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# Windows on the Soul

*New exhibition at A.J. Kollar Fine Paintings features powerful portraits by major American artists*

**November 10-December 10**

**A.J. Kollar Fine Paintings**

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by *Melanie Enderle, Ph.D.*

Successful portraits not only present a likeness, but reveal character, and the best portraits also capture something of a person's essential being. Now on view at A.J. Kollar Fine Paintings, *Windows on the Soul: an Intimate Look at American Portraiture* features paintings by some of America's major artists at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This collection presents subjects that look back at the viewer, making direct eye contact, and allowing

a glimpse into their personalities and emotions.

Without exception, these American artists admired and borrowed freely from European Baroque painters such as Frans Hals, Rembrandt van Rijn and Diego Velázquez, and from the realist Édouard Manet. In their psychologically astute portraits, the Americans adapted the shorthand-like technique of painterly brushwork, thick application of paint and dramatic *chiaroscuro* lighting that allowed figures to emerge from dark, empty backgrounds. Elaborate furniture, rich fabrics or other decorative accessories are absent from their compositions, thereby removing any distractions and directing the viewer's focus entirely on the sitter.

Forsaking the more lucrative portrait commissions fervently pursued by other artists, Robert Henri (1865-1929) chose unorthodox subjects such as

ordinary, lower-class children painted in the manner of the dynamic Dutch Old Masters. *Little Girl in Red Stripes* presents a startling realness echoing the wise innocence of childhood. The composition and naturalism of the rosy-cheeked girl who he met when traveling in Haarlem, Holland, is repeated in a number of small-scale portraits that Henri painted of other Dutch children, and of youngsters living in Irish seaside villages, and of young American immigrants in New York City.

The unusually direct gaze, and unguarded, somber stare of the light-haired *Little Girl*, belies her comfortable seated position, and poised body under her red-striped smock, whose wrinkles Henri described as "full of the history of the day." Painted in loose and rapid *bravura* brushstrokes, the child projects a wary, spirited alertness and lively



Far left: **Robert Henri (1865-1929)**, *Little Girl in Red Stripes*. Oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 20 in., signed lower left: 'Robert Henri'; inscribed on stretcher edge: 'Stripes'; signed and inscribed with title verso.

Left: **Sidney Dickinson (1890-1980)**, *Portrait of the Artist Edwin Dickinson*. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in., signed and dated lower right: 'Sidney E. Dickinson 1917'.



**John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), *A Lady*, 1880.** Oil on wood panel, 14 x 11 in., inscribed lower right: 'To My Friend Ben / John S. Sargent 1880'; inscribed verso.

character. Henri approached his series of informal portraits of children with a respect that encapsulated their impish individuality, although their names were left unrecorded. However, in his notes, Henri wrote of two Dutch girls, Martche and Cori Peterson, that he painted “over and over again.” He described Cori as a “little roistering white-headed, red-cheeked broad-faced girl.”

As one of America’s leading progressive artists, influential teachers and the nominative leader of the Ashcan School, Henri espoused “art for life’s sake.” He encouraged painting that reflected the life experiences of the artist. His many images of urchins led critics to call Henri and those painters he mentored “apostles of ugliness.”

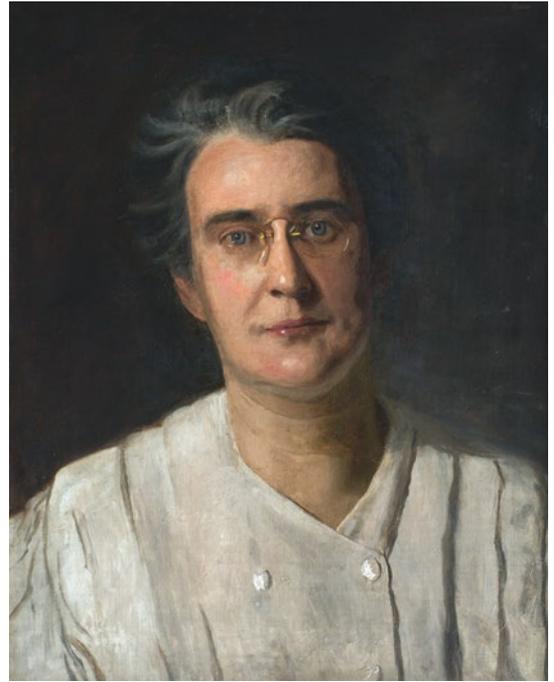
Although influenced by the realism

of the elder Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), Henri did not cast such a strong and unflattering light on his subjects as did Eakins, a teacher who, either directly or indirectly, influenced the art of the succeeding generation of American artists. Eakins’ paintings, especially those of women, present straightforward, unapologetic honesty. Never praised for their prettiness, his

Right: **William McGregor Paxton (1869-1941)**, *Woman with Red Hair*, 1922. Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in., signed on verso stretcher bar lower right: 'PAXTON'; titled on verso stretcher bar upper.



Far right: **Thomas Eakins (1844-1916)**, *Portrait of Lucy Langdon Williams Wilson*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in.



portraits are harshly real to the point where they can prove unsettling. Rather than compliment his sitters, Eakins seemed to examine and record them as objects of frank, intense scrutiny. One of his subjects, Helen Parker (1885–1975), who posed for Eakins wearing her grandmother's gown, later referred to the painting as her "Ugly Duckling portrait."

The penetrating gaze of the well-known educator and feminist in Eakins' *Portrait of Lucy Langdon Williams Wilson*, painted within the narrowed parameters of bust-portraiture, demands attention. Kind, composed and serious, Lucy Wilson (1864-1937) wrote elementary school books on science and history. Painted to express her character, the artist downplayed her femininity; she is uncompromisingly portrayed and devoid of idealization. Eakins did not hide her blemishes nor smooth her wrinkles. Wilson wears no fashionable hat or jewelry. Her hair is pulled back in a sensible, unfussy style, without flair and light hits the side of her face and forehead, literally illuminating her intelligence. She is clothed in a garment that hangs off her shoulders in heavy folds that add bulk to her body, making her upper torso seem massive and powerful. With glasses perched on her nose, she stares out directly at the viewer. The spectacles could have

easily been omitted for the sake of vanity or beauty, but instead reinforce the impression of an authentic, logical and sensible woman. Given that many of Eakins' depictions of women make them appear frail, the fact that he painted Wilson in a masculine manner might indicate his admiration for this particular female subject. Lucy Wilson's strong intellect is her essential being, and is portrayed without any unnecessary gestures or pretense.

Presented to her as a gift she may not necessarily have treasured, the portrait remained in the Wilson family for more than ninety years. Lucy Wilson later explained to Lloyd Goodrich, respected art historian and director of the Whitney, that Eakins used vulgar language while painting this and another portrait of her, in 1908 and 1909. She speculated the colorful language was for shock value, and not for seduction.

Labeled by *The New York Times* in 1913 as the "foremost American portrait painter," William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), another of the period's leading artists and celebrated instructors, rendered *Portrait of Louis Betts* with expressive brushstrokes of subdued tones. The engaging portrait features a closely cropped figure against a neutral background in the manner of the European Masters, save

for the one white patch of an artist's canvas that occupies nearly a quarter of the background. This detail places the location in an art studio, and also cleverly displays the signature of the painter.

Focus is placed on the approachable face and upper body of Louis Betts (1873-1961), one of Chase's art students at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Most likely completed as a teaching canvas for a classroom demonstration, the studious Betts, who later became a well-regarded painter in the American impressionist style, which he learned from Chase, looks at the audience from behind a pair of rimless glasses. Rather than a frontal confrontation, Betts' face and body is at a three-quarter angle, suggesting movement and a sense of vitality, similar to an alert self-portrait of Velázquez that Chase copied sometime between 1872 and 1879, and that is now in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

A leading member of the Boston Art School and best known for his sensitive attention to detail in genre scenes and portraits of the leisure class, William McGregor Paxton's (1869-1941) *Woman with Red Hair* presents the sitter in a serene yet dramatic pose. Perhaps caught by surprise, the auburn-haired beauty turns her

porcelain-complexioned face toward the painting's admirer with a side-glance, wearing an expression that is ambiguous, yet seems to reveal an alert curiosity.

Attention is given almost equally to her face and her left hand, and the two are connected by the long gold-chain necklace she absent-mindedly twists. This simple gesture energizes the painting, while the less distinct detail of her shadowed right hand, placed confidently on her hip in a pose of power and authority, further ignites Paxton's portrait. The contrasting placement and activity of her hands seem to present a duality of the genders. Although painted nearly 100 years ago, she appears animated and looks as if she is about to speak.

John Singer Sargent's (1856-1925) *A Lady*, painted at the start of his professional career, seems to possess an inner spirit. This early, close-up portrait stands apart from his later paintings of gilded-age high society, on which he made his reputation and career. Her large, sad, heavily lidded eyes and candid expression enhance an introspective quality to a mesmerizing degree. Although painted with somber realism, Sargent's portrayal of the young woman projects gentleness and invites the viewer to share in an intimate, pensive moment. Completed very quickly and in *alla prima* (wet paint on a wet ground), Sargent captured a sense of immediacy and a kind of freshness more commonly found in sketches.

Created while Sargent was in Spain, and given as a gift—the painting bears the inscription, “To my friend Ben”—with *A Lady*, the artist did not announce who she was or to which social class she belonged. Details such as furnishings, décor and elaborate dress, which could help identify the figure are omitted. Instead, the simple addition of a blue bow in her hair and white ruffled collar enhance her femininity, and her dangling earrings charge the

work with life as they reflect the light and mirror the twinkle in her eyes. Leaning forward, she appears on the verge of speaking, and seems to have quite a secret to divulge.

In contrast, the blunt sensitivity of Sidney Dickinson's (1890-1980) revealing portrait of his cousin does not need to speak—his look and demeanor say it all. *Portrait of the Artist Edwin Dickinson* is surprising in what it exposes. With head lowered and eyes raised in an intense stare out at the viewer, the fashionably mustached artist leans slightly forward as if unstable on his feet. Edwin Dickinson's (1891-1978) stance and overall disheveled appearance, including a loosened tie around his neck, and the cigarette he holds unlit in his hand, all hint at the after-effects of a long, hard night.

Known to complete portraits in one sitting of three to four hours, with limited detail and quick brushwork,

Sidney Dickinson took on the modern idea that had been championed by Henri of painting real people and genuine experiences. He offered an uneasy portrayal of his hung-over, yet successful and creative cousin who was also a portraitist. Building on a tradition of realism in American portraiture, Dickinson sought to depict not only the image of his cousin, but to bare a raw, brutally honest glimpse of the human condition.

Portraits can be powerful devices for conveying a likeness, documenting appearance and uncovering a person's character or mood. They are able to capture a specific moment in time, and lend a glimpse of one's inner self, and *Windows on the Soul* brings together an incredible collection of compelling, penetrating and informative images of some of the people that touched the lives of some of America's most significant and important portraitists. ■



**William Merritt Chase (1849-1916),** *Portrait of Louis Betts*. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in., signed lower center: 'Chase'.