

# Museum accessions

By Eleanor H. Gustafson



Both before and for many years after the American Revolution, Connecticut was home to a population proud of its restrained tastes, pious ideals, and republican values. As the eighteenth century wound to a close, prosperity was on the rise—farms flourished, towns and cities grew, and cultural amenities began to spread. Ralph Earl, a Massachusetts-born and London-trained painter who had been

**T**he Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Company has operated in Connecticut for 135 years. Nearly twenty years ago, recognizing the important role its home state had long played in American art, the firm began collecting paintings, sculptures, and works on paper executed by artists who lived or worked in Connecticut. That collection has recently been donated to the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut, which itself was the locus of one of the best-known art colonies of the end of the nineteenth century. A more auspicious confluence is hard to imagine. The paintings are to be installed in a new building at the museum next spring.



imprisoned in New York City for debt in the late 1780s, found in an increasingly affluent Connecticut society a way to salvage his reputation and regain his financial stability. He went to Fairfield County in 1788 and for the next decade painted the leaders of Connecticut society, devising a style that perfectly fitted their image of themselves and the spirit of their age. Typical is the earliest painting in the Hartford Steam Boiler Collection, which depicts Elizabeth Harris Richards (illustrated below). In it Earl shows evidence of his English training—such as the red drapery and the beautifully rendered dress fabric—tempered by the proud, conservative nature of his sitter who, solidly set in the space, gazes directly at the viewer, her visage showing little hint of flattery in its painting. Also typical of Earl's work is the sense of place established by the view through the window, depicting the coastal community of New London, where Richards lived.

Place was equally important to artists in Connecticut at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, several art colonies grew up in the state at that time, including the one at Lyme, which devolved around the boarding-

house run by Florence Griswold in Old Lyme. Drawn by the old New England village, the gently cultivated landscape, and the picturesque shoreline, these painters used the natural and manmade landscape as the inspiration for some of the most extraordinary impressionist paintings executed in the United States. Approximately one-third of the works in the Hartford Steam Boiler Collection are by artists connected with the Lyme colony, including Childe Hassam, whose *The Ledges, October in Old Lyme, Connecticut* is illustrated at upper left. The coloring of the trees and sky and the rendering of the rugged boulders, all enveloped by the golden light, perfectly express autumn in Connecticut.

Hassam's friend John Henry Twachtman took up residence near Greenwich, Connecticut, in 1889, and painted the bucolic landscape around him repeatedly over the ensuing years. Occasionally he ventured into less rural subjects, however, as in *Connecticut Shore, Winter* of about 1889 (lower right), depicting boats laid up in an icy harbor, probably in Bridgeport, which was a major manufacturing center in the state at the time. His skill at rendering the effects of light is exemplified in the coloristic use of shades of white, lavender, and gray.

Although painted at almost the same time, *Strawberries*, by Charles Ethan Porter makes a sharp contrast to the Twachtman painting and thus underscores the breadth of the Steam Boiler Collection. It is a lushly colored, traditional still life by one of the leading African-American artists of his time. A native of Hartford, Connecticut,



Porter studied at the National Academy of Design in New York City and in Europe before settling in Rockville, Connecticut.

*The Ledges, October in Old Lyme, Connecticut*, by Childe Hassam (1859–1935), 1907. Signed and dated "Childe Hassam 1907" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 18 inches square. The paintings illustrated are in the Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, Connecticut, Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Company Collection.

*Mrs. Guy Richards of New London* [Elizabeth Harris; 1727–1793], by Ralph Earl (1751–1801), 1793. Inscribed "R. Earl Pinxt 1793" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 43 by 32 3/4 inches.

*Strawberries*, by Charles Ethan Porter (c. 1847–1923), 1888. Inscribed "C. E. Porter/88" at lower right. Oil on canvas, 12 by 16 inches.

*Connecticut Shore, Winter*, by John Henry Twachtman (1853–1902), c. 1889. Oil on canvas, 24 1/8 by 30 inches. The signature at lower left was added posthumously.



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