

Maurice Prendergast

Maurice Prendergast worked in the shadow of many of the most acclaimed artists of the 20th century, one reason, perhaps, why he is often overlooked. However, his star is in the ascendancy. He is part of the current exhibit in the Metropolitan Museum of Art called *Americans in Paris , 1860-1900*; a print of his was recently valued at over \$30,000 on the *Antiques Roadshow*; and he is the subject of this article. This Canadian-Irish-American painter deserves the attention.

The Prendergast name came to Ireland with Strongbow and the Normans in the 12th century. Biographers know little about Maurice's family and they disagree about much of what is known. We know that his father came to St. John 's, Newfoundland from Ireland , that he operated a sub-arctic trading post, and that he became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1881. Well respected researchers have Maurice and his sister Lucy Catharine born in St. John 's in 1858, while others put the birth in 1859. Lucy died at age eighteen or twenty; the parents also lost a daughter at birth and her twin brother Richard at age four. The family moved to Boston after the father's business failed when Maurice was two years old or ten, depending on the source. Maurice's mother, Mary Malvina Germaine, a woman of French-Canadian origin, was a native of Boston, so the family's move to Boston trods the path followed by families in trouble, the path back home to Mother and Father (a doctor). Both Maurice and his surviving brother Charles attended Rice Grammar School until age fourteen, an education equivalent to that of others in that time. The sons' Irishness must have been enhanced with their father's being active in the Benevolent Irish Society in Boston .



Maurice led a rather ordinary life as a dry goods clerk and a store card illustrator after his schooling. His talent in illustration- store cards were advertisements placed in store windows- was an early indicator of his gifts. Close to his brother Charles throughout life, Maurice and Charles decided to take a chance on their artistic potential, so in 1886 they traveled to England to study art. This was the beginning of many trips to Europe and the beginning of an artistic career which would propel Maurice to permanent collections in great art museums.

Maurice spent the years 1891 to 1894 in a Paris that was suffused with French Impressionism. No wonder, then, that he is often called an American Impressionist because his earliest watercolors were impressionistic interpretations of scenes painted on the coast of Normandy , at Dinard, St. Malo, Dieppe , and Tréport, and his influences were great Impressionists like Manet. Upon Maurice's return to Boston in 1894, the scenes he chose to paint were, like his French paintings, scenes on the sea shore at places like Marblehead , Nahant, Beachmont and Revere Beach . He also sketched and painted Boston scenes, such as the Public Garden and Castle Island . Boston identifies Maurice Prendergast as a proud son of Boston ; he is well represented in its Museum of Fine Arts and also in Williams College 's Museum. At this time, Charles's hand carved picture framing business was getting noticed for its quality product. Maurice also carved some frames and signed them on the back creating significant auction value in the future for his frame work. He also earned some money illustrating books. One of his most notable commissions was to create 137 line drawings for James M. Barrie's book *My Lady Nicotine: A Study in Smoke*. In this book, Prendergast shows his command of the Art Nouveau style that came into vogue in architecture and design during his lifetime. Louis Comfort Tiffany's work in glass is the epitome of the Art Nouveau style. Maurice's drawings for Barrie 's book are very like the drawings of the notorious Art Nouveau stylist, Aubrey Beardsley. In one of life's coincidences, Lewis Sullivan, born in Boston of an Irish father and enrolled in the Rice Grammar School at the same time as Prendergast, is noted as an exemplar of Art Nouveau in architecture.

After an exhibition at the Eastman Chase Gallery in Boston in 1897, Maurice began to be noticed. Mr. and Mrs. Montgomery Sears, friends of Mary Cassatt, sponsored a trip to Italy for Prendergast. Venice, especially, became a rich source of subjects for him with its canals, bridges and spectacular architecture. The painting *St. Mark's, Venice 1898* accompanying this article clearly illustrates Prendergast's skill in capturing architectural details in watercolor and pencil. The three flags is a motif he often used in his Venice paintings. His Italian tour also brought him to Rome, Florence, Assisi, Siena, Padua, Orvieto, Naples, and Capri, but it was Venice which took his heart. William H. Downes in 1896 said about his work at this point, "...he carries a whole Fourth of July in his color-box." Returning to Boston in late 1899, the world was on the threshold of a new century and Prendergast's work was now valued in exhibition spaces.

William Macbeth in New York wanted Prendergast watercolors for his Macbeth Gallery. Prendergast's highly successful one man show at the Gallery of William Macbeth in 1900 led Prendergast to spend a good portion

of his year as a commuter to New York until he finally settled in New York in 1914. We represent his New York paintings in this article with *The Mall, Central Park 1901*. As observed by Nancy Mowll Mathews, Prendergast Curator at the Williams College Museum of Art, this painting shows once more Prendergast's interest in architecture in his treatment of the Beaux-Arts staircase and in the pyramidal arrangement of the people. The prominence of umbrellas and whites and reds in this watercolor and pencil painting are common sights in Prendergast paintings in many settings. His New York scenes include Madison Square and the East River, but Central Park, with its fountains, colorfully dressed women and children, horse carriages, perambulators and festive days, inspired the bulk of his New York paintings.

The new century was to bring in the period of Maurice Prendergast's greatest recognition. In 1901 he won a bronze medal at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, his only medal until just months before he died in 1924. He took more trips to Europe: France in 1907 and 1914; Italy in 1911. He and Charles made the move to New York permanently in 1914 settling in at Washington Square South. They were able to live comfortably owing to Charles' income from his framing business. These were the days of \$110 prices for art work.



Not many years into the new century Maurice Prendergast was to make a change in his familiar Impressionist style. Two of the most notable exhibitions which displayed his paintings were his participation as part of The Eight at the Macbeth Galleries in 1908 and the Armory Show in 1913. The Eight were a group of artists, including Prendergast, Robert Henri, and Williams Glackens, who were loosely connected through New York art circles. One critic thought that "... what will infallibly happen at this exhibition... Mr. Henri and Mr. Prendergast will be better received than the rest." Another critic, however, thought that Prendergast's part in the exhibit was a display of "artistic tommy-rot, unadulterated slop; the show would be better if it were that of the Seven rather than the Eight." These comments, both favorable and unfavorable, remind us of the subjective nature of the arts: one person's trash is another's treasure. The show traveled to eight cities and was revolutionary by New York City standards but not by Parisian. Many of the artists who were part of The Eight, but not Prendergast, were dubbed the Ash Can School for their painting of gritty urban scenes and focus on poverty, not Prendergast's material.

The Armory Show is a legendary art exhibit in the annals of American culture. Called the International Exhibition of Modern Art and sponsored by the Association of American Artists and Sculptors and held in the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City, the show ran from February 17, 1913 to March 15. The show was monumental: 1250 paintings, sculptures, and decorative works by over three hundred avant-garde artists. Prendergast had seven watercolors in the show, and the honor of beings exhibited with Degas, Cézanne, Renoir, Monet, Seurat, Van Gogh, Matisse, Manet, Lautrec, Dufy and Gauguin. Modernism had come to America, and Prendergast was a part of it. The Metropolitan Museum of Art confirmed Modernism's legitimacy by purchasing Cézanne's *Hill of the Poor*, even though President Theodore Roosevelt said of the show, "That's not art!"

Prendergast was unquestionably a different artist in the last fifteen years of his life than the Impressionist we see in the pieces reproduced in this article, but none of his work was ever as edgy as the most controversial painting in the Armory Show, Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. After trips to France in 1909 -1910 and to Italy in 1911-1912 and his permanent move to New York in 1914, the lightness and joyfulness of his Venetian scenes, for example, were replaced by heavy brush strokes and muter colors. He painted more in oils, his beach scenes now had nude bathers and his park scenes, too, had nudes. A viewer of these later paintings can see in them Gauguin, Matisse and the Pointillists. Prendergast was reinvented.

Maurice Prendergast died on February 1, 1924 and was cremated on the next day. His obituary in the *New York Telegram and Evening Mail* said about him, "The oldest in years in his group, he was in many ways the youngest and an interesting example of the combination of New England caution, Irish alertness and French intelligence." See Maurice Prendergast's work at the Met, at MOMA and at the Whitney. He deserves a wider audience.

(Written by John Walsh, November 2006)

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