



Guy Pène du Bois
American, 1884 - 1958

The Politicians

c. 1912

oil on fabric-covered millboard

overall: 40.6 x 30.7 cm (16 x 12 1/16 in.)

framed: 56.5 x 46.4 x 5.7 cm (22 1/4 x 18 1/4 x 2 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Guy Pène du Bois

Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.138

ENTRY

The Politicians is a study in contrasts. A corpulent man wearing a bowler hat listens, expressionless, to a shorter, animated individual with a moustache. The latter's head is recoiled and tilted back as, with mouth open, he aggressively directs his comments toward his silent, stolid counterpart. On the wall, hovering above the stark shadows cast by the profiles of these middle-aged Tammany Hall types, are sketchy, indistinct markings that suggest election posters. The dark monochromatic palette and heavily brushed technique are typical for Pène du Bois at this early stage of his career. Two similar characters sitting at a table in a café are found in a contemporary drawing [fig. 1]. At the Armory Show in 1913 Pène du Bois exhibited *The Politician* [fig. 2], a closely related work in which a figure stands next to a podium making an oration. [1] Pène du Bois's trenchant views of politicians were applicable to artists as well. He later recalled an unpleasant episode with one of the Armory Show's key organizers, Walt Kuhn (American, 1877 - 1949), remarking that Kuhn shared "the professional politician's innate contempt for humanity." [2]

The Politicians was painted during Pène du Bois's final year working as a reporter for William Randolph Hearst's *New York American*, for which he covered the more sordid, criminal aspects of the city. These experiences informed his early paintings caricaturing lawyers, policemen, tycoons, and politicians as corrupt, lazy, and incompetent. In his autobiography Pène du Bois did not spare his fellow journalists, noting that they were "as academic as churches," and, much like academic painters, seemed incapable of grasping the notion that "a fact does not become a

reality until it has been given life and meaning.” [3] These attitudes were in keeping with the credo of art for life’s sake espoused by his mentor, Robert Henri (American, 1865 - 1929), who a generation before had convinced his colleagues John Sloan (American, 1871 - 1951) and William Glackens (American, 1870 - 1938) to forgo journalism for painting. Both the subject of *The Politicians* and its acerbic tone are in the tradition of Théophile Alexandre Steinlen (Swiss, 1859 - 1923), with whom Pène du Bois had studied in Paris, and, more profoundly, Honoré Daumier (French, 1808 - 1879). Regarding Daumier, Pène du Bois wrote, “He was much more likely to pity than to censure. When he laughed . . . he did so in generous and understanding sympathy.” [4] Pène du Bois believed his own work conveyed a similar attitude: “It is a travesty of truth that I should . . . have become known as a satirist . . . I portrayed people from pure love of them.” [5]

At this early stage in his career, Pène du Bois was developing the consistent, distinctive treatment of the human figure that was to become the salient characteristic of his signature style. Like the works of his fellow Henri student and exact contemporary Edward Hopper (American, 1882 - 1967), Pène du Bois’s paintings provide just enough detail in his subjects’ physical features and gestures, as well as their locales, to make them familiar and recognizable, but not a sufficient amount of information to allow the viewer to reach any definitive conclusions about exactly who is pictured, what they are doing, or where they are. Unlike journalism, where clear answers are prized, it is these open-ended questions that make works like *The Politicians* so engaging.

Robert Torchia, Charles Brock

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Guy Pène du Bois, *In the Restaurant*, 1913, crayon and pencil on paper, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966



fig. 2 Guy Pène du Bois, *The Politician*, c. 1912, oil on academy board, The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia. © 2017 The Barnes Foundation

NOTES

- [1] *International Exhibition of Modern Art, at the Armory of the Sixty-Ninth Infantry* (New York, 1913), no. 1039.
 - [2] Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (New York, 1940), 166.
 - [3] Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (New York, 1940), 138.
 - [4] Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (New York, 1940), 131.
 - [5] Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (New York, 1940), 129.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a commercially prepared, fabric-covered millboard support. The fabric is a finely woven, lightweight plain weave and has been pre-primed with a pale gray, thin ground. A second thin white ground was applied on top of the gray by the artist. The paint was applied in single layers, blended wet into wet. Apart from the low impasto accomplished by dragging small hatched brushstrokes in the faces and collars, there is minimal paint texture. The pale green background is semi-absorbent in infrared, suggesting the use of terre vert pigment. The flesh and background paint have a slightly grainy appearance that, when examined with a microscope, shows large agglomerations of chalk particles. Examination of the painting with infrared reflectography showed no evidence of an underdrawing, and x-radiographic examination did not show any artist's changes. [1] The painting is in good condition with only a few scratches and mild abrasions. All four edges have been overpainted in to a depth of approximately 1.5 cm. Little dabs of residual paint can be found scattered on both the front and back of the painting, suggesting that the artist stacked his paintings on top of each other when the paint was still wet. The painting is coated with a thick layer of slightly discolored varnish.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The painting was examined with a PtSi camera in the range of 1.5 to 2.0 microns.

PROVENANCE

The artist; (Kraushaar Galleries, New York); sold 24 April 1920 to Chester Dale [1888-1962], New York; bequest 1968 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1937 New York Realists, 1900-1914, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1937, no. 44.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

1955 An Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture Commemorating the Armory Show of 1913 and the First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in 1917, American Academy of Arts and Letters and National Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, 1955, no. 56.

1965 The Chester Dale Bequest, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1965, unnumbered checklist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1965 *Paintings other than French in the Chester Dale Collection*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1965: 54, repro.
- 1970 *American Paintings and Sculpture: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1970: 50, repro.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 145, repro.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: 212, repro. 214.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 257, repro.
- 2004 Fahlman, Betsy. *Guy Pène du Bois: Painter of Modern Life*. New York, 2004: 28, fig. 31.
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