



Guy Pène du Bois
American, 1884 - 1958

Pierrot Tired

c. 1929

oil on canvas

overall: 92.08 × 73.03 cm (36 1/4 × 28 3/4 in.)

framed: 113.67 × 95.25 × 10.16 cm (44 3/4 × 37 1/2 × 4 in.)

Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase through the gifts of William Wilson
Corcoran and Ivan C. Aivasovsky) 2015.19.177

ENTRY

Conjuring a specific period and mood, *Pierrot Tired* underscores Guy Pène du Bois's skills as both a painter and a trenchant social observer. Painted at the end of the 1920s, the canvas demonstrates the artist's talent for transporting solid, majestic, Renaissance forms into stylized, urban settings. [1] At a time when abstraction held critical dominance, Pène du Bois's style was characterized by a richly toned, painterly realism as well as a neoclassical devotion to volume and form. Yet this work's emphasis on uneasy social interactions and urban anomie reflects a modern sensibility. The critic Royal Cortissoz was the first to note the artist's "gift for mordant characterization," finding in his work a "cynicism that dispassionately impales a type, and, practicing again the art of omission, leaves it to speak for itself." [2] Despite the simplified figures of the composition, the painting is rich in psychological and sociological detail.

Two figures are seated in a booth at a Parisian café sharing a drink. Both are fashionably dressed and decidedly cosmopolitan. The woman sports a sleek helmet of dark hair. A white stole is draped around her neck and over her left shoulder; her lips are painted red and lined in black. Her companion, by contrast, is more understated. Dressed in a banker's three-piece suit, he sits quietly and studies his drink, a tall glass of amber liquid, a form that is balanced by the stack of coasters on the other side of the table. The mood is quiet. The figures are physically close yet emotionally distant. Although their bodies brush against each other, their eyes do not meet, each isolated by individual thoughts. Behind the booth is a window onto the street outside, where a second couple is visible with their heads bent toward each other. The woman wears a hat and the man, with a

distinctive cap and an epaulet on his shoulder, appears to be in uniform. Though the image seen through the window is murky, the body language of the couple outside is more intimate than that of the couple in the café.

The seated man wears a brown suit that blends almost seamlessly into the colors of the banquette, with the effect that he recedes into space. The gentleman is bald with a smattering of white hair at the temples. As evidenced by her youthful hairdo, his companion is a great deal younger than he is. Are they married? Having an affair? Is he an old fool attempting to reclaim his youth through a dalliance with a young woman? Pène du Bois leaves the nature of their relationship an open question. Both faces are expertly modeled yet heavily shadowed; shadows are created through a buildup of rich brown and ocher paint, with lavender contour lines defining the woman's profile. The murky faces contribute to the ambiguity of the scene, coupling the unreadability of expression with the impossibility of connection.

Several strands of Pène du Bois's personal background intertwine in *Pierrot Tired*. In 1899 he entered the New York School of Art, where he studied under William Merritt Chase (American, 1849 - 1916). In 1902 he met Robert Henri (American, 1865 - 1929), whose advocacy of realism and simple forms had a lasting impact on the artist. After studying with Henri for three years, he traveled to Paris, where he immersed himself in French art and made his debut at the Salon. [3] Early collectors of his work included *Chester Dale*, *Albert Coombs Barnes*, and *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*. [4] During the 1920s Pène du Bois spent six years living in France, returning to New York in 1930 following the stock market crash. As an outsider, he was fascinated by the social interactions of the upper crust. He struggled to make ends meet for much of his career, working as a writer to supplement his income. [5] Pène du Bois was a critic for the *New York American*, the *New York Evening Post*, and the *New York Tribune*, while also serving as the editor of the magazine *Arts and Decoration* for seven years. The skills of observation and analysis that he honed as a critic inflected such works as *Pierrot Tired* with an incisive understanding of social relations.

During Pène du Bois's sojourn in France the artist found Paris too expensive and lived 30 miles outside the city. [6] He continued to direct his sharp focus on urban scenes from a position of both physical and psychological distance. It is unclear whether the subjects of *Pierrot Tired* are Parisians or Americans. Wealthy Americans were a common sight in Paris at the time, and the artist was fascinated by the expatriate culture. His 1926 painting *Café Madrid* [fig. 1], a portrait of the

prominent collectors Chester and Maud Dale, attests to his interest in Americans living abroad. [7]

Pierrot, the French variant of the Italian character Pedrolino, is the sad clown of the *commedia dell'arte*, characterized by his naïveté and his haplessness in matters of love. The best-known depiction of the character is *Jean Antoine Watteau's* 18th-century painting *Pierrot*, which depicts the clown as a melancholy figure dressed in an ill-fitting costume, his open face looking toward the viewer with despair [fig. 2]. It has been in the collection of the Musée du Louvre since 1869, and it is quite possible Pène du Bois encountered it during his six years in France. As in *Pierrot Tired*, the central figure of *Pierrot* is isolated within his social milieu. Watteau's clown is weary; his facial expression and slumped posture suggest that he is exhausted by his designated role. Pène du Bois's *Pierrot* is similarly moon-faced and dissatisfied. The figure's mannequin-like stiffness and the pervasive air of ennui evoke a man chafing against his designated type, the wealthy fool for love, and tired of fulfilling society's expectations. The title suggests a parallel between the artifice and codified roles that define the *commedia dell'arte* and the artificial and stultifying world of high society.

When the painting was found by the artist's family after his death the title of the work was unknown. The artist's son-in-law, thinking the interior resembled a restaurant that the family frequented in Manhattan, called it *Drink at the "Russian Bear."* The painting was exhibited under this title for the next 25 years, until research revealed the artist's original title. [8]

Kerry Roeder

August 17, 2018

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Guy Pène du Bois, *Café Madrid (Mr. and Mrs. Chester Dale)*, 1926, oil on panel, Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg. Bequest of John Hinkle, Nephew of Chester Dale



fig. 2 Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Pierrot, formerly known as Gilles*, c. 1718–1719, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Image: Franck Raux

NOTES

- [1] In 2004 the date of the painting was changed from c. 1927 to c. 1929 in accordance with Corcoran Gallery of Art American Paintings Catalogue policy, which restored dates to those given when the picture was first exhibited or published. See *Exhibition of Paintings and Water Colors by Guy Pène du Bois* (New York, 1930), cat. no. 10; and e-mail correspondence between Emily Shapiro, Corcoran assistant curator of American art, and Betsy Fahlman, professor of art history, Arizona State University, June 24 and 25, 2004, NGA curatorial files. See also Shapiro to Registrar, memorandum, July 1, 2004, NGA curatorial files.
- [2] Royal Cortissoz, *Guy Pène du Bois* (New York, 1931), 8–9.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

- [3] John Baker, “Guy Pène du Bois on Realism,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 17, no. 2 (1977): 2.
- [4] Betsy Fahlman, “Guy Pène du Bois, Jane,” in *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery* (Rochester, NY, 2006), 269.
- [5] His moderate success as an art critic was not surprising given his literary background: his father, Henri Pène du Bois, was a writer, and the artist was named for the great author Guy du Maupassant, a family friend. Royal Cortissoz, *Guy Pène du Bois* (New York, 1931), 7.
- [6] Betsy Fahlman, “Guy Pène du Bois: The Twenties at Home and Abroad,” *American Art Review* 7, no. 5 (Oct.–Nov. 1995): 112–117.
- [7] Often guided by Maud Dale, a painter and art critic, the financier Chester Dale assembled a sizeable collection of French and American 19th- and 20th-century art—including four paintings by Pène du Bois—which he later donated to the National Gallery of Art. Dale’s importance to the Gallery’s collection and history cannot be overstated. In addition to ultimately donating 306 works of art, he was a founding benefactor and served as president of the Board of Trustees from 1955 until his death. See Kimberly A. Jones, with Maygene Daniels, *The Chester Dale Collection* (Washington, 2009). The four Pène du Bois paintings are *The Politicians* (c. 1912), *Hallway, Italian Restaurant* (1922), *Café du Dôme* (1925/1926), and *La Rue de la Santé* (1928).
- [8] See Robyn Asleson, Corcoran education department, to Becky Tiger, Corcoran registrar, memorandum, Aug. 3, 1984, NGA curatorial files.
-

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting was executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave canvas that was mounted on a replacement stretcher. A smooth, white ground does not completely obscure the weave of the canvas. The ground must have been commercially applied because it extends over the tacking margins. The intact tacking margins indicate that the painting must be very near its original dimensions. Before he began painting, the artist executed delicate underpainting to delineate forms. This aspect is visible in a few places, such as on the left side of the woman’s neck and the right edge of her white collar. The oil paint was fluidly applied in thin layers with some isolated build-up of the paint in specific places. Overall the appearance is of a thinly painted smooth surface with minimal texture. No major changes were made in the composition, only some minor shifting of contours such as that found

02 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

in the man's right shoulder and arm and on the right side of his head.

A thin layer of natural resin varnish is apparent under ultraviolet light. It may have been applied by the artist or by someone else early in the painting's history. An uneven appearance of this varnish layer under ultraviolet light suggests that removal was attempted in the past but was not completely carried out. Presumably, sensitivity of the paint film was encountered, since the places where more varnish has been removed correspond to areas in the painting where there is light abrasion of the paint film. On top of this earlier surface coating there seems to be a second varnish layer, most likely applied in a conservation treatment prior to the painting's acquisition by the Corcoran Gallery of Art. No documentation exists about this varnish, but it has the appearance of a matte, synthetic resin varnish.

PROVENANCE

Estate of the artist; (James Graham & Sons, New York), c. 1960. Karl Jaeger, Cambridge, Massachusetts; sold 1968 to (Vose Galleries, Boston); sold 1968 to (Bernard Danenberg Galleries, New York).[1] (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, New York, 11 December 1981, no. 242, as *Drink at the "Russian Bear"*); purchased by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2015 by the National Gallery of Art.

[1] A letter of 27 November 1979, from Robert C. Vose, Jr., to Betsy Fahlman, and an e-mail of 20 April 2004, from Siobhan Wheeler of Vose Galleries to Emily Shapiro of the Corcoran, in NGA curatorial files, provide the Jaeger-Vose-Danenberg sequence of ownership. The painting's inventory number at Vose Galleries was 22831.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1930 Exhibition of Paintings and Water Colors by Guy Pène du Bois, C.W. Kraushaar Art Galleries, New York, 26 February - 25 March 1930, no. 10.

1932 127th Annual Exhibition, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 24 January - 13 March 1932, no. 439.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

1932 12th Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Oils, Cleveland Museum of Art, 10 June - 10 July 1932, unnumbered checklist.

1932 45th Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture, Art Institute of Chicago, 27 October 1932 - 2 January 1933, no. 62.

1939 An Exhibition of Painting by Guy Pène du Bois from 1908-1938, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 4-22 January 1939, no. 37.

1961 Guy Pène du Bois 1884-1958, Graham Gallery, New York, 17 March - 15 April 1961, no. 16, as Drunk at Russian Bear.

1982 Acquisitions Since 1975, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 5 November 1982 - 16 January 1983, unpublished checklist.

1985 Henri's Circle, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 20 April - 16 June 1985, unnumbered checklist.

2004 Figuratively Speaking: The Human Form in American Art, 1770-1950, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 20 November 2004 - 7 August 2005, unpublished checklist.

2005 Encouraging American Genius: Master Paintings from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, 2005-2007, checklist no. 87.

2008 The American Evolution: A History through Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1 March - 27 July 2008, unpublished checklist.

2009 American Paintings from the Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 6 June - 18 October 2009, unpublished checklist.

2013 American Journeys: Visions of Place, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013 - 28 September 2014, unpublished checklist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1932 H. C. H. "The Twelfth Exhibition of Contemporary American Oils [exh. review]." *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* (June 1932): 105.
- 1984 Corcoran Gallery of Art. *American Painting: The Corcoran Gallery of Art*.

 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

Washington, 1984: 34, repro., 35.

1996 Abramson, Ronald D. "My Favorite Painting": Discovering the Permanent Collection." *Night and Day* (July/ August 1996): 12, repro., 13.

2000 Cash, Sarah, with Terrie Sultan. *American Treasures of the Corcoran Gallery of Art*. New York, 2000: 179, repro.

2011 Roeder, Katherine. "Guy Pène du Bois, *Pierrot Tired*." In *Corcoran Gallery of Art : American Paintings to 1945*. Edited by Sarah Cash. Washington, 2011: 238-239, 281-282, repro.

To cite: Kerry Roeder, "Guy Pène du Bois/*Pierrot Tired*/c. 1929," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/195811/2018-08-09> (accessed August 09, 2018).