

34: Childe Hassam *The Bathers* (1904)

Margaret Bullock

This idyllic, fantastical scene of nude bathers in a landscape (on a canvas over twelve feet long) was originally part of an even larger composition by the American impressionist Childe Hassam. Hassam's friend Charles Erskine Scott Wood, a lawyer, amateur painter, writer, and patron of the arts, had hoped that paintings by Hassam and the artists J. Alden Weir and Albert Pinkham Ryder would all adorn his Portland, Oregon, home.¹ In the end, only Hassam's mural was completed.²



The mural commission arose from a conversation between Hassam and Wood in the fall of 1903 in which Wood mentioned his desire to tie together the eclectic collection of paintings, antiquities, sculptures, Asian art objects, and rare books in his library.³ Hassam offered to create a decorative program for the walls of the room. He began work around November and wrote Wood on March 1, 1904, to report that the mural was complete and on view in his New York studio.⁴ "A great many of the best men here have seen your decoration and they like it," Hassam proudly reported. "Of course it is too far 'up the gulch' for most people....Pinkey [Albert Pinkham Ryder] came up and was most appreciative."⁵

Childe Hassam,
1859–1935
The Bathers, 1904
Oil on canvas, 48 1/16 x 148 1/4 in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ogden
Phipps, 63.27

Hassam's hallmark as an artist was his versatility. His brushwork was fluent and changeable and he adapted his techniques and compositions to suit his subjects. Though his works often looked as if they were dashed off rapidly and easily, he labored over many of his canvases, working and reworking them sometimes for years. Hassam never radically departed from his impressionist style once he adopted it in the 1890s, but he did like to experiment with new stylistic elements as well as new formats, media, and painting techniques throughout his career.

In 1903 when he began work on the mural for Wood's library, Hassam was a well-established and highly successful painter, known for his impressionist views of New York's streets and the artist colonies and seaside towns of New England, particularly the Isles of Shoals off the coast of New Hampshire. His eagerness to create a mural for Wood's library and the speed with which he completed it suggest it was a format he had been considering for some time. Murals were a popular choice of decoration for American public buildings in the late nineteenth century and many of Hassam's contemporaries had received such commissions. Wood also was a supportive friend and patron, allowing Hassam freedom in his choice of subject and composition. The mural project offered him an opportunity to experiment and challenge himself in a variety of ways, including the large-scale format, extended consideration of a single motif (nudes in a landscape), and use of a modernist palette and composition.



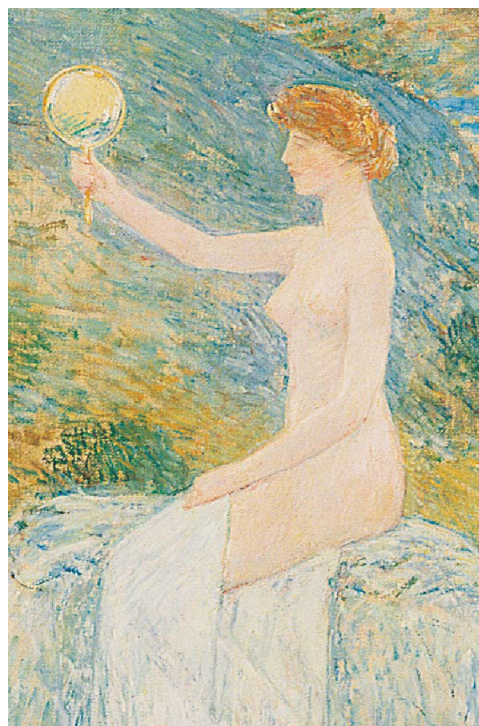
Library, C.E.S. Wood's House,
Portland, Oregon, ca. 1910
Oregon Historical Society,
OrHi74497#1132-A

Like *The Bathers*, the other sections of the library mural depict both individual nude female figures and groups of nudes along the shore of a body of water. Hassam had painted similar scenes of nudes in landscapes prior to 1904, and they became a regular subject later in his career. In the case of the mural, it is unclear whether this motif was his own idea or Wood's. But Hassam had been using classical elements in his paintings since 1900, and the idealized female forms in *The Bathers* are certainly reminiscent of archaic and early classical Greek sculpture.⁶ During this period, Hassam was also grappling with the innovations of the postimpressionists and experimenting with elements of their styles. In its dream-like arcadian setting and bright palette, the mural suggests the work of both Georges Seurat and the symbolist painter, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, both of whose work Hassam had studied.

The mural was painted as a series of individual canvases (probably for easier transport across country) but conceived as a single continuous decoration. Hassam gave the composition an overall rhythm and harmony through his repetitions of vertical accents, strategically placed rock formations, and figure groupings. The palette and brushwork are also consistent across the entire mural. Generally, the background and sky are fairly thinly painted, with the canvas showing through in spots; so too the larger landscape elements in the foreground and middleground. Landforms along the horizon are outlined with simple descriptive strokes that suggest certain shapes (a hill, the curve of a rock, etc.) without extensive detail, a form of shorthand notation Hassam used regularly. In contrast, foreground clusters of vegetation are riots of freely painted dots, dashes, drips, and strokes of color—virtuoso passages of impressionist painting. The nudes are heavily impastoed, simplified forms with touches of color to indicate details. Though he painted them regularly, Hassam's figures often feel rather wooden or awkward, particularly in contrast to his fluid landscape painting. Here, the nudes show signs of having been labored over and reworked a number of times, and were clearly the most time-consuming element of the composition.

One figure in *The Bathers* stands out among the varying clusters of nudes. She is seated just right of center, holding a mirror. Images of women holding mirrors have been a common motif in art since antiquity. They are often meant as *vanitas* emblems to suggest the fleeting nature of beauty and life. Hassam's nude, however, turns her mirror toward the world outside the mural, both acknowledging its separation from her idyllic setting and incorporating it. By reflecting Wood's world, the mirror also suggests that he is part of both the classical artistic lineage the nude represents and the half-real, half-magical world in which she resides.

Pictures of Wood's library taken around 1910 show that the original mural occupied the two long walls of the room above the bookcases. Wood's grandchildren also remember it extending onto a third wall (not photographed).



Childe Hassam,
1859–1935
The Bathers (detail), 1904
Oil on canvas, 48 7/16 x 148 1/4 in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ogden
Phipps, 63.27



Childe Hassam,
1859–1935
The Bathers (detail), 1904
Oil on canvas, 48⁷/₁₆ x 148¹/₄ in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ogden
Phipps, 63.27

When Wood later sold the house, the mural was split up into five canvases of varying sizes, one for each of his children. Over time, the pieces were sold out of the family and are now scattered across the country.⁷ *The Bathers*, the largest of the canvases, was given to Wood's daughter, Nan Wood Honeyman (the first congresswoman from Oregon), who still owned it in 1953 when it was lent to the Portland Art Museum for exhibition. By 1963, it had been sold to the Hirschl & Adler Gallery in New York, where it was purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Ogden Phipps and then donated to the Memorial Art Gallery.⁸

Though Hassam was a highly prolific artist who worked in a variety of media, creating thousands of paintings, drawings, and prints during his career, the mural for Wood's library was one of only two he ever attempted. The second was a mural he painted for the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco in 1914 that also included idealized female figures. Apart from the murals, Hassam's only other large-scale work, again an image of nudes in a landscape, titled *June* (1905, 84 x 84 inches), is now in the collection of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York.

The Portland mural also played another significant role in Hassam's career. During his 1904 trip to Oregon to install the work in Wood's library, he was captivated by the state's rich and varied landscape, particularly the eastern desert. Hassam created sixty or more oils, watercolors, and pastels that are unique in his body of work for their western subjects, lack of reworking, and, for many, his use of pure *plein air* painting.⁹ These images, and the library mural, reveal an artist secure in his ability and willing to explore new worlds, both literal and artistic.

Margaret Bullock is Curator, Harwood Museum of Art, Taos, New Mexico.