

Allies Day, 1917



Childe Hassam (1859–1935)
Oil on canvas (36 ½ x 30 ¼ in.)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
1943.9.1

CHILDE HASSAM [1859-1935]

12 *f* Allies Day, May 1917, 1917

One month after the United States officially entered the First World War, the city of New York festooned Fifth Avenue with flags. As a welcoming gesture to the British and French war commissioners, the Stars and Stripes hung alongside the Union Jack and the French tricolor to create a patriotic pattern of red, white, and blue. Childe Hassam, an American of British descent who had studied and worked in Paris, took personal pride in the new military alliance.

Allies Day, May 1917 is not Hassam's only flag painting, but it quickly became (and has remained) the most famous of the ensemble. Hassam began the series in 1916, when thousands of Americans demonstrated support for the Allied cause by marching up Fifth Avenue in the Preparedness Parade. Moved by this and other war-related ceremonies, he eventually produced some thirty views of New York streets bedecked in banners. Because Hassam was influenced by French Impressionism, he was naturally drawn to the sun-struck spectacle of those colorful, celebratory occasions. But the flag paintings transcend the pageantry to express Hassam's conviction about the moral and financial supremacy of the United States.



12-B Childe Hassam (1859–1935), *Allies Day, May 1917*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 36½ x 30¼ in. (92.7 x 76.8 cm.). Gift of Ethelyn McKinney in memory of her brother, Glenn Ford McKinney. Image © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Although it may appear as casual as a snapshot, *Allies Day* is meticulously composed. To paint it, Hassam set up his easel on the balcony of a building at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-second Street, which allowed a view of springtime foliage north toward Central Park. Flags are everywhere, but they cluster on the right and bottom edges of the canvas, making a colorful frame for the buildings lining the west side of the avenue. In the immediate foreground the emblems of the Allied nations hang neatly in a row (the Union Jack appears on the Red Ensign, the unofficial flag of Canada) to establish the theme that Hassam varies and repeats. With different patterns but matching colors, the flags represent the harmony of three nations joined in a single cause—“the Fight for democracy,” as Hassam himself defined his painting's significance. But in this flurry of symbolic meaning, only one banner hangs entirely clear of other flags and flagpoles. Hassam's contemporaries would have instantly recognized his purpose in placing the Stars and Stripes at the pinnacle of the composition, set against a cloudless sky.

If *Allies Day* portrays a historic occasion and symbolizes the nationalistic temper of the times, it also offers a telling description of landmarks on Fifth Avenue, known at the time as Millionaire's Row. The façades are all bathed in morning sunlight, but the brightest façade in the row, Saint Thomas Church, is also the newest, constructed in the Gothic-revival style and consecrated only the year before this work was painted. Beyond it stands the University Club, recalling a Renaissance palazzo, beside an expensive hotel called the Gotham (now the Peninsula). Next to it, just barely visible, is the sloping façade of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. Many of the flags point toward these buildings as if to identify them as the subject of the picture; all served the richest, most prominent members of New York society, linking them to the nation's prosperity. Hassam may have featured the two ecclesiastic structures—particularly Saint Thomas, which gleams in the sunlight—in order to suggest that the new alliance of the United States with the Old World nations of Britain and France had even won divine approval.

As Hassam's most patriotic picture, *Allies Day, May 1917* became instantly famous through the sale of color reproductions to benefit the war effort. The flag paintings were exhibited together for the first time four days after the armistice was declared in November 1918, to document the story of the American entry into the Great War and to commemorate its victorious conclusion.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to view this painting carefully, distinguishing all the separate elements.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

Have the students describe the brushstrokes in this painting.

They can be distinguished separately, as if the artist has just made them. They are not blended together to make a smooth surface and are of different sizes.

E | M | S

Ask students to find the church tower. *It is on the left.*

Where are the trees in Central Park? *They are the green in the lower center of the painting.*

What is happening in the street? *The street is filled with people. Perhaps there is a parade.*

E | M | S

Have students locate several United States flags, two British Union Jacks, three French Tricolors, and a red flag with a small Union Jack on it that represents Canada.

E | M | S

Have students look at street and satellite maps of New York City to see where Hassam was when he painted this and how this view has changed. *He was on a balcony at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-second Street looking north toward Central Park.*

E | M | S

Where are the shadows and what color are they? *They are under projecting parts of the buildings and in the street, and they are blue.*

E | M | S

How is this painting like an impression rather than a finished artwork?

The bright colors, unblended brushstrokes, and lack of intricate detail make it seem like a quick glance at a scene.

Explain that Impressionism, which began in France in the late 1860s, was a popular painting style in America at this time.

INTERPRET E | M | S

Which flag in the middle ground stands alone and is not overlapped by other flags? *The American flag is surrounded by light blue sky.*

What does this suggest about how Hassam felt about his country? *He thought America was unique and was proud of his country.*

M | S

What international event was happening when this was painted? *It was painted during World War I.*

Why were so many flags flying in New York City on this day? *A month before this was painted, the United States officially entered the war. On this day the British and French war commissioners were visiting New York.*

M | S

What do these flags flying together symbolize? *They symbolize the fact that these three nations were standing together to fight the war.*

What elements do the flags have in common? *They are all red, blue, and white.*

M | S

What does this painting show about America's spirit in 1917?

Americans were proud of their country and optimistic about the future and this alliance with France, Britain, and Canada.

M | S

Why did this painting become famous soon after it was completed?

Color reproductions of it were sold to benefit the war effort.

Why did Americans want copies of this painting?

For the beauty of the art and to show support for America and its allies as it joined them in the war.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: American isolationism; World War I; League of Nations; armistice

Historical Figures: Woodrow Wilson; Archduke Franz Ferdinand

Civics: history of the American flag

Geography: the Allied Powers (France, Russia, United Kingdom, Italy, United States); the Central Powers (Austria-Hungary, Germany, Ottoman Empire); the Western Front

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway (secondary); *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot (secondary)

Music: "The Star Spangled Banner"

Arts: Impressionism; American Impressionism



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Childe Hassam (artist)

American, 1859 - 1935

Allies Day, May 1917, 1917

oil on canvas

overall: 92.7 x 76.8 cm (36 1/2 x 30 1/4 in.)

framed: 110.8 x 94.3 x 6.4 cm (43 5/8 x 37 1/8 x 2 1/2 in.)

Gift of Ethelyn McKinney in memory of her brother, Glenn Ford McKinney
1943.9.1

[On View](#)

A patriotic whirlwind overtook mid-town Manhattan as America entered the First World War in the spring of 1917. On Fifth Avenue, the British Union Jack, the French Tricolor, and Stars and Stripes were displayed prominently during parades honoring America's allies. The colorful pageantry inspired Childe Hassam, who dedicated this picture "to the coming together of [our] three peoples in the fight for democracy." Hassam's flag paintings were first shown as a group in New York's Durand-Ruel Gallery in November 1918, just four days after the armistice was declared. Thus, the works, originally created to herald America's entry into the war, also served to commemorate its victorious resolution.

Hassam had studied in Paris from 1886-1889 and was strongly influenced by the impressionists. In many respects, *Allies Day* resembles the vibrant boulevard paintings of Monet and Pissarro. Like these contemporary French artists, Hassam selected a high vantage point overlooking a crowded urban thoroughfare to achieve an illusion of dramatic spatial recession. But, rather than using daubs of shimmering pigment to dissolve form, he applied fluid parallel paint strokes to create an architectonic patterning. Although he shared the impressionists' interest in bright colors, broken brushwork, and modern themes, Hassam's overall approach was less theoretical and his pictorial forms remained far more substantial than those of his European contemporaries.

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Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Childe Hassam (1859–1935)



Childe Hassam (1859–1935), a pioneer of **American Impressionism** and perhaps its most devoted, prolific, and successful practitioner, was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts (now part of Boston), into a family descended from settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Equally adept at capturing the excitement of modern cities and the charms of country retreats, Hassam (properly pronounced HASS-am) became the foremost chronicler of New York City at the turn of the century. In our day, he is perhaps best known for his depictions of flag-draped Fifth Avenue during World War I ([67.187.127](#)). His finest works manifest his brilliant handling of color and light and reflect his credo (stated in 1892) that "the man who will go down to posterity is the man who paints his own time and the scenes of every-day life around him."

After establishing his reputation in Boston between 1882 and 1886, Hassam studied from 1886 to 1889 in **Paris**. There he was unusual among his American contemporaries in his attraction to **French Impressionism**, which was just beginning to find favor with American collectors. Hassam returned to the United States late in 1889 and took up lifelong residence in New York. His signature images include views of Boston, Paris, and New York, three urban centers whose places and pleasures he captured with affection and originality. Examples include *Winter in Union Square* ([43.116.2](#)) and *Spring Morning in the Heart of the City* ([43.116.1](#)), both of which record lively sections of New York during the first decade of Hassam's activity there.

While Hassam was unusual among the American Impressionists for his frequent depictions of burgeoning cities, he spent long periods in the countryside. There he found respite from urban pressures and inspiration for numerous important works of art. Hassam's many portrayals of the old-fashioned gardens, rocky coast, and radiant sunlight of the Isles of Shoals, Maine, are among his most cherished works. Among them is the 1901 view *Coast Scene, Isles of Shoals* ([09.72.6](#)), the first canvas by the artist to enter the collection of the Metropolitan Museum. Hassam's images of Newport, Portsmouth, Old Lyme, Gloucester, and other New England locales also exemplify the late nineteenth-century appreciation of the picturesque region redolent of early American settlement and colonial growth. In 1919, Hassam and his wife purchased a **colonial-period house** in East Hampton, on the south fork of Long Island, New York, and made it their summer headquarters.

Hassam created more than 2,000 oils, **watercolors**, **pastels**, and illustrations, and—after 1912—more than 400 **etchings** and **other prints**. With these works he achieved critical acclaim and commercial success, riding the great wave of enthusiasm for American Impressionism to fame and fortune.

H. Barbara Weinberg

Department of American Paintings and Sculpture, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Citation

Weinberg, H. Barbara. "Childe Hassam (1859–1935)". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hass/hd_hass.htm (October 2004)

Further Reading

Weinberg, H. Barbara, et al. *Childe Hassam: American Impressionist*. Exhibition catalogue. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

Related exhibitions and online features

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[American Impressions, 1865–1935: Prints, Drawings, and Watercolors](#)

These related *Museum Bulletin* or *Journal* articles may or may not represent the most current scholarship.

"A Bicentennial Treasury: American Masterpieces from the Metropolitan." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, v. 33, no. 4 (Winter, 1975–76). [JSTOR](#) | [PDF](#) | [Supplemental PDFs](#)

Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History



Avenue of the Allies, Great Britain, 1918

Childe Hassam (American, 1859–1935)

Oil on canvas

36 x 28 3/8 in. (91.4 x 72.1 cm)

Bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot (1876–1967), 1967 (67.187.127)

NOT ON VIEW Last Updated October 10, 2011

During World War I, Hassam painted views of New York's Fifth Avenue decorated as "the Avenue of the Allies." This painting depicts part of the most ambitious flag display, held between September 28 and October 19, 1918, in support of the Fourth Liberty Loan Drive. This spectacle was planned by a committee of artists and architects and involved the decoration of Fifth Avenue between 26th and 58th Streets. Here, Hassam looked north from Fifty-third Street and compressed into a vibrant pattern three blocks dedicated to flags of Great Britain, Brazil, and Belgium. The artist painted at least thirty flag pictures and these were exhibited often in groups of twenty-two, as a reminder of the number of allied nations.

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Citation

"Childe Hassam: Avenue of the Allies, Great Britain (67.187.127)". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/67.187.127> (October 2006)

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