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**A Democratic Aesthetic:
Walt Whitman and American Visual Art From 1850 to 1910**

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by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Between the Civil War and World War I, Walt Whitman played a central role in the visual art scene in America. Through the use of his own changing portrait and an interpretation of democracy, Whitman created a program for the visual references in his most notorious work *Leaves of Grass*. This program was enacted by the visual artists that Whitman befriended while alive, and the generation of American painters working in the decades after his death; most notably the Ashcan school of Realism. This paper traces the role of Whitman in visual art circles during the mid and late 19th century, his role in the American reception of French Realism and, and the influence of his aesthetic program in text and visuals on the generation of American artists working after his death.

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Introduction

“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.” Abraham Lincoln, 1862

In the aftermath of the Civil War, America began a long and laborious process of rehabilitation. Reconstruction attempted to heal the wounds of this country while establishing measures to prevent further insurrection. Reconstruction reached beyond assimilating the former slave into the ranks of citizenry, beyond relocating the nation’s capital, beyond the pardons and reparations. In order to reconcile and progress as a unified nation of states a dramatic social restructuring was required. The words of Abraham Lincoln capture the problem and the solution with clarity and eloquence.

Between the American Civil War and World War I literary and visual representation underwent a dramatic shift: some claim this shift as revolutionary. Amongst many other factors new political systems, systems for the exchange of goods, for social control, for the distribution of wealth, new technologies and a significant increase in immigration created a new social environment. Within these sometimes radical and sometimes nuanced changes there lies a correspondence to the ways in which the individual views and records the world around them. This is no one-to-one relationship with a signifier easily identifiable by its signified counterpart. Further, any attempt at tracing visual representations at this time in a linear format or narrative would be much too exclusive of the many facets interdependently producing the very generalized concept of modernity.

Martin Heidegger claims that the “essence of the modern era” resides not in how we picture the world, but in the very fact that we are able to picture the world.¹ The modern era inextricably binds the relationship between subject and object to a sense of use-value. The picture of the objective world then hinges on how it can be used or utilized by the subject. This notion indicates the enlightenment ideal of the source of knowledge transferred to the individual—away from the religious or political entities that were formerly considered authorities of knowledge. Heidegger marks a shift in authority. With the loss of the Gods or other guardians of knowledge our technology, policy, and concept of beauty that were once divulged through the intervention of the sacred, are now systematized through social and political means; or, in keeping with Heidegger, socio-economic systems. Thus, in the modern era, ‘authority’ regains synonymy with ‘author’ as the singular creator of systems, but loses its implied dominion in a cacophony of authors.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Garland Press, 1977), 130. “The world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguished the essence of the modern age [der Neuzeit].”

This paper traces the career and aesthetic pursuits of one author, a very specific contributor to the artistic dialogue of this era, in the hopes of implicating the general atmosphere of this era and the influence of this contributor.

Walt Whitman played a significant role in the development of an American aesthetic in both the textual and the visual arts. Through his direct influence in dialogue with American painters, and his indirect influence found in the tone of his prose and poetry, Whitman's role in the creation and maintenance of democracy in the arts reverberates beyond the boundaries of this country and beyond the years of his life.

From very early on, the relationship of the textual and the visual was introduced to Whitman through his work as an apprentice printmaker. Between printmaking and his initial attempts at journalism, Whitman gained an interest in the correspondence between the textual and the visual. His journalistic pursuits led him into the company of working artists whom he heralded in print and befriended in life. The visual artist—the painter, the sculptor, the printmaker, the photographer—would make up a significant portion of his acquaintances for the remainder of his days; and as he was influenced by the look of the art, so these artist were influenced by the words of the poet.

Whitman's most prolific work, *Leaves of Grass*, revolutionized American poetry. The influence of this work, in its eight editions, carried beyond literary circles into the realm of the visual artist; delivering a message of democracy, equality, optimism, and the act of embracing the era one finds themselves in. An evaluation of the portraits Whitman chose to accompany the various editions of his work provides a visual counterpart to the textual aesthetic of the work. Though his praise of the American art scene never wavered, Whitman did come to appreciate the French Realists and Impressionists. After viewing the work of Jean-Francois Millet Whitman realized that the tone of his textual work could be carried visually with means other than portraiture of the writer. Millet acts as the first painter who can visually correspond the democracy of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* without a direct reference to Whitman himself. The generation of American painters working after the death of Walt Whitman paid homage to the bard through their picturing of the modern era. Though works by Marsden Hartley, Robert Coady, and Joseph Stella are particularly popular in reference to Whitman, the teachings and street scene depictions of the Eight truly capture the essence of Whitman and the American aesthetic that he fostered.

By tracing the life of Whitman and evaluating his work, by digesting this particular, a general picture of the American art scene between these wars comes to the fore. Though such a work does not exhaust the scholarship of this era, the life and work of this individual indicates many of the factors that combine to form the picture of American life at the turn of the 20th century.

Chapter 1
The first edition

Born in 1819 in Huntington, New York, Whitman was the second of nine children. The Whitmans struggled with finances throughout their family history, a struggle that found them moving from Long Island to Brooklyn and back again.² During his first stay in Brooklyn, at twelve years old, Whitman landed printing apprenticeships under Erastus Washington, and then Alden Spooner.³ At fifteen he contributed small articles to the *Star* and the *Mirror*; these were the initial steps into the world of print journalism that Whitman would pursue as a career and a passion.

As Allen notes, Whitman was present for the Brooklyn visit by president Andrew Jackson, he attended performances at the New York Bowery, and was a frequent patron of Worthington's circulating library.⁴ Attending these places and events comprise Whitman's secondary education and reveal his interest in the communities where he lived. Brooklyn was Whitman's classroom; this place provided him an entry point into the social and cultural climate of the nation, and a vantage point from which to view and partake in a community's struggle for autonomy. These are two recurrent themes in his prose and poetry; the autonomous self, and the role of community member. As but one example of where these themes intersect in Whitman's life; in 1832 citizens of Brooklyn, disgruntled by not having control of their ferry system attempted to incorporate their various committees and apply for a city charter. This attempt was stymied by the state legislature for the next year. The interim period found Whitman amongst many citizens paying Manhattan fees to use the Brooklyn ferry.

After ascending from novice to journeyman printer, Whitman was hard-pressed to find work and had to return to his family now living in Hempstead. In Hempstead Whitman acquired a position as a schoolteacher. Approximately four years later, at twenty, he left his teaching position for a printing assignment in Queens with the *Long Island Democrat*, and at twenty-two he moved to Manhattan and acquired a position with the *New York Aurora*.

As a fledgling writer and a former school teacher Whitman was very knowledgeable of the world around him, and both endeavors solidified his interest in writing. It was his printing positions, however, that seeded his passion for the relationship between the visual and the textual. During his apprenticeship, and through his eventual promotion into journeyman printer, Whitman developed an interest in letters beyond writing. His task, as a printer, revolved around the formal qualities of the print; as a printer Whitman orchestrated the visual composition of the written word. This required keen attention to detail and a pre-visualization of the finished product. Whitman's task was to compose the visual correspondence to the written word in the best interest of what was written. His interest in the 'look' of the written word thus

² Numerous biographies of Walt Whitman have been written, with few discrepancies. For the purposes of this paper, all dates and events of Whitman's adolescence and young adulthood are taken from Gay Wilson Allen's *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman*. New York: Grove Press Books, 1955.

³ Allen 21.

⁴ Allen 23-24.

constitutes another theme in the prose and poetry of his later career. Considering his pursuits in writing and printing, Whitman's interest cannot be strictly separated into either realm. His writing must be viewed with consideration to the visual presentation, and his visual presentation must be viewed within the context of what was written. His passion for the written word developed tangentially with the 'look' and the 'content.' As a fledgling writer Whitman did not have as much control over the presentation of his work as he doubtlessly would have wanted, but later in his career when he did acquire complete editorial control, the relationship between what is presented (the text) and how it is presented (the visual component) comes to the fore.

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) included on the title page a print of a steel engraving by Samuel Hollyer. This depiction of Whitman shows the poet standing in a relaxed yet confident manner with one hand in his pocket and the other resting on his hip. However, it is the clothing of the poet that best aligns with the tone of the poetry. In this depiction Whitman wears slacks and a shirt that resemble working class dress, as if fresh from a sojourn into the city where he catalogued the many common people and their daily tasks. The hat he wears cocks slightly back, further hinting at the unrefined character and innovative style of the prose contained behind this portrait. This was a portrait chosen carefully by Whitman, for he believed this print to be a visual signifier of his textual work. It hints at his interest in visual culture, the unrefined character of his personality and his poetry, and most importantly his notions of democracy.

Whitman wrote of his countrymen, and of the contemporary; his interests were in culture, citizenry, politics, and the textual and visual arts. Themes of the contemporary condition flourished in his writing, particularly the concept of "democracy" in various incarnations. To understand the "democracy" that Whitman pursued in his prose and poetry requires an investigation into the possible influences during his formative years; those days prior to the release of his seminal work *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Within these years Whitman finds himself in a city whose social climate altered alongside its booming population. The population of New York grew "over eightfold in forty years, from 120,000 in 1820 to not far off a million people by 1860."⁵ These new citizens were primarily immigrants; impoverished and sometimes starving, adhering to the customs of their homeland and establishing neighborhoods based on nationality. As but one example of the changing social climate due to immigration, in 1835 thousands of immigrants fled famine stricken Ireland and settled into the five points. Most of these new arrivals had no possessions, money, or skills applicable to the city.

The established New Yorker viewed the pouring of immigrants into the city as upsetting the heterogeneity of city culture and forever changed the old world character of New York. Other than a general resentment toward the immigrants, this further divided the class structure of the island's inhabitants. The capitalist and political bosses had a

⁵ Wynn M. Thomas, *Transatlantic Connections: Whitman U.S., Whitman U.K.* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 5. Between 1840 and 1859, immigration into the United States rose to a total of 4,242,000, and 428,000 of these newcomers entered New York in 1848. By 1858 two-thirds of the male population was foreign-born. See Edward K. Span, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857* Columbia University Press, New York, NY 1981.

growing population of unskilled labor to employ for barely livable wages while reaping massive profits for themselves. As the social poles became increasingly distant to one another, the struggling journalist and would-be poet took record.

With his return to city life in the 1840's Whitman was witness to the pace and multiculturalism as he, like the immigrant, settled in Manhattan. He immediately set to work in journalistic endeavors, obtaining numerous posts and contributing to many weekly papers that circulated throughout the boroughs.⁶ As a working class journalist Whitman found himself bridging the social poles of the impoverished and the elite. He wrote for the literate and established *New Yorker*, yet lived in near destitute conditions. He mingled with the masses of the city while living on his meager wages, using public transit, taking sojourns into the city's parks, joining political organizations, and frequenting art establishments. As a journalist he was acquainted with the political and business happenings of the upper classes, and as a citizen he partook in the daily routines of his fellow New Yorkers. Whitman was extremely observant of the various incarnations of culture that came from both ends of the established hierarchy. The first manifestation of Whitman's writing on democracy, and a better understanding of how the multifarious characteristics of such a time and place conform to a singular title can be found in Whitman's renaming of this city.

The title *Manhatta* was applied to the poetic writings of Whitman (both during his stay in the 1840's and later, in reminiscent poetry such as the 1860 piece "Manhatta").⁷ In his journalistic endeavors of this same time Whitman also referred to his city as Manhattan, but the formal name carried the connotations of the darker sides of the city. Citations of Whitman's writings explain the difference. *Leaves of Grass* offers the optimistic, poetic rendition:

you lady of ships, you Manhatta,/ Old matron of this proud friendly,
turbulent city...[here there could be found] a million people—manners
free and superb—open voices—hospitality—the most courageous and
friendly young men.⁸

Whitman's work in *Life Illustrated* describes the other side of his city:

The degrading confession and warning is necessary, that New York is one
of the most crime-haunted and dangerous cities in Christendom...Don't be
in haste to make city street acquaintances. Any affable stranger who
makes friendly offers is very likely to attempt to swindle you as soon as he
can get into your confidence. Mind your own business as we said before,
and let other people mind theirs.⁹

⁶ See cite 22 for a list of the papers Whitman was employed by.

⁷ From the original Algonquin nomenclature.

⁸ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Doubleday Doran and Company, 1940), 418 and 586.

⁹ M. Wynn Thomas, *Transatlantic Connections: Whitman U.S., Whitman U.K.*, (Iowa City, IO: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 4. Quoting: Walt Whitman "Life Illustrated." *New York Dissected* (1972): 136.

As a significant step in Whitman's poetry, his use of *Manhatta* illuminates the character of a city beyond the formal qualities of the omnibuses and immigrants. Whitman intends to divulge the cosmopolitan spirit or the life of the city that flows through the streets like blood through veins. As Peter Conrad explains: "Corporeally, the city means a congregation of bodies—not an antagonistic rabble of disparate selves but a common identity, for all its creatures share the same physical form."¹⁰ Through his tribute to *Manhatta* Whitman attempts to single out the life beneath the routines of individuals, to locate that intrinsic quality of culture that all inhabitants of the island share and perpetuate. *Manhatta* amounts to an essence that resides in the city characterized by the inhabitants but intrinsically bound to a geographical locale. As Conrad elaborates, "The city's individuated people are reconciled and made one in Whitman... In the melting pot of New York, ethnically incompatible arrivals would be compounded into the new composite race of Americans."¹¹ For Whitman, *Manhatta* is as much about a people bound to a place as it is about a place. This relationship creates a dialogue contingent on both parties. This relationship between a people and their locale determines one facet of Whitman's democracy.

By the time of the release of his 1860 poem titled "Manhatta", Whitman had already developed his characteristic cataloging technique. No style was more appropriate to apply to a place of so many (sometimes contradictory) manifestations of social life. By creating and expanding long lists of sights and feelings Whitman captures the extreme diversity of the title city. By re-baptizing his city with the Native American name he directs his focus to the all inclusive or underlying culture of the city; encompassing both the cosmopolitan and the slatternly. By cataloging the many faces and facets of that culture Whitman shows the parts that make the whole—the individual manifestations that determine the overall sense of his city. These individual manifestations would be nothing without their link to the larger concept—this interdependency creates Whitman's democracy.

The critical acclaim of *Leaves of Grass*, most notable of which would be Ralph Waldo Emerson's praise upon receiving an original edition, prompted additional editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Though the first and second editions of *Leaves of Grass* were printed and bound from Whitman's personal finances, the 1860 edition was reformatted for massive distribution due to the critical praise of the first two. Based on a painting by Charles Hine (*Walt Whitman, 1860*) the engraver S. A. Schoff worked to accurately depict Whitman. The sharp contrast between these two portraits relates to the acclaim surrounding Whitman's work. In this second portrait, hand picked by Whitman, we see an alternate view of the bard. Schoff's work shows Whitman refined and kept. He has styled hair, presumably seated, and he wears a dignified shirt and coat. There is a hint of flamboyance in the shape and style of his tie countered only by the sitter's cerebral stare. This engraving "makes visible both Whitman's newfound status among New York's

¹⁰ Peter Conrad, *The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 15.

¹¹ Conrad 17.

bohemian writers and his emboldened expectations for the public success of the book.”¹² In this portrait, unlike the Hollyer engraving, the Whitman portrays a confident, competent writer. This Whitman sits as the emerging bard of New York, waiting to accept the acclaim he deserves; he assumes the position of an acclaimed public figure. This, in sharp contrast to the Hollyer engraving of a significantly unknown Whitman; he is one of the communities of people that he writes of—a rebellious, unknown, even *exotic*, author. Whitman’s characteristic deviances from his contemporaries in poetry best define this exoticism.

As an American Romantic, Whitman finds himself in the company of men like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edgar Allen Poe, both of whom are established and respected poets by the time of the initial release of *Leaves of Grass*. Within this group it is Whitman’s catalogue, word choice, politics, and most importantly, literary lineage that reveal his distinction.

The catalogue comprises the first of the major deviations from his contemporaries. This technique, as previously discussed, enabled Whitman to apply a uniform characterization to a place of such diversity. The technique itself was one that Whitman originated in poetic description. Yet another deviation from his contemporaries can be found within his catalogue; Whitman’s word choice that provides the second great deviation from his contemporaries in American romantic poetry.

In his work, the established and respected American poet, Edgar Allen Poe, attempts to purify words from their material or practical ties. Poe’s pursuit was to relinquish words from their worldly connotations. Like Poe, another prominent American poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, chose a purist pursuit. Poe and Emerson attempted to strip the social connotations from their words, exemplified by Emerson’s infamous quote: “Words are signs of natural facts.” Emerson attempts to uncover the primitive, natural state where words are in complete unity with nature. Where Emerson and Poe “transcend” the social connotation of word choice Whitman embraces the “blab of the pave.” These poets differ through their respective word choice, and through their choice of words their grasp of the concept of language also differs. As Betsy Erkkila describes this difference:

If for Emerson the sources of language were in nature, for Whitman the sources of language were in democratic culture, which included—but was not limited to—natural facts. Language, Whitman argued, must express the multiplicity of habits, heritages, and races that make up the American nationality.¹³

Whitman openly embraced the social and political connotations of his words. Through his embrace of slang and colloquialisms interspersed alongside formal speech, Whitman was again embracing the democratic spirit; the all-inclusive sense of community, the semblance of brotherhood uniting strangers, and the dismissal of social hierarchy. The purist pursuits of Poe and Emerson, who attempted to remove words, thus

¹² Bohan 41.

¹³ Erkkila 84-85.

language, from the sphere of common usage—to transcend society through poetry—also found both poets attempting a political transcendence. Purifying words from their social connotations removes the issue of class, so the transcendental and the purist have no socio-political grounding. Whitman, however, “proclaimed the political contingency of art and artist...[his] attempt to readjust the theory and nature of poetry centered on the issue of class.”¹⁴

By using the “blab of the pave” to illustrate his catalogue, Whitman reopens language from the exclusive dominion of the upper classes. He identifies and attempts to destroy the relationship between language, class, and political system. “Whitman represents language as a site of social struggle, a relationship of power in which the “rude words” of the people struggle against the lady and gentleman words of the dominant class.... If language could work as a form of social control, it could also be reworked as a medium of social transformation.”¹⁵ This class struggle between the “rude words” and the gentlemanly mannerisms coincided with the influx of immigrant populations, a dramatic increase in new technologies, and changing political policy that marked the mid 19th century as a time of social unrest in American culture. The newly arrived immigrants and the generations of men and women living in the midst of new technologies and political ideologies now challenged the Victorian ideals that had for so long characterized American society. Here lies the democracy Whitman found refreshing and openly embraced; it was a changing of the guard. “To counteract the antirepublican influence of old-world culture, Whitman urged American artists to create an art commensurate with new-world democracy.... The art he imagined was an art that would both express and stimulate the republican spirit of the nation.”¹⁶ In his own words on the role of the poet in the new democracy Whitman supports the advancement of society while acknowledging the ideals of the previous era:

The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him the other continents arrive as contributions...he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake. His spirit responds to his country’s spirit...he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes.¹⁷

This abandonment of old-world ideals, embrace of common speech, and radical deviation to the transcendental notions of Poe and Emerson can locate Whitman on the streets of the city he was so fond of. Mingling with immigrants and singing their praises in prose and poetry might seem to justify the grungier habits of the lower classes and the less than noble habits of the upper classes, but Whitman was as dissatisfied with the bedraggled lifestyle as he was with a ruling old-world aristocracy. Through his writings

¹⁴ Erkkila 76.

¹⁵ Erkkila 80.

¹⁶ Erkkila 74.

¹⁷ Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley eds. *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader’s Edition*. (New York: Norton, 1965), 505.

and in his journalistic endeavors Whitman rejected both social extremes and proposed a radical change.¹⁸ As Laura Meixner puts it:

He [Whitman] rejected Culture as either a ruling-class creed or a mass-marketed commodity, and reclaimed culture as art originating in the everyday life of the nation. He believed that the solidarity of plainspoken people would produce future art forms of honesty and vigor, and thus offer a dignified alternative to both the remote hyper-refinements of genteel culture and the cheap sensational appetite of public amusements.¹⁹

The literary lineage that Whitman aligned himself with creates the last major deviation from his counterparts in romantic American poetry. A British lexicographer, Sir William Craigie, noted the lineage of particular British to American writers and states that “Whatever difference there may be between the language of Longfellow and Tennyson, of Emerson and Ruskin, they are differences due to style and subject, to personal choice or command of words, and not to any real divergence in the means of expression.”²⁰ Craigie claims that Emersonian poetics descends from an English tradition, and the variations between him and his English forebears are contextual, not thematic. In the same sense of thematic relevance and contextual difference, Whitman claims his literary heritage from revolutionary France, due to the democratic nature of post-revolutionary French writers.²¹

This understanding of the themes and style of Walt Whitman relies on a comparison of his fellow American Romantic writers. An understanding of where and how Whitman deviates from within the tradition of American poetry, as exemplified by Poe and Emerson, clarifies his sense of democracy, community, and optimism. Comprehension of the contemporary condition Whitman addresses in works such as *Song of Myself* and *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* further heightens this democratic sense. Once Whitman’s thematic elements and style are situated in reference to his textual work, his influences in the visual representations of this contemporary condition correspond.

¹⁸ “For grounds of *Leaves of Grass* as a poem, I abandon’d the conventional themes, which do not appear in it; none of the stock ornamentation, or choice plots of love or war, or high, exceptional personages of Old-World song; nothing, a I may say, for beauty’s sake...But the broadest average of humanity and its identities in the now ripening Nineteenth Century, and especially in each of their countless examples and practical occupations in the United States to-day.” Walt Whitman, from Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley.

¹⁹ Laura L. Meixner *French Realist Painting and the Critique of American Society* (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press 1995), 26.

²⁰ Sir William Craigie, “The Study of American English,” *Society for the Purity of English Tracts*, no. 27 (1927), 203.

²¹ “Whereas his American contemporaries found antecedents in English and German Romanticism, Whitman found antecedents more relevant to American democratic experience among French writers—in the works of Volney and Rousseau, Meichelet and Sand, Beranger and Hugo—whose works were shaped by the egalitarian and libertarian ideals of the revolutionary era.” Erkkila 77.

Whitman's influence in visual culture in the late 19th century and early 20th century align with his democratic sensibility, sense of optimism, and lack of social hierarchy. This influence manifests itself in three distinct realms: his influence on the community of artists he befriended during his life-time, the rationalization behind his praise and dismissal of works of art (particularly portraits of himself), and the reverberations of his democratic sensibility on a generation of artists working after his death.

During his stay in Manhattan in the 1840's Whitman wrote for numerous publications.²² In 1845, hard-pressed to find work, Whitman boarded the Brooklyn Ferry and found himself again in Brooklyn. He retained a writing position with *The Brooklyn Evening Star*, he also held the position as editor of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* where he honed his journalistic skill and developed a taste for writing on the visual arts.²³

It was also during the years prior to the release of his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman became a habitual patron and staunch advocate for the visual arts. As Ruth Bohan records;

At the time Whitman launched his journalistic career, New York was experiencing a period of sustained growth and increasing public interest in the arts...The Apollo Association, soon to become the American Art Union, opened in 1839. Within a few years the International Art Union, the New York Gallery of Fine Arts, the Düsseldorf Gallery, and the Spingler Institute joined it.²⁴

In February of 1851, settled again in Brooklyn, Whitman advocated for the newly founded Brooklyn Art Union through an article in the *New York Post*. In this article he mentioned two artists whom he had befriended, Walter Libbey and William Sidney Mount.²⁵ Whitman accepted an offer to act as keynote speaker for the Union's first distribution of prizes, and was nominated by Libbey to be the organization's next

²² Whitman wrote for *The Sun* (1842) and *The Statesman* (1843). Later in 1843 Whitman published his poem "Death of the Nature Lover" in *Brother Jonathon*, he was published in the March issue of *Colombia Magazine* (1844). *The New Mirror* in 1844, edited by George Pope Morris, the *Aristidean* in 1845, edited by Thomas Dunn English. In May of that year he published an article in the *American Review* (later called the *American Whig Review*), and in June of that year Whitman's "Revenge and Requitall" was published in the *Democratic Review*. Cited from the Allen biography pgs. 61-66.

²³ Ruth L. Bohan *Looking into Walt Whitman: American Art, 1850-1920* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 24.

²⁴ Bohan 18.

²⁵ Allen 108.

president. In a “stirring testimonial of his efforts on the organization’s behalf”²⁶ Whitman won the nomination over four other candidates.²⁷

Though he never presided over the union, his keynote address established Whitman as the poet and main advocate of the visual arts in Brooklyn, and enabled him to infiltrate a circle of visual artists working and living in Brooklyn including the sculptor Henry Kirke Brown.²⁸ Through recurring visits to the studio of Brown, Whitman conversed with artists who shared a democratic vision of the visual arts in America. Brown himself spoke often of relinquishing the grasp of the ancient and modern master’s in favor of a new American aesthetic.²⁹

While reminiscing with Horace Traubel in Camden, just prior to his death, Whitman spoke fondly of these days. He called this period and these artists the often quoted “Gathering of the Forces”.³⁰ These long and sometimes heated discussions of the current of the visual arts in America “served as visual corollaries for the literary challenges Whitman was beginning to set for himself as a poet”. Themes undoubtedly included in these conversations were their “preference for American over European subject matter, their concern with artistic naturalism over the more traditional language of classicism, and their technical challenges to the prevailing norms of their profession...”³¹ What began as an appreciation for the placement of words on a page in Whitman’s early days as a printing apprentice, grew into an appreciation for the visual culture of his community; Whitman’s appreciation for the relationship between the textual and the visual was heightened by his role in the visual art circles of New York.

Whitman’s immersion in the visual culture of antebellum New York strengthened his commitment to the mutuality of verbal and visual modes of representation. Friendships with artists and frequent visits to the area’s art galleries and exhibition venues honed his understanding of the artistic process while solidifying his support for the arts in a democracy.³²

²⁶ Sill, Geoffrey M. and Roberta K. Tarbell eds. *Walt Whitman and the Visual Arts* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 11.

²⁷ Whitman never presided over the Brooklyn branch of the American art Union as a complaint was filed “by a disgruntled artist against the American Art Union [that] prompted the courts to declare the parent organization illegal on the grounds that its lottery constituted a form of gambling. By the end of the year, the American Art Union was defunct.” Sill 13.

²⁸ Through Brown, Whitman made the acquaintance of Sanford Gifford, Daniel Huntington, William Page, Asher B. Durand, William James Stillman, Samuel Colman, John Quincy Adams Ward, and Larkin G. Meade.

²⁹ See Wayne Craven’s “Henry Kirke Brown: His Search for an American Art in the 1840’s” *American Art Journal* (November 1972): 44-58.

³⁰ “The Gathering of the Forces” is also the title to the two-volume set of Whitman’s pre-*Leaves of Grass* writings. Edited by Cleveland Rogers and John Black, the volumes include gallery and book reviews, editorials, and short stories.

³¹ Bohan 22.

³² Bohan 29.

The mutuality of verbal and visual modes of representation extends beyond the occasional review of a gallery show, or Whitman praising an artist or piece in his writing; his appreciation for the relationship between the visual and the textual surfaces in his choice of portraits for the editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman felt that the visual representation of himself should align with the tone of his work. Any portrait of Whitman should then invoke the spirit of the man, as the text of his poems do; they are not solely intended to render his physical features. His portraits for *Leaves of Grass* should be the visual extension of the textual work, and the Centennial edition of *Leaves of Grass* most successfully aligns with this program.

Chapter 2 Centennial Edition

Approximately two years after the release of the 1860 edition Whitman left Brooklyn to visit his brother soldiering in the Civil War. He was not to return to New York for more than a quick visit for the remainder of his days.³³ Over the next three decades Whitman oversaw the publication of five additional editions of *Leaves of Grass*.³⁴ Within subsequent editions Whitman included new poems, changed the titles of some existing poems, added a short autobiography, a preface, and included new visual depictions of him. Of these changes the most significant to the relationship of textual and pictorial representation is found in the Centennial Edition of 1876.

For the Centennial Edition Whitman chose three portraits to visually signify authorship. Samuel Hollyer's steel engraving, from the original release, a wood cut print by William J. Linton (1873), and a photograph by G. Frank Pearsall (1871).³⁵ The Pearsall photograph was placed in the traditional location opposite the title page and the other two images were strategically placed within the text. The Pearsall photo, and its inclusion opposite the title page signifies Whitman's attempt at unifying the message of the portraits of the previous editions. This representation of the bard has qualities from both the Hollyer print of the 1855/1856 editions and the refined representation by Charles Hine. Here the poet sits, but he reclines in his chair with a relaxed lean. His characteristic beard remains apparent but less kept and more pronounced than either of the previous prints. The growth of the beard and the relaxed posture of the poet evoke the demeanor of an established poet laureate, contrary to the refined and eager dandy that graced the second edition through the Schoff print. The fashion of Whitman identifies another deviation from the Schoff and Hollyer prints. He wears a wide-brimmed hat slightly cocked backward that seems out of place given the urbane coat and vest below the beard. He wears a noticeably wrinkled suit unbuttoned at the collar. His tie, though not nearly as flamboyant as the Schoff print, adds to the relaxed and easy demeanor of Whitman's posture. The loose tie, open at the neck signals a touch of the nonconformist nature of the man.

Tracing the portraits from the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* offers a clue to how Whitman viewed authorship of his work, and, more importantly, how the visual representation of the author changed alongside the editions. By including the original prints alongside an updated photograph, Whitman reinforced the temporality of the work within—he acknowledged the passing of time inclusive of the slight alterations in his verse and in himself. Whitman believed that his verse was a textual form of himself,

³³ Whitman spent a couple of years in New Orleans working as an editor. He then moved to Camden and took up residence with the Gilchrists, lived in Philadelphia; returned to Camden after suffering from a stroke and died in 1892.

³⁴ Overall Whitman published The First edition of 1855, second (1856), third (1860), fourth (1867), fifth (1870), The Centennial Edition (1876), sixth (1881), a pocket-sized edition and the "Death-Bed" edition (1891).

³⁵ The Linton print was taken from a photograph of Whitman by George C. Potter (1871).

which includes both his past and present, and so deserved a corresponding visual form to mark the passage of time.

The other two portraits of Whitman in the Centennial Edition of *Leaves Of Grass*, as mentioned, were strategically placed within the text. The Hollyer print, located within the volume, accompanies the now titled “Song of Myself.” Whitman viewed this portion of his work as his days of youth and vigor, giving the portrait of Whitman as a young man a time-specific reference. By placing the print that had accompanied the original release of one of his earliest works in this section of the Centennial Edition he also provides a sense of temporal consistency. The poem itself changed titles but not a word was edited, and any follower of the work would easily be able to correspond the original picture to the original words. “Song Of Myself” and the Hollyer engraving both capture the essence of Whitman as a young laboring poet.

The final print added to the Centennial Edition of *Leaves of Grass* was completed by William J. Linton in 1873. The print itself boasts rich lines and textures. Cross-hatching below the cheeks and above the eyes gives not only a sense of modeled form above his unruly beard, but provides a locus in the eyes. The eyes themselves consist of circular lines indicating age and wisdom. Here again the sitter wears a suit jacket, but Whitman’s characteristic beard spills over the collar; again, the refinement of his dress fails to contain his unrefined character. His eyes, his suit, his pronounced beard and his head slightly nodding forward combined create a mixture of compassion and wisdom. This print was placed alongside “The Wound Dresser” (one of the poems in the “Drum Taps” sequence) and provided a “physical and conceptual intimacy” with an individual poem.³⁶ This particular poem recounts Whitman’s time visiting his brother at a camp for wounded during the Civil War so the compassionate knowing stare of Whitman established a certain rapport between the reader of the poem, the viewer of the print, and the poet himself. It was this connection between the textual and visual that Whitman hoped to achieve through such a depiction of him.

The specific choice of portraits for the Centennial edition of *Leaves of Grass* signifies the importance that Whitman placed on the relationship between the visual and the textual representations of himself. These three renditions of the poet, however, do not exhaust the type or quantity of portraits of Whitman. Artists actively sought appointment with the bard to attempt to render the man that had revolutionized American writing. Whitman was pleased to be a sitter, welcoming the company and conversations with persons working in the creative realms. In fact, Whitman encouraged friendly competition between artists attempting to depict his likeness in the manner of his literary ideology.

Late in 1887 Herbert Gilchrist returned from a trip to England with the intention of painting Whitman’s portrait, as Whitman was still residing in Camden. Gilchrist found himself amongst two other artists attempting the same feat; the sculptor Sidney Morse, and the painter Thomas Eakins. The two painted renditions produced in the ensuing competition provide examples of different styles. Whitman admired the portrait by Eakins over the one completed by Gilchrist. A formal evaluation describes the

³⁶ Bohan 53.

difference, but when including the context of the poet's life in 1887 provides clarification of Whitman's preference for Eakins' work.

In the Gilchrist portrait the composition of the sitter is very similar to many other renditions of Whitman. He sits, in a relaxed position, probably in his favorite rocking chair. The tool of his trade gripped in his right hand and a writing board on his lap show the poet in the midst of working. Here we have the characteristic unkempt beard spilling over his collar, and the collar itself left unbuttoned. Whitman does not wear the clothing of a workingman, but his shirt and coat are wrinkled and as unkempt as his beard. This work shares the qualities of portraits that graced the pages of *Leaves of Grass*, and though Whitman admired the form and handling of paint, he felt that its portrayal was too refined and conservative.

In contrast to Gilchrist's portrait, the Thomas Eakins portrait of 1887 (completed in 1888) captures an adventurous, youthful sensibility in the rendition of the sixty five year old man. The handling of the paint provides another contrast between the two portraits. Gilchrist intersperses light and color to create the texture of Whitman's clothing and beard in an application that seems loose, yet intentional. Eakins, on the other hand, renders the poet in a gritty, unrefined realism, using planes of color and wet-on-wet mixing of pigment to achieve a pleasing, though brazen, effect.³⁷

At one point, both pictures adorned the walls of Whitman's working space. Horace Traubel records the following words of Whitman on the dialogue created by having these two pictures in the same room:

The two pictures sort of bark at each other, they are so unlike. The Eakins portrait gets there—fulfills its purpose; sets me down in correct style, without feathers—without any fuss of any sort.... Now Herbert is determined to make me the conventional, proper old man: his picture is very benevolent, to be sure: but the Walt Whitman of that picture lacks guts.³⁸

In another passage from *In Camden*, Traubel records the finding and reading of a review of the Eakins portrait, after which Whitman proclaims his appreciation for the portrait:

³⁷ This style of portraiture, an unrefined realism, is a precursor to the portraits of later American modernists like Robert Henri; but for Eakins is a signature of the end of his long career. Towards the end, Eakins painted subjects outside of the realm of what they "did", preferring instead to show what they "were". This is probably attributed to Eakins' growing interest in the natural sciences. See Elizabeth Johns *Thomas Eakins* for further analysis, or Lloyd Goodridge *Thomas Eakins* for an alternate view.

³⁸ Jeanne Chapman and Robert Macisaac, eds. *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Volume 7 (Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data: Fellowship of Friends Inc., 1992), 153-154.

Sunday, February 1, 1891...missed this the other day: Mr. Eakins' Walt Whitman is by odds and far the best portrait yet made of an heroic figure in our letters.... (Philadelphia Press, January 29, 1891.)

Talcott Williams probably wrote it. W. Was "pleased" and said, "I have no doubt Eakins' picture deserves all they say about it."³⁹

An important difference between the two works, and a significant deviation from the many portraits of Whitman is Eakins' portrayal of Whitman looking away from the viewer. This characteristic of the portrait works against the intention of capturing the poet in the essence of his poetry. "As Meyer Shapiro and others have argued, the visual counterpart to the language of direct address, the language by which Whitman established himself as poet-prophet, is the frontal view."⁴⁰ In the Eakins work there is no connection between the subject and the viewer of the portrait; Whitman looks into the space beyond the viewer disregarding the author/reader relationship he had established in his writings. It seems as if Whitman, by showing his approval of Eakins' portrait, and a slight disdain for the portrait of Gilchrist, harbored some resentment to the latter. For he, the man so fascinated by the interplay between the textual and the visual as markers of each other, failed to recognize the directness of the gaze and the established psychological space in the work of Gilchrist that was missing in the work of Eakins.

What was the appeal of the Eakins portrait, then? Both share the characteristic relaxed seated position, the unruly beard, the open collar, and the rumpled clothing. It is not likely that Whitman preferred the style of depiction, the actual application of paint or palette choice of one over the other as he never claimed the superiority of one style or medium of expression over another. Whitman's appreciation for the visual arts extended into the realms of sculpture, printmaking, and photography, so he did not adhere to a medium-specific evaluation as long as the representation of the subject carried the essence of the subject. Given the scholarly input on the visually mediated connection between the rendered Whitman and the viewer, corresponding to the textually mediated connection between the author Whitman and the reader, it would seem that the Gilchrist portrait is more closely aligned with how Whitman perceived the textual/visual relationship.

Much like Whitman's choices of portraits included in the Centennial Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, that depended on the temporal specificity of Whitman's look (as a young man, as a potential bard, as an established bard) the rationale behind his appointing Eakins' portrait as the more worthy of the two centers on this specific time of Whitman's life. Just as the Schoff print marked a specific time in the poet's life—rendering the man whose writing demanded a third edition—the Eakins portrait captures the voice of the poet in 1888. However, Whitman's fondness was for the Eakins work.

While sitting for these artists, Whitman was writing. The work written during these sessions, *November Boughs*, was published in 1888, and was included in subsequent editions of *Leaves Of Grass*. This poem carries two very distinct themes of Whitman's life during this period, and it is these themes that the Eakins portrait captures. The very name of this poem infers the late years of the poet's life; a time where he was

³⁹ Jeanne Chapman 444.

⁴⁰ Bohan 121.

faced with the inevitability of age and death; he was reflecting on his various endeavors and accomplishments, lamenting the loss of youth, the passage of time. The rendition by Eakins shows Whitman in an introspective moment; his eyes are not connecting with a viewer but focused beyond the space of the viewer as if he is consumed by an internal monologue. Eakins also captures the bard in frail moment; his body is aged, weakening, his beard is yellowing and his eyelids droop in fatigue.

The second theme of Whitman's life and work of 1888, that Eakins captures in his portrait and Gilchrist's lacks, is based on the maritime themes of *November Boughs*. At this point in his life Whitman held a fascination for his Dutch ancestry, specifically the sailors he claimed to descend from. Whitman took pleasure in acknowledging the similarity between the Eakins rendition of himself and a "jack tar" about to reveal one his many maritime adventures. The inward gaze produces an effect of conjuring fond memories to recite to interested parties. A specific work relating to this time period would be *Passage to India*; in this poem Whitman conjures oceanic imagery and heralds the past:

The Past—the dark unfathom'd retrospect!
 The teeming gulf—the sleepers and the shadows!
 The past—the infinite greatness of the past!

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)
 After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,
 After the noble inventors, after the scientist, the chemist, the geologist,
 ethnologist,
 Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,
 The true son of God shall come singing his songs.⁴¹

The feature that eluded Gilchrist, that Eakins was able to capture and was then rewarded by Whitman's praise, was a temporal regard. A sense of the particular time of Whitman's sitting. While Gilchrist rendered the standard of Whitman's portrait—adhering to the previously established formula [three-quarter view, seated position, direct eye-contact]—Eakins captured the poet as he was in 1888; both physically and, more importantly, as a referent to his recent textual work.

From these portraits it is this temporal regard, the artist's ability to capture Whitman at this specific time in his life that pleases Whitman. In portraiture, capturing the wrinkles and thinning hair of the aging Whitman suffices to regard time. However, this temporal regard is not limited to the natural effects of age outside of portraiture. It incorporates the social atmosphere. Both Gilchrist and Eakins render the figure of Whitman with a sense of time regarding the era of Whitman's life in compositions other than portraits. Two canvases provide fodder for such a comparison; both incorporate, but are not limited to, the physicality of Whitman, and both act as indicators of the era. The visual cues within the compositions hold socially and temporally specific referents to the American culture at the turn of the 20th century.

⁴¹ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1940), 211, 215.

The work of Eakins, *Between Rounds* (1899), depicts a boxing match. Though pugilism was not an American invention, the rise of the sport's popularity in America coincided with the increase of immigrants after the Civil War. Metropolitan cities such as New York provided ever-increasing venues and athletes for the exhibition of boxing matches. As seen in Eakins' canvass, boxing in the late 19th century was much more controlled and systematized than the back-alley competitions of earlier in the century.

Eakins felt that such an event was conducive to the new American spirit harbored by Whitman; after all, boxing, as a metaphor, represents the democratic American dream. Any man can enlist as a fighter, but success is guaranteed to no one; the champion is he who can outlast, outwit, and outmuscle his opponent. Another aspect of this era is the increasing popularity of the spectacle—illusions, like those offered in movie houses, pornography, and through the novelty of technology. Boxing provided a cathartic release to spectators; especially those not fit to compete with such physical exertion. Instead of entering the ring themselves they would choose their champion and cheer them on.

In this canvass Whitman is depicted in the upper quadrant, directly above the fighter. In his hand he holds the tool of his trade, a writing implement. By including Whitman in the canvass, Eakins likens the revolutionary and truly American spirit of Walt Whitman with the passions of such a spectacle.

In *Between Rounds* the depiction of Whitman is a tertiary component; simply a remark on the connection between the poet and this pastime. The canvass of Gilchrist that provides the other half of this comparison depicts Whitman as a primary character in the setting. Though Gilchrist accurately portrays the sense of time—a transitional era from Victorian ideals to the new post-Civil War dogmas—it is at the cost of devaluing Whitman's role as an usher of this new era.

Of the portraits of Walt Whitman, *The Good Gray Poet's Gift* is unique. The work is compositionally sound and well rendered, capturing four figures surrounding a table. Due to the close relationship of the Gilchrist's and Whitman the poet is placed at the family table alongside the mother and sister of Herbert—he is a member of this family. The long stay of Whitman at the Gilchrist home allowed Herbert the time and opportunity to render a full figure portrait in oil.

One characteristic that sets this work apart from the other depictions of Whitman is the fact that he is depicted in an interior scene. Due to Whitman's devotion to nature and his compassion for the outdoors most artists depict the poet in an exterior scene, contemplating the presence of the natural. Portraits of Whitman abound throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century.⁴² Full or three quarter portraits as seen in the editions of *Leaves of Grass* and elsewhere include a primitive seat where it is supposed the poet sat for hours on end contemplating nature, writing, and conversing. The

⁴² Beginning with the steel engraving by Samuel Hollyer that graced the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, other artists who painted Whitman's portrait include; John McLenan (1860), Charles Hine (1860), G. Frank Pearsall's and George C. Potter's photographs (1871), William J. Linton (1873), numerous depictions by Herbert Gilchrist, George W. Waters (1877), Percy Ives (1882 and 1926), Dora Wheeler (1887), Thomas Eakins (1887 and 1888), John White Alexander (1889), and the busts by Samuel Murray (1882) and Sidney Morse (1888).

Gilchrist portrait, however, captures Whitman in a Victorian style dining area whose interior is filled with the décor of mid to late 19th century furnishings. Framed portraits, small statuettes, a possibly antique candleholder and a modest tea setting are a few of the elements that date the interior space. Other elements of the composition that mark this interior as belonging to a late-Victorian decorative style are the fabrics of the room, specifically the costumes of those rendered. The Mrs. Gilchrist wears a dress with ornate collar ruffles that catch the light and accentuate her face. The daughter of Mrs. Gilchrist wears a full dress that though not quite as elaborate, is emblazoned with ruffles at the collar and cuffs. The dresses of both women are of a subtle hue, not catchy and not revealing, but refined. The fashion of Whitman provides a foil to the ladies as he wears what resembles a working class coat and pants, making his presence seem out of place in the company of refined women and a Victorian setting. The only characteristic of Whitman's clothing that resembles that of the company he is keeping is the sharp flash of white protruding from the sleeve of his coat. This is a portion of a shirt poking out from the cuff and catching the light; the inclusion of this highlight is read in the context of Whitman's ambiguous sexuality. Here we have a rugged exterior of working-man's fashion and a refined interior characteristic of the homosexual or, at best, sexually ambiguous flaneur. The time of the painting of this work also reflects the ambiguity of Whitman's sexual preferences; at this time he had authored works like *I sing the body electric*—in praise of the male form, and fraternal love. Also, he was a confirmed bachelor with no intention of marrying.

The unusual nature of Whitman's presences in an interior scene is further referenced by the small flower bud that he holds. As if he is drinking from the flower, Whitman holds the small red bud to his face and inhales the scent of the outdoors through this representation of nature. Even in the company of such companions, and indulging in tea, Whitman still longs for the outside, for his beloved nature. The final reference to Whitman's predilection for the outdoor is the parting of the curtains behind his head. The fabric of the curtains parts just enough to frame the poet's head; this allows for the detail of his profile to include the reflection of natural light as seen in the delicately rendered crown and forehead in the profile. This light differs from that catching in the ruffles of Mrs. Gilchrist's dress and that light illuminating the table. The difference in light gives the subjects differing qualities of shade and sets the seated ladies apart from the seated bard. As a framing device, the parted curtains also invite connotations of nature surrounding the poet.

The Good Grey Poet's Gift stands apart from other portraits of Whitman. This work captures the poet in an interior scene and hints at the questionable sexuality of the poet. However, Whitman had a slight disdain for the work and this was not due to the representation of himself, or the context of the scene in which he is placed. Gilchrist's portrait characterizes the stylistic choice of an American painter. Though this work pays homage to traditional painting style (through the formal composition, the Victorian décor and fashion, and the brushwork) it also incorporates a contemporary flavor. Thematically, the work embraces the principles of Whitman's democracy through recognition of the past and the embrace of the contemporary. However, the reason for Whitman's slight disdain for the work is the tradition from which Gilchrist was working.

In his career Gilchrist had made several sojourns to London where he was accepted into the contemporary art circles. After returning to the states from one such

excursion he painted *The Good Gray Poet's Gift*; “Compositionally, the painting owes a considerable debt to the lavish Victorian interior in William Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* (1852-54). Thematically, the work appropriates the convention of the “conversation piece,” popularized in the eighteenth century by William Hogarth.”⁴³ With his ties to English artists Gilchrist rendered a domesticated and sentimentalized Whitman—a condition that Whitman constantly attempted to distance himself. The frame of exterior light around Whitman’s head, and his apparent preoccupation with the flower blossom do offer a sense of the rugged character that Whitman attempted to formulate around his own persona; however, these elements scarcely conceal the overt domesticity of the composition.

Including the works of Gilchrist and Eakins, Whitman was never inclined to use anything except a portrait of himself for the editions of *Leaves of Grass*. This was a program Whitman developed and strictly adhered to for the nine editions of the *Leaves* that he oversaw publication of. It wasn’t until 1881 when he viewed the works of Jean-Francois Millet that Whitman became convinced that a composition other than portraiture could carry the visual program that he developed for *Leaves*. Millet provided a fraternal bond between French realism and American romantic poetry, but it wasn’t until the Ashcan school of Realism in the early 20th century that an school of painters from New York could carry the aesthetic of Whitman’s program. This was due in no small part to their appreciation of both Millet and Whitman.

⁴³ Bohan 98.

Chapter 3 John Sloan and Millet

Though Walt Whitman did not live into the 20th century his legacy and influence reverberated throughout the first two decades of American visual depiction. Robert Henri and John Sloan recorded this influence in their personal and academic writings. Henri was Sloan's teacher, and though Sloan never traveled abroad his work comes closer to visually representing Whitman's aesthetic.

Robert Henri, an American artist, writer, and teacher facilitated the reception of Impressionism and Realism through his teachings. Through his influence as a teacher, Henri encouraged (if not created) a significant chapter of American painting. In his works, and the works of his students, Henri depicts an unrefined realism similar to the late works of Eakins, with European tendencies. As the founder of the Eight, later deemed the Ashcan school, the canvases of Henri and his students utilize the *plein air* foundation of Impressionism—taking canvass and brush out of the studio, depicting people in the public realm. Also significant in the work of the Ashcan is the choice of subject matter. Not only were figures rendered in public and semi-public spaces, but also the subjects of the painting were not strictly the affluent. Taking a cue from the French Realists, specifically Millet and Corbet, the Ashcan rendered the previously unrepresented; the poor and the destitute of course, but also the many facets of city life whose activities and social realm had for centuries gone unheralded in paint. Rendering the middle and lower classes populating the streets and parks of the city provides an important deviation from the Impressionist tendency to record the leisure activities of the wealthy, while the renditions of these subjects with abrupt strokes and little refinement deviates from the hyper-realistic craftsmanship of the French Realism tradition. Thus, the aesthetic of the Ashcan school hinges on a mixture of French styles—Impressionism and Realism—imbued with a sense of American democracy.

Henri was primarily a portrait artist, and his often quoted “my people” illustrates his constant pursuit to seek out and record those individuals who create his “love of mankind”.

The people I like to 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 the lines nature intended for them. My people may be young or old, rich or poor...But wherever I find them...my interest is awakened and my impulse immediately is to tell about them through my own language.⁴⁴

Henri's pursuit of his people created portrait sitters out of subjects from every walk of life. When considering his entire body of work in portraiture, Henri created a catalogue of canvases similar to the textual catalogues of Whitman. The only element binding the subjects of Henri's portraits is their placement in a community. In his writings, Henri

⁴⁴ Robert Henri *The Art Spirit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 143.

attempts to mirror the pursuits of Whitman; discovering a sense of individual identity while locating that sense in the ever important concept of community.

It seems to me that before a man tries to express anything to the world he must recognize in himself an individual, a new one, very distinct from others. Walt Whitman did this, and that is why I think his name so often comes to me. The one great cry of Whitman was for a man to find himself, to understand the fine thing he really is if liberated.⁴⁵

Robert Henri met John Sloan over a mutual appreciation for the writing of Walt Whitman.⁴⁶ Sloan was then an illustrator for a Philadelphia newspaper and Henri, seeing great potential, encouraged Sloan to follow him to New York and pursue his artistic inclinations in the city that he, and Whitman, held so dear. The careers of these two artists, and the other members of the Eight, have been meticulously traced in the one hundred years since the now infamous showing at Macbeth gallery in 1908. However, a critical stance on a single member of this group, though the lens of Whitman's democracy, proves extremely beneficial in attempting to situate the current of visual art in the early 20th century. That artist is John Sloan. Through the significant influence of Henri, Sloan familiarized himself with the realism and impressionism coming from Europe. Combining this influence with his interest in the works of Whitman, Sloan created canvases that adhere to the democratic notions of Whitman's writing.

As Henri was primarily a portrait artist, his and Whitman's aesthetic program align neatly. However, the Ashcan were notorious for their street scene depictions of the Lower East Side; cityscapes and landscapes dominate the Ashcan compositions. Though this may seem problematic when referencing the Ashcan to Whitman's preference of visual representation, a deeper understanding of Whitman's preferences in visual depiction shows just how similar the programs are. Whitman's role in the American reception of French Realism and Impressionism is of particular note.

As supporter of the arts in a democracy, Whitman was very influential in the American reception of European art after the Civil War. This period in America, as mentioned, was a turning point. The "Old Guard" was failing and with immigration and technology a new American society was being constructed. Visual artists were taking cues from European counterparts and as the 19th century wore on, Realism and Impressionism were fast becoming the new styles that American painters incorporated into their nationalistic tendencies. American painters began to reject the pantheism inherent in indigenous styles such as the Hudson River School, and adopt new modes of representation. In particular, the works from post-revolutionary France provided a certain fraternal attachment to the post-Civil War American society. With the nation reformatted and hundreds of thousand either dead or wounded, Americans now had to cope with a democratic, national identity hinging on the tenets of capitalism. As Laura Meixner notes; "Above all, the public reception of French Realism and Impressionism was a democratic conversation held among the many Americans who looked past their

⁴⁵ Henri 135.

⁴⁶ Sloan presented Henri with a rare copy of the Centennial Edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

own borders to clarify their vision of themselves. In their plain view of things, Realism and Impressionism revealed the paradoxes inherent in France and America.”⁴⁷ French realism, and eventually impressionism provided the visual cues for reconciliation of the war torn national identity. Whitman, the new out-spoken proponent of American arts was just as taken with French realism as the many American artists who came back from trips to Paris with fresh ideas. In particular, Whitman was fond of Jean-Francois Millet:

The *Leaves* [Whitman told Traubel during his days in Camden] are really only Millet in another form—they are the Millet that Walt Whitman has succeeded in putting into words...Millet excites all the religion in me—excites me to a greater self-respect. I could not stand before a Millet picture with my hat on.⁴⁸

In April of 1881 the Bostonian art collector Quincy Adams Shaw allowed Whitman a private viewing of his collection of Millet.⁴⁹ Two of Millet’s works were particularly captivating to Whitman; *Peasant Watering her Cow, Evening* (1873), and *The Sower* (1850). Traubel recorded Whitman reminiscing over these works:

[concerning *Peasant Watering Her Cow, Evening*] Its simplicity, its grand treatment, the atmosphere, the time of day: not a break in the power of its statement. I looked at it long and long—was fascinated—fastened to it—could hardly leave it at all. This picture more than any other to my judgment confirmed Millet—justified his position, heroism—assured his future.

[concerning *The Sower*] I felt the masterfulness of The Sower: its dark grays: not overwrought anywhere: true always to its own truth—borrowing nothing: impressive in its unique majesty of expression.⁵⁰

What Whitman viewed in the works of Millet, and what he linked with his own work was the authenticity of subject mixed with optimism. These were works depicting peasants toiling; typical people performing typical tasks, but modeled with dignity and without pretension. As seen in Millet’s *The Sower*, the figure sets to work without reservation; the long strides and outstretched arm illustrate the efficient movement of one ready to accomplish the task at hand. This worker is capable of his charge and physically prepared to carry it out. The palette of murky yellows and warm reds is countered only

⁴⁷ Laura J. Meixner *French Realist Painting and the Critique of American Society 1865-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 259.

⁴⁸ Jeanne Chapman volume 2, 407.

⁴⁹ Shaw’s relation to Millet was through the Boston-based William Morris Hunt, who was Millet’s first American pupil that gained prominence in New England. In the 1860’s Shaw met Millet in France and by the time of Whitman’s visit, Shaw’s collection numbered more than twenty oil paintings and just as many pastel works.

⁵⁰ Jeanne Chapman volume 3, pg. 89.

by the bright falling light on the horizon, offering a glimpse of the reward of hard labor. This may be a menial task assigned to a peasant, but the fully capable worker embraces his charge.

The allure of these two paintings also speaks to the nationalism that Whitman held so dear. The American and the French revolutions were both victories for democracy and mirrored each other in terms of the reorganization of society. The similarities between both social movements are present in the depiction of French laborers by such painters as Corbet and Millet; however, at this time there was no American counterpart in the visual arts that painted the rigors and authenticity of peasant life. Why a French peasant could conjure nationalistic tendencies in an American audience speaks to the tradition of labor in the United States.

The United States had no indigenous peasantry. The goods produced in America—the textiles, food, fabric, and machines—as well as the raw material for export or domestic use were gathered by a faceless class of labor. Anonymous hands laid the trains that solidified the dream of manifest destiny, and the very track they ran upon. Slave labor, the labor of emancipated slaves, the work of immigrants fresh from other nations, and the migrant worker composed the labor class of America. With a class of faceless, anonymous workers laboring on the farms and in the cities of America, equally faceless images of peasants from foreign soil are readily applicable. The image of the American laborer could be “interpreted with ambiguity and latitude...the alien air about manual laborers made it not only plausible but seemingly appropriate to depict them in the guise of Millet’s peasants.”⁵¹

The kinship that Whitman beheld between the work of Millet and his own was significant for yet another reason. As recorded in his conversations with Traubel, Whitman felt that he and Millet shared similar inspirations. Whitman found a visual signifier of his work beyond a portrait of himself:

Whitman was, for the first time, struck by the possibility that visual representations with no direct referent to either the poet or the narrative details of his verse could effectively inscribe characteristic features of his poetic enterprise. His response signifies a major departure from his long-held belief that the engaging symbiosis between his person and his verse was best conveyed visually through portraits of himself.⁵²

His praise of Millet characterizes the American reception of French Realism; a bond that bridges the Atlantic. The influence of French visual depiction was readily applied by American painters, to those who stood on French soil, and to those who witnessed these works in the acquisitions of American collectors. These artists brought the influence of the French back to states, and created a fusion of the French styles, Whitman’s democracy, and American pragmatism.

Given Whitman’s interest in the landscapes of Millet, noting Whitman and Whitman’s aesthetic program in reference to the Ashcan artists functions well. The

⁵¹ Meixner 137.

⁵² Bohan 80.

canvases of John Sloan provide an excellent vehicle for referencing Whitman in the decades after his death.

Sloan was a newspaper illustrator prior to moving to New York. He was trained in topicality, and to record daily life in the same speed at which it occurs. As a newspaper illustrator he was working class, unlike other members of the Ashcan whose family monies were able to support their lifestyle. This social standing alleviated any sense of intrusion as he recorded the private lives of other members of his community. Sloan was notorious for looking into windows, sometimes with the use of a telescopic device, to witness and record the events unfolding within. Janice Coco, in her work *Re-viewing John Sloan's Images of Women*, makes a psychoanalytical claim for Sloan having voyeuristic tendencies illustrated by framing devices surrounding his female subjects, and suppressed maternal issues evidenced by a series of failed marriages.⁵³ However true this may be, reading Sloan's own words from his journal directs the source for his interest in his community directly to Whitman: "Whitman's love for all men, his beautiful attitude toward the physical absence of prudishness. . . all this represented a force of freedom."⁵⁴ Later in his journal Sloan recognizes the stylistic choice of Whitman as an influence in his work: "I liked what resulted from his descriptive catalogues of life. They helped to interest me in the details of life around me."⁵⁵ These two quotes directly identify Whitman as a primary influence in the works of Sloan. Indirectly, Whitman's democracy surfaces in the compositions of Sloan through an exaggerated egalitarian choice of subjects, Sloan's inclusion of the viewer as part of the composition, and the transparency of private space Sloan strove for.

The essence of democracy, for Whitman, relies on an interdependency of social poles working to dissolve social hierarchy. Central to this attempt is a sense of optimism. There is nothing derogatory in Whitman's remarks on prostitutes, the destitute, and the ignorant. Likewise, there is no valorization of the capitalist, the wealthy, or the aristocratic. Each incarnation of democracy is treated from the same removed stance. The catalogue technique is the great equalizer, giving preference to no single component. Combining the cataloging act with his sense of democracy illustrates Whitman's attempt to locate that elusive quality which binds citizens together—beyond geographic locality and similar interests or stations of life.

It is Whitman's intent to use the word democracy to characterize a sense of community between a place and those who people it. In his *Prose Works* Whitman attempts to reveal his notion of democracy:

Did you, Oh friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it

⁵³ Janice M. Coco. "Re-viewing John Sloan's Images of Women" *Oxford Art Journal* Vol.21 (1998): 81-97.

⁵⁴ Joseph J. Kwiat, "Robert Henri and the Emerson-Whitman tradition," *PMLA* 71 (September 1956): 618.

⁵⁵ Kwiat 618.

may pass on and come to its flower and fruits in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men, and their beliefs.⁵⁶

In expanding this notion of democracy beyond the political arena Whitman claims a number of “departments” or categories applicable to this notion. The most significant of these as relating to Whitman’s influence in the visual arts are, as Stephen John Mack describes them, the “phenomenology of self that situates the individual and society in a relationship of interdependence...[and] a religion that attempts to facilitate ‘spiritual transcendence,’ which is Whitman’s term for the ubiquitous human desire for ecstatic experience, by redirecting it as the individual’s quest for reconciliation with the larger (social and cosmic) democratic order.”⁵⁷

This is not to say that Whitman understood democracy as a departmental entity whose parts could be understood as individual proofs and utilized singularly. For Whitman the concept of democracy, even as he divides it into departments, is a set of interrelated values. His concept of a democratic umbrella carries a diverse set of fundamentals, but when revealed within his poetry or prose shows the interconnectivity of these variations within the American life. As Mack explains concerning the departmental nature of Whitman’s democracy; “by casting into relief the democratic values implicit in each [department], Whitman also throws them into relation, highlighting the way each supports, compromises or modifies the democratic claims of the others.”⁵⁸

This sense of democracy is applicable from the themes of Whitman’s poetry to the grammatical structure of his writing. For Whitman, democracy permeates all aspects of culture and life, including the very style of his own writing. Within his poems “Whitman abandons symbolic or metaphoric representation, in which one thing stands for another, in favor of anti-hierarchical, inclusive catalogs punctuated only by ellipses and commas.”⁵⁹ Or, as Wai Chee Dimock states, the process of Whitman’s style is “the transposition of seriality into simultaneity.”⁶⁰ This simultaneity is the grounding of the democratic tone or thematic nature of Whitman’s work. When addressing such a varied and diverse subject as contemporary American society within the locus of New York City, the tone of democracy would be lost if any element was given preference over any other. Simultaneity, therefore, works to democratize the characteristics of the city while seriality would reinforce a hierarchy of characteristics.

⁵⁶ Floyd Stovall, ed. *Prose Works 1892*. (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 389.

⁵⁷ Stephen John Mack *The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy*. (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 161.

⁵⁸ Mack 162.

⁵⁹ Peter J. Bellis *Writing Revolution: Aesthetics and Politics in Hawthorne, Whitman, and Thoreau* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 72.

⁶⁰ Erkkila, Betsy and Jay Grossman eds. *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 62-79.

Bellis goes on to claim that Whitman does not create the authorial voice from cataloged particulars, but “dispenses the poetic self into these particulars”.⁶¹ The democratic theme of Whitman’s work pervades even the voice of the poem. The poetic voice in Whitman’s work is dispersed away from a strict sense of authorship and towards a democratic collectivity of the subject and reader. Both Bellis and Dimock refer especially to *Song of Myself*, a work written in first-person perspective, much like a narrative. However, even the first-person tense is overpowered by the democratic collectivity; the reader is invited not to partake in the song as a passive witness or spectator but to become the author—the ‘myself’—of this song. *Song Of Myself* redirects authorship from one entity into a collective consciousness; yet another ramification of the all-pervasive sense of democracy.

Punctuation in Whitman’s work is yet another example of how the democratic spirit invades all aspects of the poem. In Dimock’s argument of reinforcing the simultaneity and opposing seriality of the individual facets of the catalogue, relinquishing traditional punctuation and heavily emphasizing ellipses provides an anti-hierarchical arraignment of those individual facets. It provides yet another example of the tone and thematic intention Whitman chose. The diversity of the city and those that populate it, who collectively create the spirit of the culture, are catalogued with no indication of a qualitative difference. The inclusion of such a variety of elements without hierarchical leanings is, again, the essence of Whitman’s democracy manifested within the very fundamentals of the writings.

John Sloan’s career lasted well into the 1940’s. His personal painting style stayed relatively the same between the Macbeth gallery exhibit and his final works. His reluctance to adopt new modes of expression stagnated his career towards the end, especially when considering how quickly the currents of visual expression changed in the first half of the 20th century. When, due in no small part to the Society of Independent Artist’s show of 1917, artists adopted new modes of visual representation, Sloan adopted new places to render his style. When the expressive current went beyond realism, Sloan went west—the deserts and ‘primitives’ of the American West replaced the gutters of New York. Sloan’s link to Whitman hinges on his stay in New York City, during the infancy and climax of his career.

During his days in New York Sloan was notorious for depicting the private spaces of unsuspecting people. Many of his canvases and tens of his numerous prints were composed so the viewer could see through a window, door, or other frame. Criticism of this technique includes accusations of voyeurism.⁶² However, when incorporating the writing of Whitman that held such sway over Sloan, these tendencies are for transparency:

Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from
the jambs!...Undrape! You are not guilty to me,.../I see through the

⁶¹ Bellis, Peter J. *Writing Revolution: Aesthetics and Politics in Hawthorne, Whitman, and Thoreau*. (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2003), 72.

⁶² As per Janice Coco.

broadcloth and gingham... what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.⁶³

Other than private space, Sloan also created many works depicted semi-public space. Sloan was fond of climbing to the rooftops and creating compositions from the activities of city dwellers using the rooftops for various tasks. From his *New York City Life* series numerous etchings show city dwellers utilizing the rooftops for household chores and socialization. Of particular note is *Roofs, Summer Night* where Sloan depicts apartment dwellers escaping the sweltering summer night by sleeping on the roof. Correspondingly, Whitman's poem from 1855 titled *The Sleepers*, describes the act of looking while others slumber:

I wander all night in my vision, Stepping with light feet, swiftly
and noiselessly stepping and stopping, Bending with open eyes
over the shut eyes of sleepers, Wandering and confused, lost to
myself, ill-assorted, contradictory, Pausing, gazing, bending, and
stopping...⁶⁴

Hairdresser's Window, a painting by Sloan, typifies the characteristics of Whitman's democracy. This work revolves around a spectacle; a woman running a business, as noted by the inclusion of a sign denoting her as 'Madame Malcombe' and her prices for hairstyling. Considering the social normative structure of the early 20th century, a woman owning and operating a business was extremely uncommon. As captured in *The Good Gray Poet's Gift* merely fifteen years prior, the social lives of women still adhered to a dying Victorian ideal. The spectacular nature of this composition is found most in the display of the hairstylist's work. Madame Malcombe is breaking taboos not just by owning and operating a business, but also by displaying the practices of feminine grooming to the public.

Sloan depicts the city street. As egalitarian as Whitman's catalogues, Sloan incorporates a diverse set of on-lookers. A very regal, composed woman in the lower left quadrant, two young and enthusiastic women in the foreground, another woman on the right, Madame Maclombe—herself a working woman—and the hands of her assistant whose skill and wages are undoubtedly less than the Madame, and of course the woman who is paying to have her hair fashioned. Also included are three men. The age and economic differences between these men, indicated by their hats and jackets, place all three as a sampling of the public at large.

Another indication of Whitman's influence in this composition is seen in the abundance and wording of the included signage. Here the signs conjure Whitman's "blab of the pave". In the early 20th century the billboard and advertising markers became increasingly popular for businesses and events, adding to the spectacular nature of city life. However, it is assumed by scholars, such as Linda M. Larson that Sloan himself named the hairdresser "Madame Malcomb" regardless of how the actual sign was

⁶³ Whitman 26, 31.

⁶⁴ Whitman 56.

worded.⁶⁵ By altering what the sign said for the aims of his composition, Sloan then is entering the dialogue of the spectacle and adding to it his own take on advertising techniques. Sloan recognizes the control of advertising over the public and asserts his own voice onto the pavement.

Finally, it is through the use of framing devices and sightlines that conjure the Whitman aesthetic of visual representation. These two devices act in much the same manner as Whitman's use of invitational punctuation in his poetry. Instead of definitive punctuation, Whitman used the ellipses as a device to invite the reader into his catalogues, to include the reader in the poem itself. Sloan, in a very similar manner, composes this canvass with recognition of the viewer's role. As Rebecca Zurier states

In Sloan's work, viewer and narrator identify with the observers depicted and thereby become implicated in the urban spectacle. Informed by a nearly constant awareness of class and gender difference, Sloan's pictorial narratives explore the layered implications of several different forms of viewing relationships in the city. They remind us of "double-time structuring", in which the urban viewer's own viewing presence becomes part of the story.⁶⁶

This structure is perceivable in *Hairdresser's Window*; first, one of the street level spectators directs her gaze toward the viewer of the work. The positioning of her body indicates that she has turned away from the window to confer with her acquaintance, and her gaze now acts as an invitation for the viewer to engage the scene, to become a part of the throng of on-lookers. The lines of sight from the other spectators engage the window where the hairdresser works, indicating the source of the attraction. Secondly, the hairdresser works from a second story window, at twice the height of any of the painted spectators. There is nothing between the hairdresser and the viewer that interferes. In fact, Sloan uses a framing device—the rectangular window—to draw attention to the hairdresser. This same rectangular frame is repeated throughout the canvass in the form of signage and display windows—further accentuating the display characteristic of the hairdresser working, further emphasizing the spectacular nature of the scenario. Because of this vertical nature the viewer is invited to gaze through the window as well, to take part in the viewing of the spectacle; to find themselves amongst the throng of on-lookers passing by on the street that are also caught up in the display of female grooming practices. The use of sightlines and framing devices to incorporate the viewer into the composition characterizes Sloan's canvases through the first two decades of the 20th century.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Only found in electronic format, Larson's work is summarized here; http://members.tripod.com/linda_larson/page3.htm accessed March 2008.

⁶⁶ Rebecca Zurier. *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School*. (California: University of California Press, 2006), 281.

⁶⁷ *South Beach Bathers, Election Night, Italian Procession, McSorley's Bar, Chinese Restaurant, Movies Ten Cents* all painted in the height of the Ashcan's popularity and all incorporate this sight line technique.

Literature on Walt Whitman reaches well beyond the style of his writing or his place in the literary canon of the western world. Whitman has been a propellant for political, social, and aesthetic theories since he first entered the public eye in with his 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In Literary fields Whitman has inspired exhaustive research and theory. Artists in their personal journals and artistic endeavors have recorded Whitman's influence in the field of visual studies. These secondary sources are vital in gaining a keener understanding of the work of the artists, and provide scholars with archival material for research and study.⁶⁸ As Geoffrey Sill states, "Whitman's influence has become so pervasive, and his followers tend to be so loyal, that Whitman has become a larger-than-life figure whom it is difficult to separate from the legend that surrounds him."⁶⁹ By deconstructing the legend of Whitman, separating the myth from the man, and relying on a correspondence between his words read by artists, and the works of those artists, his influence is charted in the visual culture of the early 20th century. A poet and journalist—an enabler of culture—who was so pervasive, so popular, that his influence reached beyond the streets of his community, beyond the shores of his country, and well beyond the years of his life allows an understanding of the culture that revered him.

The influence of Walt Whitman in visual culture culminates in the works of John Sloan. Prior to Sloan, visual representations of Whitman relied solely on portraits of the bard. Believing that a portrait best contained the aesthetic that most closely resembled his writing, Whitman encouraged artists to render his likeness. Whitman showed a fondness for the portraits by Linton, Hollyer, and Eakins for they represent to the viewer the same Whitman who authored *Leaves of Grass*. These portraits signify his empathy, his concern for his fellow citizen, his working class roots and rise to popularity. The changing faces of these portraits mirror the changing format of *Leaves of Grass*.

Only after viewing the works of Millet did Whitman realize that compositions other than portraiture could carry the visual connotations of his writing program. In the works of Millet, Whitman saw a certain authenticity of depiction. In Whitman's rhetoric, Millet's peasants were being true to themselves. The next incarnation of Whitman's influence came some forty years later with the Ashcan school of realism. Democracy, fraternity, cataloging the diversity of the city and its inhabitants, community; these themes that Whitman promoted through the nine editions of *Leaves of Grass* are rendered in paint by John Sloan.

⁶⁸ Roberta Tarbell traces the influence of Whitman on the sculptor John Storrs, Lauren Weingarden follows Whitman and the architect Louis Sullivan, Matthew Baigell traces Whitman's effect on Georgia O'Keefe, John Marin, and Arthur Dove; Ruth Bohan investigates the works of Whitman in relation to Marsden Hartley, Robert Coady, and Joseph Stella.

⁶⁹ Geoffrey M. Sill. 20.

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