Gari Melchers An American Impressionist at Home and Abroad

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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, perspectival 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 their ranges too broadly for neat categorization, as unworthy of serious consideration. Others view expatriate artists, with their ranges too broadly for neat categorization, as unworthy of serious consideration.

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 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 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 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 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...
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 An American Impressionist At Home And Abroad (continued from page 1C)
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 Pavin 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 continues to reflect 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 traides in traditional costumes that evoke modern Dutch and Flemish art. He also adopted a hybrid style that emphasized the sculptural forms of his academic motifs. Other works melded his academic leanings with Impressionist brushwork, with brilliant sunlight and bright colors. Between 1915 and 1920, Melchers taught at the Academy in Weimar, Germany.

The totality of Melchers’ European output made him a respected portraitist of international stature, whose works were lauded and sold well in America. He is perhaps best known for his posters. In 1967, The Smithsonian acquired the entire collection of the artist's works. 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 projects, 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 Rower, 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 Jean William H. Gerds, “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 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-fitted 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 charming red-brick warehouses, wispy smoke and boat activity around the picturesque harbor with its aquamarine water and natives under intense sunlight.

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 noneentity in a closeup, head-on image that seems to convey the sitter’s somewhat uneasy feeling.

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