



Robert Henri  
American, 1865 - 1929

## *Catharine*

1913

oil on canvas

overall: 61 x 51 cm (24 x 20 1/16 in.)

framed: 85.1 x 74.9 x 6.4 cm (33 1/2 x 29 1/2 x 2 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Robert Henri; upper left of canvas reverse: Robert Henri;  
upper right of canvas reverse: 266 / H; across top horizontal stretcher bar reverse:  
CATHERINE [sic]

Given in memory of Mr. and Mrs. William J. Johnson 1948.7.1

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### ENTRY

Robert Henri's fame as a portraitist rests on his many spontaneously painted images of people whose appearance fascinated him rather than on his commissioned portraits. Such rapidly painted character studies of people with whom the artist felt a strong spiritual empathy, like this young girl, enabled him to portray a wide spectrum of humanity that would have been unavailable in conventional commissions. Henri explained:

The people that I paint are 'my people,' whoever they may be, wherever they may exist, the people through whom dignity of life is manifest, that is, who are in some way expressing themselves naturally along with the lines Nature intended for them. My people may be old or young, rich or poor. . . . But wherever I find them, the Indian at work in the white man's way, the Spanish gipsy moving back to the freedom of the hills, the little boy, quiet and reticent before the stranger, my interest is awakened and my impulse immediately is to tell them through my own language—drawing and painting in color. [1]

Chief among Henri's subjects were the young children whom he met during his travels. He felt that their faces reflected a primal innocence that had not yet been corrupted by the rigors of life:

If you paint children you must have no patronizing attitude toward them. Whoever approaches a child without humility, without wonderment and without infinite respect misses in his judgment what is before him, and loses an opportunity for a marvelous response. Children are greater than the grown man. All grown men have more experience, but only a few retain the greatness that was theirs before the system of compromises began in their lives. I have never respected any man more than I have some children. In the faces of children I have seen a look of wisdom and of kindness expressed with such ease and such certainty that I knew it was the expression of a whole race. Later, that child would grow into being a man or woman and fall, as most of us do, into the business of little detail with only now and then a glimmering remembrance of a lost power. A rare few remain simple and hold on through life to their universal kinship, wade through all detail and can still look out on the painter with the simplicity of a child and the wisdom of the race plus an individual experience. These, however, are rare, but the potentiality exists in all children. [2]

*Catharine* was painted in June 1913 during Henri's first visit to Achill Island, County Mayo, off the west coast of Ireland. He had originally intended to spend the summer in Woodstock, New York, but the stress he had endured during and after the Armory Show led him to seek seclusion in the country where his second wife, Marjorie Organ, had been born. [3] He also traced his ancestry to Ireland, and in New York had befriended the expatriate Irish portraitist and writer John Butler Yeats, father of the noted poet William Butler Yeats. After traveling around the country the Henris decided to stay near the isolated fishing villages of Keel and Dooagh, remaining there until the end of September. Henri returned to Achill Island regularly until his death in 1929.

William Innes Homer regarded 1913 as the beginning of "the third and final period in Henri's artistic development," and noted that this first trip to Ireland "served as a catalyst that led him to a fresh approach to painting." [4] On Achill Island Henri painted landscapes and portraits of local villagers, including a large number of children. In a letter to John and Dolly Sloan, Henri's wife reported that "Bob expects to do great things—millions of all kinds of children in the most primitive dresses—the[y] weave and dye their own goods—and the effects are stunning." [5] The description that Henri gave his friend and patron William J. Johnson about how

he came to paint *Catharine* captures the flavor of his remote location:

It was done last summer in Ireland. We lived for three months on Achill Island (county Mayo) and my studio and our residence, as well, was ‘Corrymore house’ that was built on the wild, boggy side of Croaghan above the little village called Dooagh where Catharine lived. Captain Boycott—whose name has become a dictionary word—was the builder of ‘Corrymore’ and he lived there for many years. Dooagh is a mile below (and two to walk) at the water’s edge—a very old, primitive and very poor village made up of little white cottages, with walls of heavy stone, thatched roofs, and smoke from the turf fires coming always from the chimneys.

Catharine’s house was on the main road. The people fished and tilled what soil they had made possible among the rocks and on the bogland—a wonderful good natured people with the richest voices I have ever heard. There was still boycotting going on, local war waged against the balifs [*sic*], land-leaguings and a lot of that which goes to make up the story of Ireland. We had a wonderful summer with nothing in the world to do but work . . . Catharine’s father fished and had his potato patch—just enough to keep things going.  
[6]

Henri stated that Catharine was related to Brien O’Malley, the elderly subject of his *Guide to Croaghan* [fig. 1], and she has recently been tentatively identified as his granddaughter. [7] No biographical information about Catharine survives, but she was one of the many children who hiked up to Corrymore and posed in Henri’s house. [8]

Because of its immense charm, spontaneity, and appealing subject, *Catharine* has always been one of Henri’s most popular and reproduced portraits. [9] Much of the painting’s success can be attributed to Catharine’s extraordinarily expressive eyes. Homer’s observation about another of Henri’s portraits of an Irish child, *Patrick* (1913, private collection, Shawnee Mission, KS), is also appropriate here: the artist drew attention to “the alert glance of the eyes peering intently at the spectator—one of Henri’s favorite devices for establishing the subject as a living,

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communicating being.” [10] The exceptionally vigorous brushwork is typical of Henri’s work of this period, and the bright palette, with its complex gradations of fleshtones, reflects the influence of Hardesty Gillmore Maratta’s system of color theory. [11] Shortly after Johnson acquired the painting, a Pittsburgh critic pronounced it one of Henri’s “best, most interesting and most attractive child pictures. Workmanship broad and sure, masterly, with great richness of surface and harmony of tone; full of loving tenderness, of vitality and feeling of childlife; beautiful, charming, a canvas that would command attention and admiration in any collection.” [12] According to the donor, the dealer William Macbeth’s son Robert deemed it Henri’s second best work after *Lady in White* (destroyed) and referred to it as the “million dollar Henri” in the belief that it would someday fetch that sum. [13]

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Robert Henri, *Guide to Croaghan (Brien O'Malley)*, 1913, oil on canvas, Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville. Purchased with funds from the Cummer Council, AP.1976.1.1

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#### NOTES

- [1] Robert Henri, "'My People': By Robert Henri," *The Craftsman* 27 (Feb. 1915): 459.
- [2] Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, comp. Margery Ryerson (New York, 1923), 237–238.
- [3] Bennard B. Perlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art* (New York, 1991), 110.
- [4] William Innes Homer, *Robert Henri and His Circle* (1969; rev. ed., New York, 1988), 247.
- [5] Marjorie Henri to John and Dolly Sloan, July 5, 1913, quoted in *Revolutions of Realism: The Letters of John Sloan and Robert Henri*, ed. Bennard B. Perlman (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 216–217.

- [6] Robert Henri to William J. Johnson, Nov. 5, 1913, NGA Library, Rare MSS 6, digitized 2015; copy in NGA curatorial files.
- [7] This information, which Henri had written on a preview invitation to the 3rd Annual Exhibition of the National Association of Portrait Painters in 1914, was supplied by the donor; Oscar Doyle Johnson to J. Carter Brown, Feb. 9, 1972, NGA curatorial files. Henri painted another portrait of O'Malley in 1913: *My Friend Brien* (Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC). Thomas McNamara, who arranged an exhibition celebrating the 80th anniversary of Henri's first visit to Achill Island in 1993, in a letter to NGA director Earl A. Powell III, Jan. 4, 1993, NGA curatorial files, noted that Brien O'Malley had a granddaughter named Catharine.
- [8] Apparently Henri stayed in contact with Catharine, because he stated his intention of forwarding a photograph of the portrait to her that Johnson had sent him. See Robert Henri to William J. Johnson, Mar. 13, 1914, NGA Library, Rare MSS 6, digitized 2015; copy in NGA curatorial files.
- [9] It is illustrated in Nathaniel Pousette-Dart, *Robert Henri* (New York, 1922), n.p.; William Yarrow and Louis Bouche, *Robert Henri: His Life and Works* (New York, 1921), op. p. 104; Bennard B. Perlman, "Robert Henri," *Arts Digest* 28 (Aug. 1, 1954), 15; and Alfredo Valente, *Robert Henri: Painter, Teacher, Prophet* (New York, 1969), op. p. 105. Oscar Johnson provided a letter he received from Robert W. Macbeth on Dec. 28, 1936, concerning Henri's sister-in-law Violet Organ's desire to use a reproduction of *Catharine* for the frontispiece of the second edition of *The Art Spirit*.
- [10] William Innes Homer, *Robert Henri and His Circle* (Ithaca, NY, 1969; rev. ed., 1988), 252.
- [11] For a discussion of Maratta's influence on Henri, see Michael Quick, "Robert Henri: Theory and Practice," in Valerie Ann Leeds, *My People: The Portraits of Robert Henri* (Orlando, FL, 1994), 47–62.
- [12] Victor Rowland, unidentified Pittsburgh newspaper, November 1913, quoted in Oscar Doyle Johnson to J. Carter Brown, Feb. 9, 1972, NGA curatorial files.
- [13] Oscar Doyle Johnson to John Walker, June 17, 1948, NGA curatorial files. The donor furnished a typed transcript of a letter from Robert W. Macbeth to William J. Johnson, October 28, 1913, in which he wrote, "If you aren't as crazy about this little Catharine as I am and if your friends among the artists don't congratulate you unanimously, I'll very much miss my guess." The donor also provided two typed transcripts of letters from Macbeth to Johnson of February 7 and 24, 1914, in which Macbeth discusses arrangements for including a photograph of *Catharine* in a forthcoming sales catalog. In the second letter he wrote, "You may look forward to seeing 'Catharine' reproduced as typical of Henri's work in our booklet. I wish it were as typical in subject as it is in its painting, but the trouble is with

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Henri's other subjects—not with 'Catharine.' I wish he always turned out pictures as attractive as she." Apparently the painting was never reproduced in the catalog.

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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The fine, plain-weave fabric support was lined with wax and remounted on a nonoriginal stretcher. Although the edges are covered with tape, a treatment report from 1969 that describes the lining process suggests that the original tacking margins were retained. The artist applied paint vigorously over a tan ground. Moderate impasto appears in the folds of the fabric and in the sitter's hair. Henri intentionally abraded the left eye to enhance the shadow there. No pentimenti or design changes were noted during examination with X-radiography. No underdrawing or changes were found during infrared examination. [1] The paint surface is in very good condition. In 2001, the painting was cleaned and inpainted along the edges and at the bottom left. At that time it was also coated with a synthetic resin varnish.

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## TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Infrared examination was conducted with the Kodak 310-21x, a platinum silicide camera with a 55 mm macro lens and a 1.5–2.0 micron filter.

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## PROVENANCE

Purchased from the artist by (Macbeth Gallery, New York); sold November 1913 to William J. Johnson [1860-1942], Uniontown, Pennsylvania; by inheritance to his son, Oscar Doyle Johnson, Wynnewood, Pennsylvania; [1] gift 1948 to NGA.

[1] Henri recorded the painting's provenance in his ledger book (Artist's Record Book, Estate of Robert Henri, LeClair Family Collection, New York City; transcription sent 28 June 1978 by Chapellier Galleries, New York, to NGA curator E. John Bullard III, in NGA curatorial files): "266H Catharine Achill Island July 1913 20 x 24. Dark vari-colored background, dark hair and eyes, grey dress, blue tie.

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Sold to Mr. MacBeth who sold to W. J. Johnson, collector of Uniontown, Pa., Nov., 1913." (A later notation in another hand added: "This painting is now in the National Gallery, Washington, a gift of Oscar Doyle Johnson, 1949.")

For a discussion of the elder Johnson, a noted collector of American art, see Nicholas Chilcott, *A Champion of American Art*, Chicago, 1975; he refers to Catharine on p. 30.

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### EXHIBITION HISTORY

1963 French, American and Italian Review, Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma City, 1963, no. 36.

1969 Robert Henri: Painter-Teacher-Prophet, New York Cultural Center, 1969, addenda no. 2, repro.

2006 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Peter R. Coneway, U.S. Embassy residence, Bern, Switzerland, 2006-2008.

2011 From New York to Corrymore: Robert Henri and Ireland, Mint Museum Uptown, Charlotte; Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, 2011-2012, no. 12, repro.

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### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1913 Macbeth, William. *Paintings by American Artists: Colonial Portraits* New York, 1913: 46, repro.
- 1921 Yarrow, William, and Louis Bouche, eds. *Robert Henri: His Life and Works with Forty Reproductions*. New York, 1921: 9, 104-105, repro.
- 1922 Pousette-Dart, Robert. *Robert Henri*. New York, 1922: unpaginated repro.
- 1954 Perlman, Bennard B. "Robert Henri." *Art Digest* 28, no. 19 (1 August 1954): 14-15, repro.
- 1970 *American Paintings and Sculpture: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1970: 66, repro.
- 1975 Chilcott, Nicholas. *A Champion of American Art*. Chicago, 1975: 30.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 173, repro.



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- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: repro. 200, 202.
- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 561, no. 855, color repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 200, repro.
- 2012 Leeds, Valerie Ann, and Jonathan Stuhlman. *From New York to Corrymore: Robert Henri and Ireland*. Exh. cat. Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte; Georgia O'Keefe Museum, Santa Fe; Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, NY. Charlotte, 2012: 144, no. 12, repro.
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