

Dorchester artist created a beloved impression of Boston

by Anthony Sammarco

Childe Hassam is considered to be among the finest of the American Impressionistic painters, and his oils and watercolors bring six-digit figures in the leading auction houses of this country. However, few of us realize that he was born and raised in Dorchester.

Frederick Childe Hassam (1859-1935) was born on Olney Street on Meeting House Hill, the son of Rose Hathorn and Frederick F. Hassam; the house was a small cottage with a stable in the rear and still stands amidst modern structures. His mother was related to Nathaniel Hawthorne, the noted nineteenth-century writer, and his father descended from the Horsham Family, as the name was originally spelled, of Salem. Hassam attended the Mather School on Meeting House Hill and later Dorchester High School, when it was located at the corner of Dorchester Avenue and Gibson Street.

He left school in 1876 to apprentice in the shop of George E. Johnson, a wood engraver in Boston.

As a child, Hassam had shown keen ability in the art of watercolor and, according to Donelson Hoopes, one of his biographers, Hassam "remembered copying the sporting prints in the billiard room of the family house on Olney Street, and using an old coach parked in the backyard for a studio. His first recollection of an original work of art, other than his own, was that of Thomas Hewes Hinckley, the painter of sentimental animal subjects, who lived in the nearby town of Mil-



Dorchester-born impressionist painter
Frederick Childe Hassam (1859-1935)

ton." As a result, Hassam was largely self-taught prior to joining Johnson's studio, and he had a sharp eye for engravings and graphic media. He freelanced as an illustrator during the 1875-1885 period, and designed covers of "Harper's Weekly", the Marblehead "Messenger", "The Century" and "Scribner's". Not only was Hassam sought as an engraver, but his watercolors were commissioned for William Dean Howell's *Venetian Life*, and Celia Thaxter's *An Island Garden*, two immensely popular books that are still appreciated, and are included in my own library.

In the late 1870s Hassam began formalized art lessons in Boston, joining the Boston Art Club's evening

art classes while working days as an illustrator. His painting style began to develop as an impressionistic style, especially under the direction of Ignaz Marcel Gaugengigl who arrived in Boston from Bavaria in the 1880s. This master of the realist movement imparted to Childe Hassam, as he was now known, the respect for form while veiling the subject with paint strokes. Through both Gaugengigl, and William Rimmer, a medical doctor, painter, sculptor and anatomical illustrator from Milton, Hassam was developing a style of painting that came to be classified as the "Boston School".

His painting style continued to develop, but it was his first trip to Europe in 1883 that allowed his creativity to absorb the old masters. After a year-long trip through Britain, the Netherlands, Brittany, Italy, and Spain, he returned to Boston to show sixty-seven of his European watercolors at the gallery of Williams and Everett.

As his artistic career began to take on importance, he proposed to and married Miss Maude Doane of Dorchester. They moved to New York City, where Hassam set up a studio on the West Side. He continued to pursue his study of art, and was accepted to display his art at the Paris Salon in both 1887 and 1888, showing the first signs of his "Impressionistic" sense of art. Impressionism had developed in France, with the attempt at an impression that the eye and mind gather, rather than representing the actual fact. He became a master of this revolutionary art form, and was to be awarded medals from the Boston Art Club, the National Academy of Design, the Columbian Exposition, the Pan-American Exposition, the Universal Exposition St. Louis, and the Exposition Universelle, Paris.

His art was lauded, and collected, throughout the world, and he continued to serve the art world through the founding in 1889 of the New York Watercolor Society, of which he was the first president; he later



Hassam's famous "Boston Common at Twilight"

joined the Pastel Society. He also formed the "Ten American Painters", an exclusive club of friends, and artists who personified the Impressionistic Movement in America. His fellow members were: Frank Benson, J.R. De Camp, T.W. Dewing, W.L. Metcalf, R. Reid, E.E. Simmons, Edmund Tarbell, J.A. Weir, and J.H. Twachtman. These were the "movers and shakers" of American Art in the late nineteenth century, and they drew from one another in addition to changing the attitudes towards art for the Victorian age.

In 1926, Hassam was asked to display his art at a retrospective exhibit at Durand-Ruel Galleries in New York. Not just was this fifty-year retrospective well attended, but it served to reinforce Hassam's vast contributions to the art world. His creativity was recognized in the presentation of the Gold Medal for Distinguished Services to the Fine Arts by the Association of American Art Dealers.

Hassam was well respected, but could well remember his own youth in Dorchester when he was a struggling art student. Knowing that there would always be aspiring art students in need of financial assistance, he established a fund to aid them, The Hassam Fund, named in honor of his wife, Maude Doane Hassam.

His death in 1935 in East Hampton, Long Island, New York was not unexpected but with him went a talent that few could match. That year, he was formally awarded the Saltus Medal for Merit by the National Academy in recognition of his achievements. In 1936, Childe Hassam was formally inducted into The American Academy of Arts and Letters.

The entire town of Dorchester may share in the pride and achievement of a native son. His art will endure as that of a genius, a Dorchester genius.

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