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BAM-AT-HOME

WOMEN IN AMERICAN IMPRESSIONISM: THREE MASTERWORKS FROM THE SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

INTRODUCTION

Through these mini-lessons you will investigate artwork from a very specific time in history. You will observe and investigate three artworks by American Impressionists in the exhibition, *Women in American Impressionism: Three Masterworks from the Smithsonian American Art Museum*. These lessons include: conversation guides; digital images; at-home activities; and an art-making project. Digital resources will be available on BAM's website. Teachers will receive a link via email to access the digital materials and share them with students.

THE ARTWORK

The artwork you will see was created during the **Gilded Age** by three of the most prominent and famous **American Impressionist** artists – Mary Cassatt, Frederick Carl Frieseke, and Childe Hassam.



THE TIMES

The Gilded Age is the name for the time in the U.S. from 1865-1918. The period is also referred to generally as the **Victorian Era**.

This was a time of:

- Rapid growth in industry and technology;
- Modernization of American cities;
- Settlement of the western U.S., thanks to railroads;
- Development of reservations and confinement of Native Americans;
- Prosperity;
- Mass immigration;
- Volatile labor relations;
- New scientific developments (light bulb, telephone, typewriter, sewing machine, radio...);
- Formation of new governmental checks and balances;
- increased forms of entertainment (dance, theatre, music, magazines, and newspapers); and
- Invention of new sports, including basketball, bicycling, and football.

American Impressionist artists expressed the times in which they lived, and focused on the everyday lives of the upper class in their paintings of people and places.

THE TERMS

IMPRESSIONISM

An art movement started in France in the 1860's. It emphasized the techniques of recording the effects of sunlight on objects and using short, broken brushstrokes and bright colors.

AMERICAN IMPRESSIONISM

In the late 1800s, various American artists traveled to France to study and paint. Those who returned to the United States continued to paint in the style of Impressionism. They adapted the techniques they learned in France to American urban and rural scenes, views of household interiors, and people. They wanted to reflect their pride in America and show it with a vibrant, modern style.

THE GILDED AGE

The Gilded Age was the time period in the United States from the mid-1860s to around 1918. It was marked by rapid growth and changes in economy, technology, government and American society. It was named based on a novel written by Mark Twain, titled *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. The scientific developments during this time laid the groundwork for contemporary technologies, such as computers, smartphones and streamlining media. The cultural and civic advancements of this period led to the freedoms we enjoy today.

VICTORIAN ERA

The 63-year period from 1837-1901 that marked the reign of England's Queen Victoria. It is described by the rapid growth of cities and the decline of rural life. The tastes, styles, innovations, and customs of this era influenced the life of high society in the U.S.

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

Women's suffrage is the right of women to vote in elections. Beginning in the early 1800s, women worked for economic and political equity as well as social reforms. They sought to change voting laws to formalize their legal right to vote. Their protests continued for almost 100 years and ended on August 18, 1920, when the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified.

THE GILDED AGE

This series of lessons will guide you through looking closely at the three masterworks, pose questions for reflection and/or discussion, and engage you in creative writing and some Victorian parlor games.

The three paintings are from the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Each of these portraits provides a distinctive view of women at the turn of the twentieth century, through each artist's perspective.

The Victorian Era (1837-1901) is characterized by the rapid growth of cities and the decline of rural life. The tastes, styles, innovations, and customs of this era influenced the life of people in high society in the U.S.

Overlapping with this time period is the Gilded Age in the United States. The scientific developments during this time laid the groundwork for contemporary technologies – computers, smart phones, and social media. The cultural and civic advancements of this period led to the freedoms we enjoy today.

These lessons will touch on several themes – rapid growth in industry and technology; modernization of American cities; new scientific developments; forms of entertainment; and changes to government and society.

This is an opportunity for you to experience these artworks and share your perspectives.



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FREDERICK CARL FRIESEKE (1874-1939)

Nude Seated at Her Dressing Table, 1909

(see image, pg. 8)



- How would you describe the color palette the artist used?
- How would you describe the application of paint to the canvas? (zoom in close to the larger image on pg. 8)
- How would you describe the composition?

The vivid colors, loose brush strokes, and intimate up-close composition are all characteristics of the **Impressionist style**.



Frederick Carl Frieseke painted this portrait in the early 1900s. The early 20th century was a period of great change – technological, scientific, and social changes were occurring rapidly.

- What have you been studying related to this time period? What was happening at the turn of the century? Imagine – what was life like at this time?

We can attribute several historical inventions and changes to the details of this portrait – and to the development of the Impressionist style.

For example, cities were expanding and railway systems were being constructed. This enabled painters to venture out from their studios and into the countryside and people's homes. At the same time, new inventions in painting equipment enabled artists, intrigued by daily life, light, and simple fleeting moments, to better capture and depict these interests in their artwork. More details about these innovations follow.

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One such development was the metal paint tube. Painters once stored their pigments in cumbersome pig bladders or fragile glass vials. Metal tubes, introduced in the mid-1800s, gave Impressionists flexibility, thanks to more portable and less messy containers.



Oil paints stored in a pig bladder.



The screw-top lid for a metal paint tube was patented by William Winsor (Winsor & Newton), 1842.

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Another was the **ferrule**—the metal sleeve that clamps paintbrush bristles. Prior to ferrules, brushes were hand-tied in a round bundle extending in one direction from the handle. The ferrule made it possible to fan and shape the bristles to create flat brushes, enabling Impressionists to suggest movement and create finely textured surfaces in a new way. The artists could also cover their canvases faster with these brushes, allowing them to capture scenes before they changed with the weather or time of day.



FREDERICK CARL FRIESEKE (1874-1939)
Nude Seated at Her Dressing Table, 1909

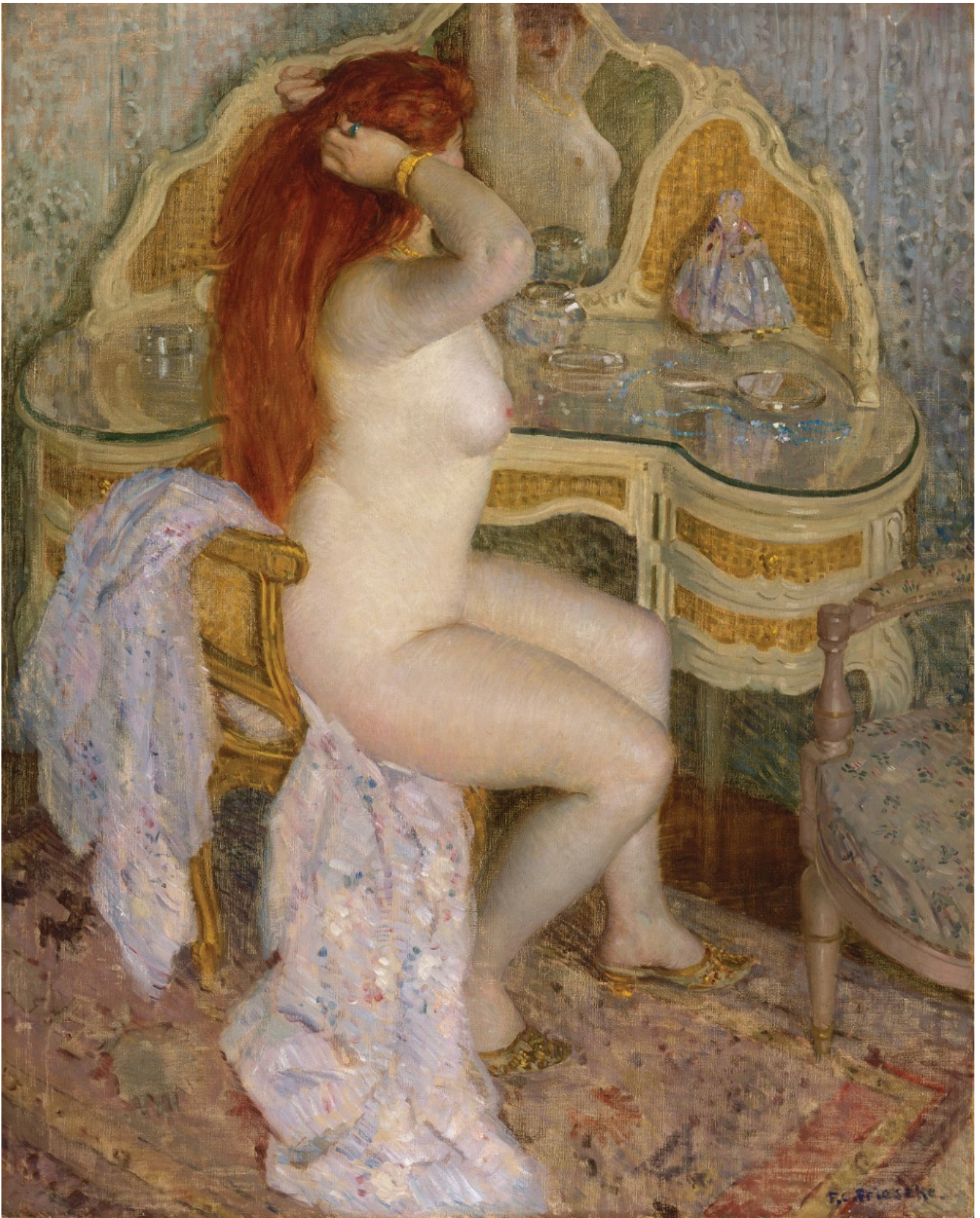
We can see the impact of these new technologies in artists' choices – loose brush strokes, portraits at home, rural landscapes, and the focus on simple moments and light. The artworks can be *read* as historical artifacts, showing us the interests of artists, as well as information about culture and society, in the past.



- What objects do you observe on the woman's dressing table?
- How would you describe the woman's social class?
 - What do you see that makes you think that?
- If we view the woman in this portrait as a symbol of women in the early 20th century, what is an adjective that could describe Frieseke's portrayal of women?
- Do you think the painting is intended to portray all women of this time? Why, or why not?
- What would you need to change for this to represent a contemporary woman, painted in her home in 2020?

In the next lesson, you will look closely at another portrait of a woman, and compare and contrast two artists' depictions of women.

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Frederick Carl Frieseke, *Nude Seated at Her Dressing Table*, 1909, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Sidney Avery and Diana Avery 1978 Trust, 1997.62

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