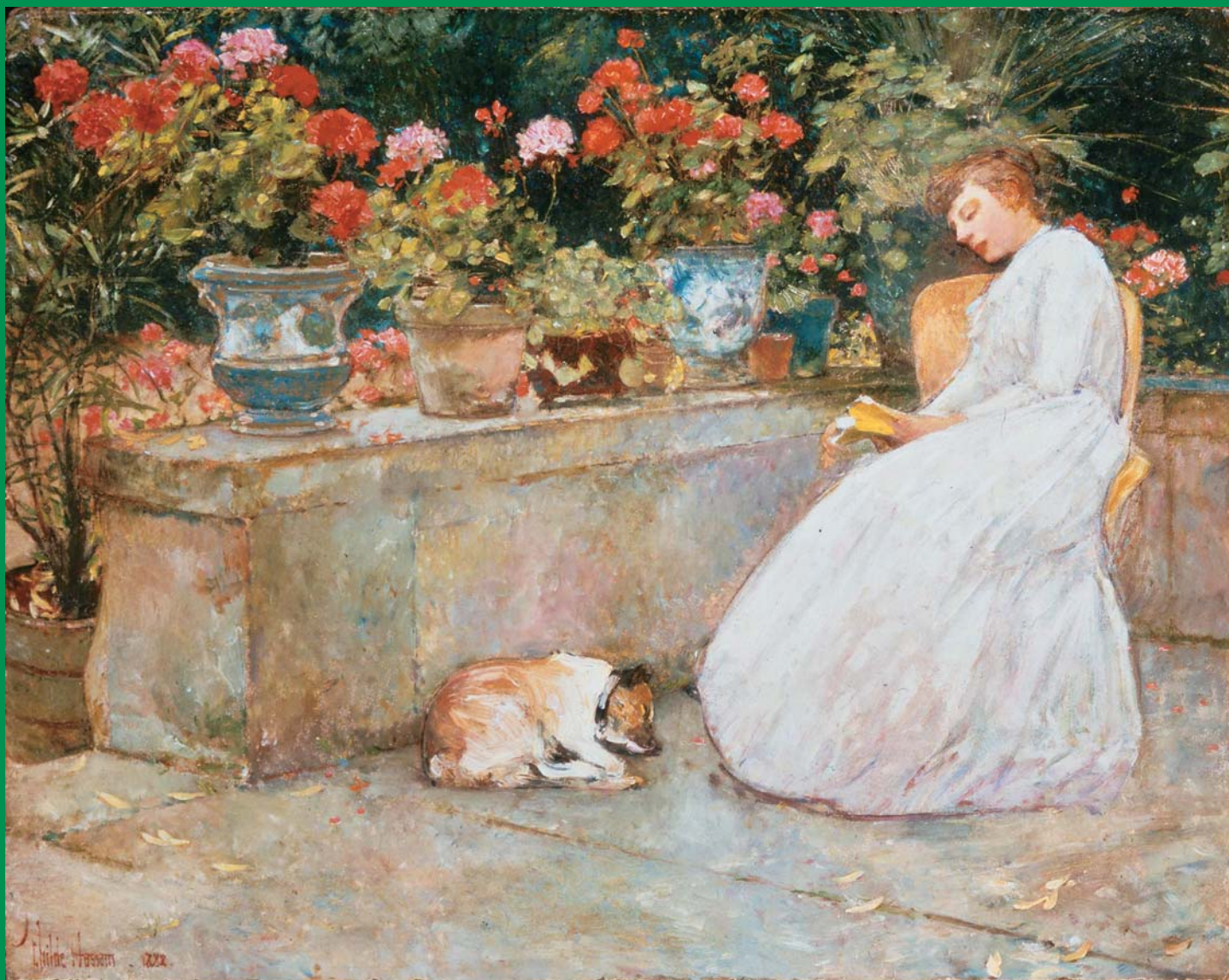


The American *Impressionists* in the Garden

BY JACK BECKER



PREVIOUS PAGE:

Fig. 1: John Leslie Breck (1860–1899)
Garden at Giverny
(In Monet's Garden), 1887–1891
 Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 29 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches
 Courtesy, Terra Foundation for American Art,
 Chicago, Daniel J. Terra Collection

ABOVE:

Fig. 2: Childe Hassam (1859–1935)
Reading, 1888
 Oil on panel, 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
 Courtesy, Hunter Museum
 of American Art, Chattanooga, Tenn.,
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. R. B. Davenport III

At the end of the nineteenth century, American artists began to demonstrate not only a preference for gardens as an artistic motif but also a growing appreciation for the art of gardening itself. The importance of the garden as a subject at this time reflects a paradigm shift in attitude toward depicting nature. As America became a settled nation and the frontier closed, artists turned away from large-scale panoramic views of the countryside favored by artists associated with the Hudson River School a few decades earlier. Instead of untamed wilderness, these painters favored intimate and domesticated landscapes. For artists enamored with Impressionism and interested in capturing the effects of light, there was no better subject than a lush garden under the play of summer sunlight.

It was not only painters who were intrigued by the garden. Americans in general were experiencing a mania for gardens. Clubs and magazines sprang up to cater to the multitude of activities associated with flowers and horticulture. Gardening was widely considered a distinct art form adhering to the same design principles of color, light, shadow, and mass associated with landscape painting. In an issue of *Harper's Magazine* in 1887, horticulturalist F.W. Burbridge wrote, "As a painter takes canvas and colors and produces for us a beautiful picture, so the gardener may paint or beautify the bare



Fig. 3: Charles Courtney Curran (1861–1942)
In the Luxembourg, 1889
 Oil on panel, 16 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{5}{16}$ inches
 Courtesy, Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago, Daniel J. Terra Collection



Fig. 4: John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)
Falconieri Gardens, Frascati, 1907
 Oil on canvas, 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
 Courtesy, Cheekwood Botanical Garden & Museum of Art, Nashville, Tenn.,
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Knestrick

earth or the grassy lawn with living flowers, but to do this well he must...be more than half an artist himself.”¹ Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer, one of the principal cultural commentators of the late nineteenth century, placed gardening among the fine arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture: “The Arts of Design are usually named as three: architecture, sculpture, and painting. It is the popular belief that a man who practices one of these is an artist...Yet there is a fourth Art of Design which well deserves to rank with them, for it demands quite as much in the way of aesthetic feeling, creative power, and executive skill. This is the art of which crates beautiful compositions upon the surface of the ground.”² For Van Rensselaer and many of her contemporaries, the creative gardener was in essence a painter, sculptor, and architect all rolled into one.

The gardens represented by the artists of this era are as diverse as their individual style and approach to paintings. Many spent long periods in Europe where they depicted the gardens they encountered. French impressionists in particular embraced the garden in their depiction of everyday scenes. Claude Monet (1840–1926) became closely associated not only with garden paintings but the art of gardening itself, transforming the grounds of his home in Giverny into a rich and varied landscape. His garden inspired generations of American painters—John Leslie Breck (1860–1899) (Fig. 1) among them—who became interested in the art of horticulture. In *Reading* (Fig. 2), Childe Hassam (1859–1935) portrays his wife Maude enjoying the domestic tranquility of an enclosed French garden, and in urban Paris, Charles Curran (1861–1942) painted *In the Luxembourg* (Fig. 3), which depicts his wife Grace in an elegant black dress and white lace trimmed hat enjoying the city’s public gardens. Other American artists found inspiration outside of France. John Singer Sargent



Fig. 5: Mary Fairchild MacMonnies Low (1858–1946)
Blossoming Time in Normandy, 1901
 Oil on canvas, 38½ x 63⅝ inches
 Courtesy, Collection of the Union League Club of Chicago

(1856–1925), for instance, captured the beauty of the Falconieri Gardens at Frascati, Italy (Fig. 4).

Many artists found inspiration in the gardens they created and tended themselves. Mary (1858–1946) and Fredrick MacMonnies (1863–1937) spent several summers in Giverny, where they refurbished Le Moutier, a medieval monastery. Mary developed the gardens there, and later turned her attention to depicting them. *Blossoming Time in Normandy* (Fig. 5) shows her gardens in the spring season. Will Hicock Low (1853–1932), who visited the MacMonnies, also painted these grounds, and his *L'Interlude: Jardin de MacMonnies* (Fig. 6) showcases the garden in the heat of summer. While in Giverny, Frederick Carl Frieseke (1874–1939) focused on the reflection of sunlight and the decorative patterns in the landscape surrounding his home, and he frequently painted images of his wife, Sadie, in the garden she created and maintained (Fig. 7). One of the last Americans to travel to Giverny was Louis Ritman (1889–1963),



Fig. 6: Will Hicock Low (1853–1932)
L'Interlude: Jardin de MacMonnies, 1901
 Oil on canvas, 26 x 32½ inches
 Courtesy, Collection of the University of Virginia Art Museum,
 Charlottesville, Museum purchase



Fig. 7: Frederick Carl Friesseke (1874–1939)
The Garden Umbrella, ca. 1910
 Oil on canvas, 32 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 32 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches
 Courtesy, Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Ga.,
 Bequest of Elizabeth Millar (Mrs. Bernice Frost) Bullard

FACING PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:
Fig. 8: Louis Ritman (1889–1963)
Flower Garden, ca. 1913
 Oil on canvas, 39 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 39 inches
 Courtesy, Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Ariz.,
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John M. Redfield Jr.


Fig. 9: Gaines Ruger Donoho (1857–1916)
A Garden, 1911
 Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches
 Courtesy, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto,
 Gift of the Canadian National Exhibition Association

whose *Flower Garden* (Fig. 8), in a high-key palette with broken brushwork, depicts a figure almost hidden among the flowers.

In the United States, numerous painters turned to the old villages of New England and Long Island both for subject matter and a place to summer. The gardens they tended and depicted were old fashioned, reflecting the growing fascination with America's colonial past. Gains Ruger Donoho (1857–1916) purchased an eighteenth-century home in East Hampton, Long Island, and quickly created a garden that he painted several times in the 1890s (Fig. 9). Matilda Browne (1869–1947) was one of a number of painters in Old Lyme, Connecticut, who turned to the theme of the garden, depicting the plantings surrounding the home of fellow artist Clark Voorhees (Fig. 10). In Cornish, New Hampshire, Maria Oakey Dewing (1845–1927) produced *The Bed of Poppies* (Fig. 11), which plunges the viewer into a close-up view of one of the remarkable garden she created there. Lillian Mathilde Genth (1876–1953) frequently painted the gardens on her farm (Fig. 12) just outside Lime Rock, Connecticut. Like many artists, the garden was not just subject matter for her painting, but was an artistic endeavor in its own right. Painting gardens was not limited to the Northeast. In Charleston, South Carolina, William Posey Silva (1859–1948) depicted plantation gardens suggestive of an earlier day in his *Garden of Dreams* (Fig. 13).

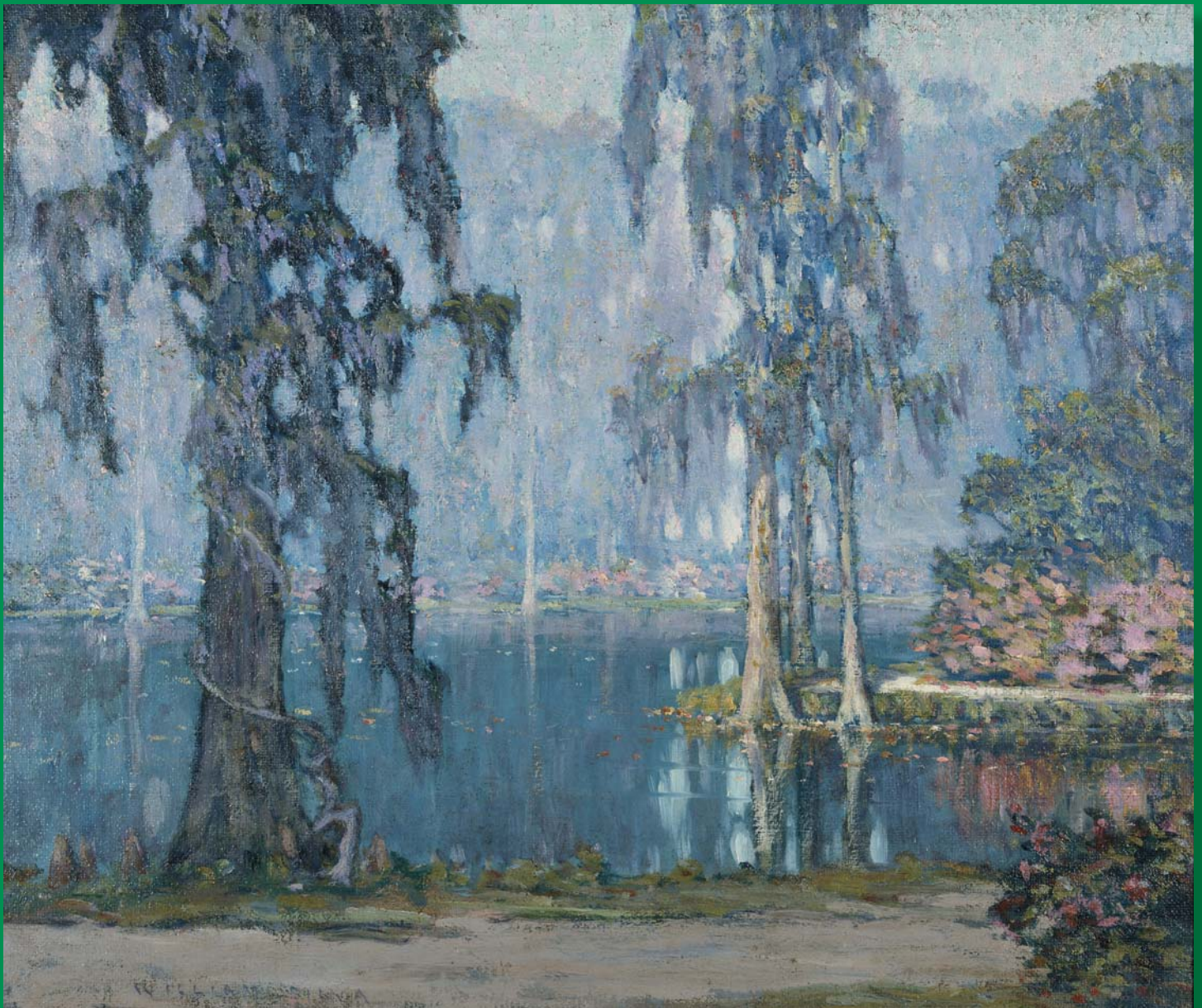




These and other paintings are in the exhibition *The American Impressionists in the Garden*, organized by Cheekwood Botanical Garden & Museum of Art, Nashville, Tennessee, a fifty-five-acre site on the grounds of the former Cheek estate. Built with the fortunes of the Maxwell House Coffee company, Cheekwood today is home to outstanding botanical collections dispersed over ten distinct gardens, a collecting art museum, and a unique collection of contemporary sculpture along a woodland path. The exhibition will open at the Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati, Ohio (February 18–May 15, 2011), the last of a series of venues. A catalogue published by Vanderbilt University Press can be purchased from Cheekwood. For more information visit www.cheekwood.org. 

Jack Becker is executive director and CEO of the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska. He is curator of *The American Impressionists in the Garden*, and is a former president and CEO of Cheekwood, where the exhibit originated.

1. F. W. Burbridge, "Old Garden Flowers," *Harper's Magazine* 76 (December 1887): 14.
2. Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer, *Art Out-of-Doors* (New York: Scribner's, 1893), 3.



PREVIOUS PAGE, UPPER LEFT:

Fig. 10: Matilda Brown (1869–1947)

In Vorhees' Garden, 1914

Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches

Courtesy, Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, Conn., Gift of the Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Company

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Fig. 11: Maria Oakley Dewing (1845–1927)

Bed of Poppies, 1909

Oil on canvas, 30½ x 35¾ inches

Courtesy, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., Gift of anonymous donor

PREVIOUS PAGE, BOTTOM:

Fig. 12: Lillian Mathilde Genth (1876–1953)

Summer Afternoon, ca. 1910

Oil on canvas, 66 x 54¼ inches

Courtesy, Cheekwood Botanical Garden & Museum of Art, Nashville, Tenn., Transfer from the Nashville Museum of Art

Fig. 13: William Posey Silva (1859–1948)

Garden of Dreams, ca. 1925

Oil on canvas, 34 x 39 inches

Courtesy, Cheekwood Botanical Garden & Museum of Art, Nashville, Tenn. Transfer from the Nashville Museum of Art