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Gari Melchers - Ephemera

Gari Melchers: An American Impressionist at  
Home and Abroad

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## Gari Melchers An American Impressionist at Home and Abroad

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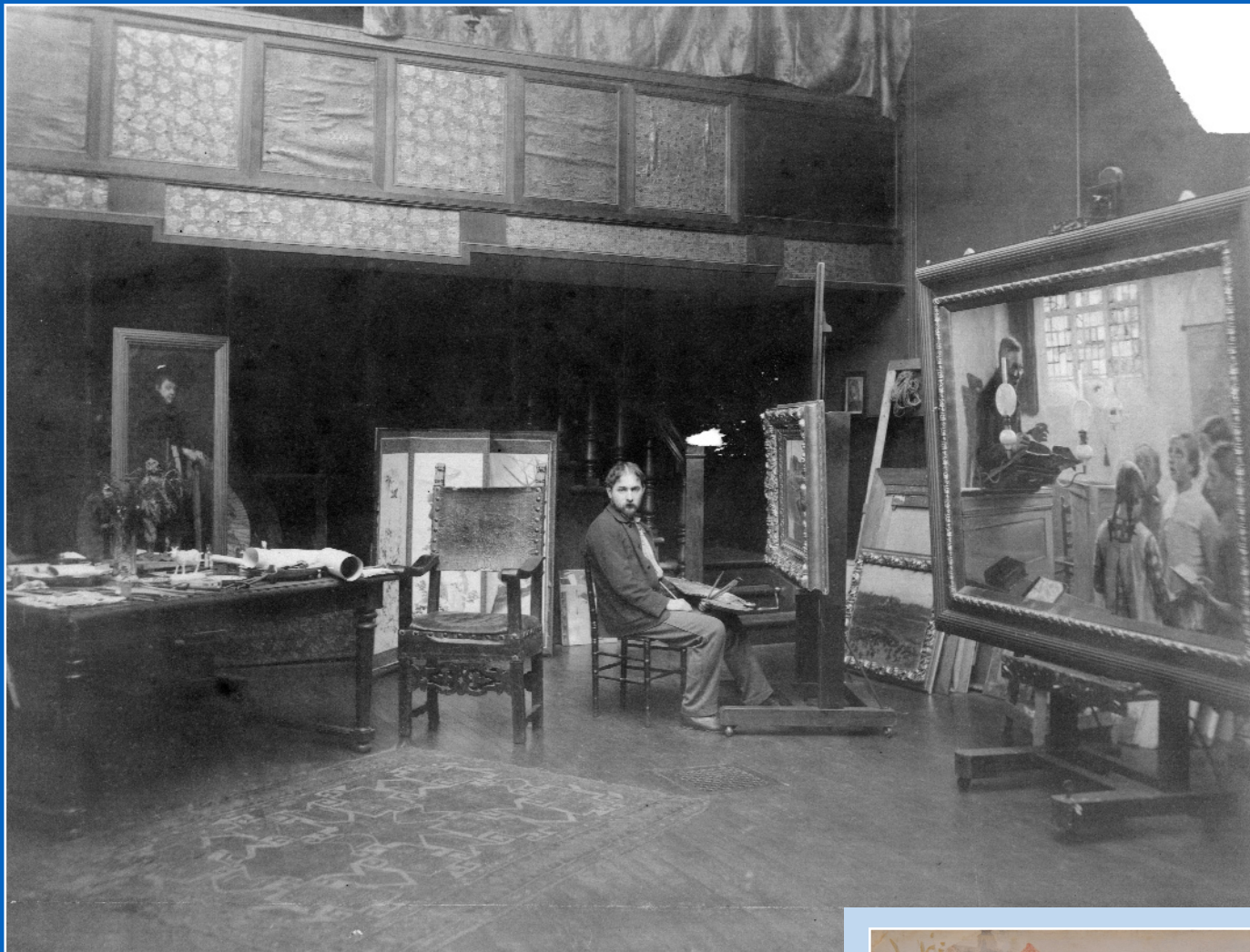
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Melchers found many attributes in common among Dutch peasants and black workers in the Western Hemisphere, "A Harbor Boy," circa 1928, is set in Barbados. Both represented to him the virtues of traditional values and hard work.

In this vintage photograph, Melchers sits in his Egmond studio, with "The Choirmaster" on the easel to the far right. His canvases of church interiors offered him the opportunity to document the piety of his neighbors. Michael Quick, who included Melchers in an expatriates exhibition at Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976, said, "It is only a matter of time until Gari Melchers ... will be accorded the attention due his considerable abilities, and he will again be honored as one of our best artists of the late Nineteenth Century."

## Gari Melchers

An American Impressionist At Home And Abroad

BY STEPHEN MAY

FAIRFIELD, CONN. — During the course of a distinguished half-century career in Europe and America, Gari Melchers (1860–1932) created widely acclaimed paintings of Dutch peasant and religious life, Impressionist canvases of Europe, New York City and the American South, perceptive portraits and giant murals.

After enjoying extraordinary critical and public success in his lifetime, Melchers slipped into oblivion after his death. Critics and art historians have tended to ignore art like Melchers' that ranges too broadly for neat categorization. Some view expatriate artists, with the exception of Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent and Henry O. Tanner, as unworthy of serious consideration as American painters. The onset of American Scene/regional art further eclipsed Melchers' more conventional work.

In recent years, there have been sporadic efforts to resurrect the reputation of this one-time international superstar and acquaint the public with his achievements. He was included in an expatriates exhibition in Los Angeles

in 1976 and a retrospective in St Petersburg, Fla., in 1990, but no other significant shows.

The paucity of Melchers exhibitions makes particularly welcome "Gari Melchers: An American Impressionist at Home and Abroad," on view through May 22 at Bellarmine Museum of Art at Fairfield University. Started by the museum's former director Jill Deupi, who grew up seeing Melchers works in Fredericksburg, Va., and completed by interim director Carrie Mack Weber, the show comprises 23 works on loan from Belmont, Melchers home and studio in Fredericksburg, in oil, watercolor, pastel, gouache and charcoal. Most are seldom seen in public.

Born Julius Garibaldi (in honor of Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi) in Detroit of German immigrant parents, Gari's father, Julius Melchers, was an art teacher and gifted woodcarver known for church furnishings and cigar store Indians. (A carved and painted example of the latter fetched \$153,600 at a Sotheby's auction in 2004.)

Young Gari studied drawing under his father's tutelage before heading to



Melchers admired the hardworking, pious people of the Netherlands, especially the working women like the figure in "Homeward," an 1885 watercolor that measures 17¼ by 23¾ inches. She appears to be bearing a *kriel* on her back, a basket used to carry potatoes from the field or dry wood from the dunes. Works like this "established Melchers' reputation as a painter of Dutch scenes that celebrate the virtues of an unsophisticated life of hard work and pious reverence.... [They] brought Melchers' art to the attention of a widespread international audience," observed Diane Lesko.

Dusseldorf in 1877 to learn the fine points of academic art. Four years later, he moved to Paris, training first at the Academie Julian and then the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Within a year he painted "The Letter," 1882, a Vermeer-like canvas showing two Breton peasant women standing at a sunlit interior window reading a newly arrived letter. Accepted at the Paris Salon, this realistic work established the subject matter, style and subdued palette that characterized Melchers' paintings for years. At age 22, he was recognized as an important artist. A painting trip to Italy that year prompted "Kneeling in Church," painted while he stayed in a

Trappist monastery.

Having completed his formal art education, Melchers maintained a studio in Paris while settling with fellow American painter George Hitchcock in the remote Dutch fishing village of Egmond. They, like other American artists, were attracted by Holland's history and nostalgia for a preindustrial past, which they found in the simplicity and piety of Dutch peasants, and the legacy of Dutch art, particularly the Hague School.

Working in a stone studio atop dunes overlooking the North Sea, Melchers

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This undated photograph shows Melchers with his painting "The Smithy." It was acquired by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which sold it to an unidentified bidder at auction in 2008 for \$122,000.



Belmont's longtime director David Berreth stands in the studio room in front of Melchers' "The Choirmaster," 1888-1891, — one of a trilogy of works, including "The Sermon" and "The Communion." Like many of the artist's paintings, it is large — 49 by 68 inches. In spite of the international acclaim for paintings such as these, Melchers is seldom mentioned in art histories, and his works are rarely displayed in major museums. This painting is not in the show.



This portrait of Melchers is by James Jebusa Shannon, an American-born, leading British portraitist. He conveys his fellow artist's somewhat disheveled look, intense gaze and hints at Melchers' modesty, unaffected by his successes as a painter of international renown. This painting is not featured in the show.



Here, Gari Melchers and his wife Corinne pose at Belmont, where they lived happily, enjoying the peace and quiet of their Virginia enclave. He is dapper in a three-piece suit, bow tie and derby. She sits elegantly, wearing a large hat, looking as lovely as she does in her husband's many paintings of her.

# Gari Melchers

## An American Impressionist At Home And Abroad

( continued from page 1C )

set out to be *the* painter of Dutch peasant life. He created a visual record of a bygone era in Holland: young women working or resting on dunes, farmers laboring in fields, fishermen conversing and devout locals worshipping in austere churches.

His intense interest in the everyday lives of his neighbors, who served as models, is reflected in "The Sermon," depicting a young peasant woman asleep during church service, and the monumental, decoratively patterned "In Holland," showing two peasant women headed for work on the dunes with a windmill and village skyline behind. "Homeward," in the Fairfield exhibition, features a rake- and bucket-toting peasant woman crossing dunes toward a red-roofed village. Melchers' admiration for Holland's brave seamen is suggested by "The Pilot," depicting an aging sailor relaxing at a kitchen table.

During frequent travels to the United States, Melchers executed a number of murals, starting with "The Arts of War and Peace" at the World's Columbian

Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, now installed at the library of the University of Michigan. This led to a commission on the same subjects for the new Library of Congress in Washington, DC, and murals for the Detroit Public Library and the Missouri State Capitol.

In 1903, Melchers married Corinne Mackall, a former student of Hitchcock's, whose beauty shines through in several likenesses. Notable is Corinne in a satin dress in 1905, silhouetted against windows at their home in Fredericksburg.

Between 1905 and 1909, Melchers stayed in the United States for extended periods in connection with important exhibitions and portrait commissions, such as for President Theodore Roosevelt. Renting a studio in the Beaux-Arts Building facing Manhattan's Bryant Park, he painted several views out his windows, depicted the Hudson River busy with boats and portrayed the gritty "Wharves, New York," with red brick buildings spewing smoke and a bustling scene on the North River.

Melchers' growing interest in



Among the highlight paintings in Belmont's elegant studio room is, on wall to left, "The Fencer," circa 1895, depicting a ramrod straight master of the sport in an academic style. This oil on canvas measures a sizable 80<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> by 39<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches and had a long exhibition record. The studio remains outfitted with Melchers' workbench, easels, brushes, palettes and other tools of his trade. A retrospective organized by Diane Lesko in 1990-91 for a tour beginning at the Museum of Fine Arts in St Petersburg, Fla., documented the high quality and international scope of the various styles in which Melchers worked. The painting is not in the show.



This gallery showcases some of Melchers' Southern paintings, notably "A Native of Virginia," circa 1925 — on the far wall — presenting a weathered farm woman standing alone with her hoe and vegetables beside her. It is a realistic picture that recalls the artist's equally unsentimental depictions of working residents in Holland. This painting is not in the show.



Belmont's main house dates to 1790 and is perched on a bluff overlooking the Rappahannock River. Gari and Corinne Melchers lived in this peaceful site starting in 1916. The white frame house is furnished with its original eclectic selection of pieces acquired by the couple in Europe — French and Oriental carpets, old porcelain, china and crystal. There are notable paintings not only by Melchers, but by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, George Hitchcock, Berthe Morisot and Frans Snyders.

Melchers treated his black subjects with respect and painted numerous views of them, such as "Ma Petite," 1925, set in Barbados. According to art historian Diane Lesko, Melchers "painted like a Dutchman when he was in Holland, like a German in Germany and like a Southerner in the South... He repeated certain themes over the years, but his work continually reflected his sense of place."



Impressionism and strong decorative detail influenced his later Dutch paintings, including religious works, lush landscapes, local residents at work and play, mother and child vignettes and young village women sitting on thrones in traditional costumes that evoke modern Dutch Madonnas. He also painted a bold composition of a powerful "The Fencer" in a hybrid style that emphasized the sculptural forms of his academic motifs. Other works melded his academic leanings with Impressionism's broken brushwork, brilliant sunlight and bright colors. Between 1909 and 1914, Melchers taught at the Academy in Weimar, Germany.

The totality of Melchers' European output made him a celebrity of international stature, whose works were lauded and sold well on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1928, his friend and biographer — and Hitchcock's ex-wife — Henriette Lewis-Hind wrote that "Melchers has been awarded gold medals and medals of honor in nearly every capital of Europe." One of several portraits of Lewis-Hind sold for a Melchers auction record \$932,000 at Sotheby's in 2005. "The Smithy," deaccessioned by the Corcoran, fetched \$122,000 at auction in 2008.

Returning to America at the outbreak of World War I, Melchers reopened his studio in Manhattan and plunged into America's art life. He served on a long list of art organizations in New York, Washington and Savannah.

In 1916, when he and Corinne settled in Fredericksburg, Melchers immediately became the most famous Twentieth Century artist working in the South. Captivated by the simple folk and picturesque scenery of the region, Melchers painted numerous bright Impressionist canvases that included structures around Fredericksburg in the spring, notably "Saint George's Church," a classroom of South Carolina African American children, sturdy Virginia farm women, rabbit hunters walking through the snow and county fair horse races.

The Fairfield exhibition underscores Melchers' empathetic view of black subjects, such as two paintings in Barbados — a strapping, barefoot young man in "A Harbor Boy" and the relaxed, barefoot "Ma

Petite." The standout is "Uncle Jim," a portrait of James Rowser, whose daughter occasionally worked for Melchers. Dignified and straightforward, the animated play of the facial highlights against a green background make it as insightful and vibrant as any likeness created by the artist.

In one of his finest Impressionist works, "Young Woman Sewing," Melchers featured a profile of his attractive wife seated and sewing at a window at Belmont. With its sparkling colors and flickering brushwork, it is, in the words of art historian William H. Gerdtz, "a classic example of domesticated American Impressionism."

The last painting Melchers completed before his death, "The Lace Cap," 1932, showing a Dutch woman reading a letter by light from a window, deals with the same subject as "The Letter," 1882, cited earlier, his first picture to gain wide public attention. The comparison makes clear how in the intervening 50 years his style evolved from a muted, academic technique to a bright, loose Impressionist manner.

Melchers found tranquility and peace at Belmont, the 27-acre, wooded estate in Fredericksburg overlooking the Rappahannock River, about 50 miles south of Washington. His widow stayed on for 23 years after his death in 1932, promoting his work and proclaiming his greatness. In 1955, she bequeathed Belmont and its collections to the Commonwealth of Virginia as a museum and memorial to her husband.

Today, the fully furnished Georgian main house (1790) and large adjacent studio/gallery (1924) are maintained by Mary Washington College and are open to the public. The imposing stone studio building contains light-filled galleries showcasing a remarkable array of many of Melchers' finest works.

Belmont thus offers invaluable insights into the artist's lifestyle, and with the largest repository of Melchers' art anywhere, including many Dutch masterpieces, an invaluable overview of his oeuvre.

Belmont's expansive lawn, flower gardens, boxwood promenade, ancient elms and oaks and gazebo evoke the tranquili-



Melchers' interest in waterfronts included those he visited when in New York. In "Wharves, New York," circa 1907, he painted a powerful evocation of the red-brick warehouses, wispy smoke and boat activity around the busy site on the North River.



Melchers' friendship with Childe Hassam, America's leading Impressionist at the time, encouraged him to work in that style. In the 1920s, Melchers wintered several times in Bermuda. In "The Landing, Bermuda" he conveyed the tranquil setting of the picturesque harbor with its aquamarine water and natives under intense sunlight.

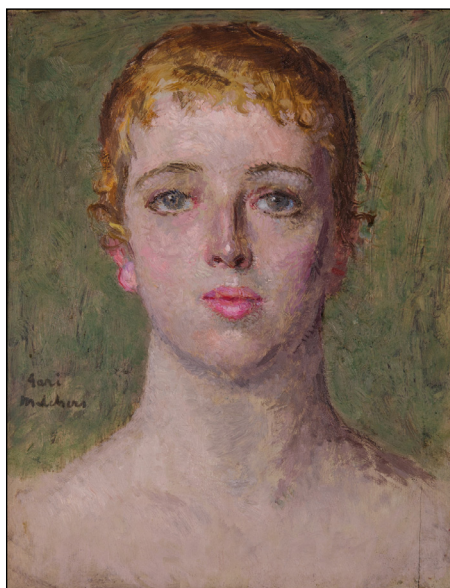
ty so enjoyed by the Melcherses. Under the leadership of director David Berreth and curator Joanna Catron, the site has been spruced up, and a visitors center and museum shop have been added. Belmont is a lovely place to visit, especially for those who want to know more about its distinguished artist and owner.

There was an unusual outpouring of sorrow when Melchers died of a heart attack at the age of 72. *The New York Times* devoted an extraordinary three columns to his obituary, describing him as "one of the foremost painters, who became internationally famous," and saluting a career "glittering with medals and honors."

Ironically, although his work is good

enough to stand the test of time, Melchers and his art soon faded into the shadows, overtaken by other art movements. Hats off to the folks at Fairfield University for mounting this interesting, informative exhibition. It should whet visitors' appetites to see larger oils from all stages of Melchers' career at Belmont. It all adds to the attention and appreciation Gari Melchers deserves.

Bellarmino Museum is at 1073 North Benson Road at Fairfield University. For information, [museum@fairfield.edu](mailto:museum@fairfield.edu) or 203-254-4046. Belmont is at 224 Washington Street, Fredericksburg, Va. For information, [www.garimelchers.org](http://www.garimelchers.org) or 540-654-1015.



Part of Melchers' high reputation was based on his portraits of such well-known figures as banker Andrew Mellon and President Theodore Roosevelt. In "Girl's Head (A Blond)," circa 1925, he presents a noncelebrity in a closeup, head-on image that seems to convey the sitter's somewhat uneasy feeling.



Melchers spent the summer of 1882 sketching and painting in Italy. He created this intimate devotional vignette, "Kneeling Monk in a Church," while staying in a Trappist monastery in Casamari.

Unless otherwise noted, all works are by Gari Melchers. All are on loan from Gari Melchers Home and Studio, University of Mary Washington.