



Robert Henri
American, 1865 - 1929

Snow in New York

1902

oil on canvas

overall: 81.3 x 65.5 cm (32 x 25 13/16 in.)

framed: 105.4 x 89.2 x 10.1 cm (41 1/2 x 35 1/8 x 4 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Robert Henri / Mar 5 1902

Chester Dale Collection 1954.4.3

ENTRY

In the summer of 1900, Robert Henri returned from a lengthy stay in Paris and rented a house in New York City on East 58th Street overlooking the East River. By June 1901 he had established a studio in the Sherwood Building on the corner of West 57th Street and Sixth Avenue, and in September he began to live there. At this point in his career, the artist occupied himself with painting cityscapes similar to those he had recently executed in Paris. In March 1902 the dealer William Macbeth encouraged him to paint New York street scenes to be included in a solo exhibition scheduled for the following month. Henri hoped to produce a painting for the occasion that would achieve a degree of critical acclaim comparable to that of *La Neige* [fig. 1], a snowy view of the rue de Sèvres in Paris that had been purchased for the Musée du Luxembourg in 1899. [1]

Henri alluded to *Snow in New York* in a diary entry of March 5, 1902: “Painted snow storm. street. high houses with well of sky between. gray looming sky. brownish houses near horizon. figures. red note electric street lamp. snow.” He identified the exact subject in his Record Book: “N.Y. down E. on 55th St. from 6 Ave. Brown houses at 5 Ave. storm effect. snow. wagon to right.” [2] Leslie Katz

Snow in New York

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has aptly described the scene as representing “the dingy, overcast mood of one of New York’s brownstone corridors, the street a thick slush of soiled and rutted snow, a sodden atmosphere animated and cheered by a lone horse-drawn wagon and two people (red splotches), under a patch of sky.” [3] Henri’s urban snowscape is fundamentally different from those by impressionist artists of the same period (see, for example, [fig. 2]): it depicts an unspectacular side street in the vicinity of his studio, rather than an imposing view of a major avenue; there is nothing narrative, anecdotal, or prettified about the image; the straightforward, one-point perspective composition is devoid of trivial details; the exceptionally daring, textured brushwork (especially noticeable in the center foreground) has more in common with a preparatory oil sketch, or *pochade*, than a finished oil painting; and the somber palette creates an oppressive atmosphere. Although more conventional artists exploited snow for its picturesque quality, Henri’s snow is streaked with mud and gravel, a phenomenon that he emphasized in his thumbnail sketch of the painting in his Record Book. His fluid technique conveys a sense of energy and immediacy, and reflects an extensive firsthand knowledge, gained primarily through Henri’s numerous excursions to Europe, of the art of Frans Hals (Dutch, c. 1582/1583 - 1666), Diego Velázquez (Spanish, 1599 - 1660), and Edouard Manet (French, 1832 - 1883). [4] The gloomy ambience, enlivened by only a few touches of red, is indicative of the artist’s essentially realist proclivities.

Those who reviewed the 1902 Macbeth Gallery exhibition evidently did not single out *Snow in New York* for discussion, but they did react to Henri’s bold technique. Arthur Hoeber complained that “not infrequently Mr. Henri leaves off where the real difficulties of picture-making begin.” [5] The critic Charles FitzGerald wrote: “It is a curious thing that a certain mechanical polish is commonly associated with the idea of finish, and from a few remarks dropped by casual visitor’s [*sic*] to Mr. Henri’s exhibition, it is evident that his landscapes are regarded by many as sketches, or thoughts half-expressed.” FitzGerald went on to defend the artist by noting that a couple of paintings in the show were “worth all the hands that ever niggled over a surface for the sake of explaining and polishing what from the first conception was meaningless and worthless.” [6] Some critics deemed Henri “a skillful handler of the brush,” and found his work “vital and strong.” [7] Nevertheless, *Snow in New York* was one of only two pictures that sold (the second has not been identified).

Because of its literal objectivity, *Snow in New York* has traditionally been interpreted by art historians as exemplifying Henri’s penchant for matter-of-fact reportage of urban subjects. Such a view is reflected in Milton W. Brown’s

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characterization of it as “a paradigm of the new realism in American painting of the turn of the century that became known as the Ashcan school.” [8] In his discussion of the closely related *Street Scene with Snow (57th Street, N.Y.C.)* [fig. 3], Bruce Chambers convincingly demonstrates that Henri’s urban views are strongly influenced by the symbolist aesthetics to which he had been exposed in Paris. [9] Like the symbolists, Henri sought to capture a subject’s intangible mood or essence—what he called the “effect”—rather than a literal transcription of nature, an objective he achieved during the creative process by relying on memory and mental imagery. Nevertheless, *Snow in New York* is a realist image that looks back to Alfred Stieglitz’s 1893 photograph *Winter-Fifth Avenue* [fig. 4], and forward to George Bellows’s *Steaming Streets* [fig. 5].

Discouraged by the fact that his New York cityscapes failed to sell and increasingly attracted to figurative art, Henri ceased to paint urban subjects and resolved to become a portraitist late in 1902. In retrospect, the expressive intensity and painterly fluency of *Snow in New York* qualify it as one of Henri’s most accomplished works from this early period in his career. It exemplifies his advice that students should strive to capture “the romance of snow-filled atmosphere and the grimness of a house.” [10] Such paintings give credence to John Sloan’s opinion that Henri’s landscapes and cityscapes are “too little known” and “among the finest things he did,” and it is fitting that Sloan, William Glackens (American, 1870 - 1938), Everett Shinn (American, 1873 - 1953), and George Luks (American, 1866 - 1933) all became distinguished painters of a genre their teacher had abandoned. [11]

Robert Torchia

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

NOTES

- [1] Many of Henri’s early New York cityscapes were snow scenes. Examples include *East River Embankment, Winter* (1900, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington), *East River, Snow* (1900, The Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas, Austin), and *Blackwell’s Island*,

East River (1901, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

- [2] Record Book “A,” no. 54. A transcription of the text and copy of the artist’s sketch of the painting from the Record Book were sent June 28, 1968, to E. John Bullard III of the National Gallery of Art by Robert Chapellier of Chapellier Galleries, New York (in NGA curatorial files). The original Record Books are owned privately.
- [3] Leslie Katz, “The World of the Eight,” *Arts Yearbook* 1 (1957): 70.
- [4] For an interesting comparison, see Manet’s *Effect of Snow on Petit-Montrouge*, 1870, oil on canvas, National Museum Cardiff.
- [5] Arthur Hoeber, *New York Commercial Advertiser*, April 4, 1902, quoted in Bennard B. Perlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art* (New York, 1991), 49.
- [6] Charles FitzGerald, “Mr. Robert Henri and Some ‘Translators,’” *New York Evening Sun*, April 8, 1902, quoted in Bennard B. Perlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art* (New York, 1991), 49.
- [7] Samuel Swift, *New York Mail & Express*, April 8, 1902; the *Brooklyn Eagle*, April 4, 1902; both quoted in Bennard B. Perlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art* (New York, 1991), 49.
- [8] Milton W. Brown, *One Hundred Masterpieces of American Painting from Public Collections in Washington, D.C.* (Washington, DC, 1983), 124. John Walker, *Paintings from America* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1951), 36, opined that *Snow in New York* was evidence that the Ashcan school painters were capable of “subtle tenderness” in addition to their reputation for painterly gusto and social protest, and noted its “mood of wistfulness, its nostalgia like that curious sadness which sometimes comes at twilight.”
- [9] Bruce Chambers, “Robert Henri’s *Street Scene with Snow* (57th Street, N.Y.C.): An Ideal of City ‘in Snow Effect,’” *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* 39 (Winter 1986): 34–35. Henri listed and described *Street Scene with Snow* in his Record Book “A,” number 222; an entry in his diary of Dec. 5, 1902 documents that he painted the picture that afternoon.
- [10] Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, comp. Margery Ryerson (New York, 1923), 259; quoted in Mahonri Sharp Young, *The Eight* (New York, 1973), 24.
- [11] Van Wyck Brooks, *John Sloan: A Painter's Life* (New York, 1955), 126.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The plain-weave, medium-weight canvas support was glue-lined to a similar fabric and remounted on a non-original stretcher in 1952. The original tacking edges were removed at that time. The thin ground is brown-black and remains exposed in

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several areas. The artist freely applied paint in a thick paste with high impasto in the whites and bright colors. In the dark areas, the paint was applied in a thin wash so that the fabric weave remains visible. There are numerous small losses in the high impasto areas, scattered small areas of retouching at the top right, in the center around the street lamp, and at the bottom in the center. The surface was inpainted and coated with a synthetic resin varnish in 1981, after it was cleaned of a yellowed varnish and severely discolored retouching.

PROVENANCE

Sold 1902 to A.J. Crawford.[1] (Sale, James P. Silo, New York, 20-21 February 1925, no. 268); Chester Dale [1883-1962], New York; gift 1954 to NGA.

[1] The painting was possibly sold out of the 1902 exhibition of Henri's work at Macbeth Gallery in New York. The sale date and reference to Crawford are in the artist's journal, as follows: "Sold to A.J. (?) Crawford (Annex Little Shop) 253 5th Ave.1902. In Mr. Crawford's house in London England 1906." The transcription of the journal entry was provided by Chapellier Galleries, New York, in a letter of 28 June 1968 to NGA curator E. John Bullard III; in NGA curatorial files.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1902 Exhibition of Pictures by Robert Henri, Macbeth Gallery, New York, 1902, no. 6.

1937 An Exhibition of American Paintings from the Chester Dale Collection, The Union League Club, New York, 1937, no. 45, as New York Street in Winter.

1937 New York Realists 1900-1914, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1937, no. 26, as New York Street in Winter.

1943 Paintings from the Chester Dale Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1943-1951, unnumbered catalogue, repro., as New York Street in Winter.

1965 The Chester Dale Bequest, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1965, unnumbered checklist, as New York Street in Winter.

2010 From Impressionism to Modernism: The Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, January 2010-January 2012, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

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- 1951 Walker, John. *Paintings from America*. Harmondsworth, England, 1951: 36, 43, pl. 43, as *New York Street in Winter*.
- 1965 *Paintings other than French in the Chester Dale Collection*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1965: 47, repro., color repro. as frontispiece, as *New York Street in Winter*.
- 1970 *American Paintings and Sculpture: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1970: 66, repro.
- 1973 Young, Mahonri Sharp. *The Eight*. New York, 1973: 24, repro.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 174, repro.
- 1980 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1980: 134, repro.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: color repro. 167, 199, 201.
- 1983 Brown, Milton W. *One Hundred Masterpieces of American Painting from Public Collections in Washington, D.C.* Washington, D.C., 1983: 124-125, color pl.
- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 572, no. 875, color repro.
- 1986 Chambers, Bruce. "Robert Henri's *Street Scene with Snow (57th Street, N.Y.C.)*: An Ideal of City 'in Snow Effect.'" *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* 39 (Winter 1986): 30-39; 37-38, fig. 7.
- 1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 154, repro.
- 1991 Perlman, Bennard B. *Robert Henri: His Life and Art*. New York, 1991: 55-56.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 199, repro.
- 1994 Gerdts, William H. *Impressionist New York*. New York, 1994: 35, pl. 22.
- 1995 Zurier, Rebecca, Robert W. Snyder, and Virginia M. Mecklenburg. *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York*. Exh. cat. National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., 1995: 69-70, fig. 68.
- 1997 Southgate, M. Therese. *The Art of JAMA: One Hundred Covers and*

Essays from The Journal of the American Medical Association. St. Louis,
1997: 62, 202, color repro.

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