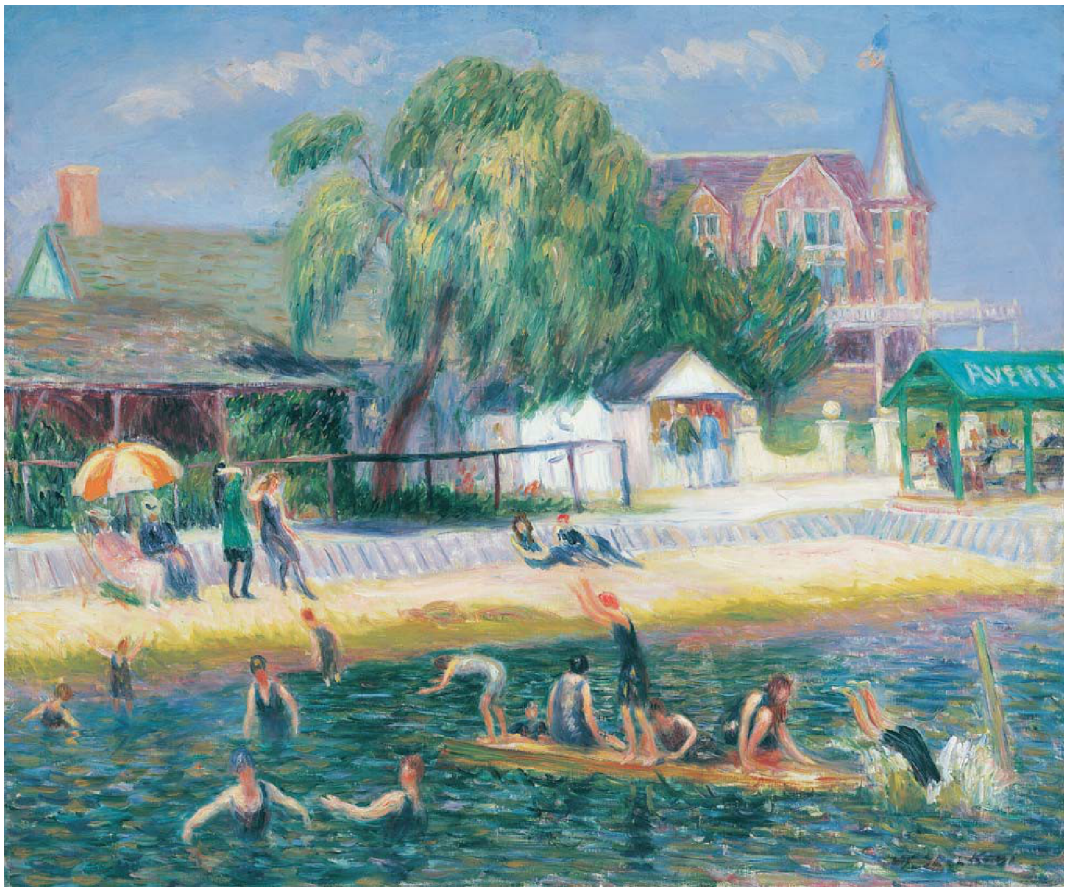

45: William Glackens *Beach at Blue Point* (ca. 1915)

Grace Seiberling

In *Beach at Blue Point* William Glackens presents a moment out of time. People relax in the soft light and warmth of a summer's day. In the blue-green water, divers, rafters, and bathers are forever stopped in mid-motion. A man and a woman buy refreshments at a window while other people lounge in an open shed with "Avery" on the roof.[1] Two women lounge under a yellow and orange umbrella with their straw hats tilted down while others relax along a sea wall. This scene is an idyll but it also lets us know some things about Blue Point and what summer was like on the relatively sheltered waters of Long Island's Great South Bay in the early teens.

Beach at Blue Point is part of an extended group of paintings Glackens did between 1911 and 1916 when he and his family spent summers in the town of Bellport on Long Island.[2] He painted many views of beaches at Bellport and nearby Blue Point. Although the Atlantic beaches on Fire Island could be reached by ferry, Glackens preferred the protected waters of Great South Bay.

These works represent a change for Glackens, who had previously concentrated on New York scenes as a painter and illustrator. A member of the group called The Eight, he had shared their predilection for urban subjects emphasizing the grittier side of city life. The impressionist-inspired landscapes showing middle-class outdoor recreation suggest a different way of living. Glackens was about forty-five when he painted *Beach at Blue Point*. His marriage to Edith Dimock, daughter of a wealthy textile manufacturer, had brought an end to immediate financial pressures, and allowed him to focus more on painting, although he would continue producing illustrations until 1919. His children, Ira, born in 1907, and Lenna, born 1913, provided one impetus for renting a cottage near the seashore. Summers at Bellport provided an opportunity to explore a new range of subjects and develop his sense of color. "Color should be as expressive as drawing," he said in 1913; "it should be as closely connected with life."[3]

William Glackens,
1870–1938
Beach at Blue Point, ca. 1915
Oil on canvas, 25¼ x 30⅛ in.
Elizabeth R. Grauwiller Bequest,
73.12

Glackens's contact with modern European painting had been renewed when he went to Paris in 1912 to buy pictures for the collector Albert Barnes, and again in 1913 when he headed the committee to select American works for the Armory Show. Although he appreciated works of Matisse and others, the challenge he had set himself of painting figures in action and in changing scenes with varied textures and shifting light was closer to that of the impressionists. He acknowledged the influence of Renoir, then the most admired impressionist in America, asking a critic, Forbes Watson, who complained of the connection, "Can you think of a better man to follow than Renoir?"[4] Glackens's colors—emerald green, yellows, dark blues, and crimson lake—do call to mind Renoir, as does the soft, feathery brushwork in some parts of the painting.

While the scene in the Memorial Art Gallery's painting may appear to be detached, it is connected in many concrete ways to its milieu in the teens. Glackens's earlier career as an illustrator continued to inform his work, both in his ability to present scenes of many people with individual characterizations and in his sensitivity to social issues and nuances of behavior.

He was aware that these scenes of summer recreation had their counterpart on the city streets. *Far from the Fresh Air Farm*, a drawing Glackens did in 1911, shows crowds of people shopping and carrying on their business beneath a banner advertising an annual beach outing, while children play ball in the street or are nearly run over by a delivery wagon. Like George Bellows in his 1913 lithograph *Why don't they all go to the country for vacation?*,[5] Glackens in his drawing presents the lives of a group of people who can't afford to get out of the city. They might spend an afternoon on the beach at Coney Island, but not the long days of leisure evoked by Glackens's scenes at Bellport and nearby Blue Point.

Seaside recreation had become a prominent feature of life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Industrial Revolution had increased leisure time for middle-class people, and improved transportation allowed greater mobility. The Long Island Railroad had made the Atlantic beaches readily accessible to vacationers. As early as the 1880s summer resorts and hotels like those at Blue Point were built in the coastline villages. By the time Glackens went to Bellport, its beaches were already crowded. Not only a wish to escape the heat of city summers, but also a concern for health had led to the development of Long Island. Popular magazines advised families to avoid the threat of infectious diseases by leaving the city for the summer.[6] Fears of the polio epidemic in 1916 even led the artist to move his family away from Bellport to a more rural location in the middle of the summer.[7]

Unlike Renoir's timeless nudes, Glackens's bathers are participants in a social scene of their time. The majority of people in the Bellport and Blue Point paintings are women. This may very well suggest the life of a seaside resort where wives and children spent the weekdays, escaping the heat and health dangers of the city, to be joined on the weekends by men who worked in New York.

Glackens's paintings of Bellport and Blue Point contrast both with the elegant views of Long Island in the works of William Merritt Chase and the rowdier, more working-class scenes of Coney Island that Glackens and John Sloan had done earlier.[8] Chase's scenes at Shinnecock show a bucolic landscape of fields inhabited by women and children, far from the workaday world. Bellport, according to Ira Glackens, was an unspoiled town without any large estates. "Near the beach," he writes, "stood a huge barnlike 'Vacation Home' for New York shopgirls."[9] A recent commentator has remarked on the accord between the improvisatory aspect of the landscape around Bellport and Glackens's subjects: "This shoreline was punctuated by rickety gazebos, jetties, rafts and water slides, and dressing sheds and seems extremely commonplace in comparison with the elegant beaches that Boudin depicted at Deauville and Trouville or that Chase recorded at Shinnecock. The liveliness of his figures' poses and of his paint application is entirely consistent with the casual energy and spontaneous activity associated with the young people whom Glackens pictures."[10]

William Glackens, 1879–1938
"Vacations" (Illustration for *Harper's Weekly* 58 [August 30, 1913]: 17)

This spontaneous activity links the beach scenes with Glackens's urban scenes and his illustrations. He could characterize individual figures yet give a sense of the activity of the whole. Wattenmaker remarks that the figures frolic and pose in specific attitudes like actors on a stage, which, in a sense, they are.[11] Women drying or dressing their hair appear in the middle ground in *The Beach at Blue Point* but neither they nor the bathers—in different variants of swimwear, with and without sleeves, with and without stockings—suggest the extent to which women's freedom of behavior at the beach was a matter of controversy at the time.

Appropriate standards for swimwear were one focus for debate about the boundaries of women's behavior in public.[12] Glackens's illustration of a beach scene, "Vacations," appeared in a 1913 issue of *Harper's Weekly* that also contained an article on champion swimmer Annette Kellerman, depicted in her controversial one-piece bathing suit. It began, "Most persons would perhaps agree that a

William Glackens,
1870–1938
Beach at Blue Point (detail),
ca. 1915
Oil on canvas, 25¼ x 30⅛ in.
Elizabeth R. Grauwiller
Bequest, 73.12

woman should not appear in public in a state of nudity, but how far short of that happiness propriety makes it necessary for her to stop seems to be an undecided question."[13] Unlike their faceless counterparts in his painting, the women in Glackens's illustration pose provocatively.

Nevertheless the Bellport and Blue Point pictures draw back from overt social commentary. Glackens was realist enough to notice the contemporary aspects, but he addresses an audience beyond the immediate, beyond the readers of illustrated magazines. The pleasurable aspects of his work remain fresh.

Albert Barnes wrote about Glackens's beach scenes: "He shows with detachment the essential picturesqueness and humanity of the events represented, and his only comment upon life is that it is pleasant to live in a beautiful world."[14]

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