

OBJECT OF THE MONTH

THE BUTTERFLY CATCHERS
THEODORE WENDEL-1859-1932
2001.43 AMERICAN
20TH Century
Painting-Oil on Canvas

Social/Historical Context

After the end of the Civil War in 1865, the US gained unprecedented international political and economic status (please see L. Kruger's Object of the Month Twachtman's White Bridge). To announce their wealth and sophistication, they built great houses and filled them with art. To appeal to prospective patrons, American artists studied in Europe especially Paris.

The emphasis in art was gradually changing from the solid and majestic, from the towering mountains and dense forests of classical art to the ephemeral light and atmosphere of Impressionism. The American Impressionists led varied professional lives and belonged to several generations. They were considered to be some of the best educated, most widely traveled cosmopolitan painters in the history of American art.

1863- The Emancipation Proclamation

1865- Lincoln assassination

1871-The Chicago fire

1876-The telephone is patented by Bell

1886-growing industrial militancy and the call for higher wages, better working conditions and union representation spreads throughout U.S.

1884-1889- Burghers of Calais by Rodin

1890-Massacre at Wounded Knee

1907-1908- The Kiss by Klimt

1917-U.S. enters WW I

Artist's Biography

Theodore Wendel was the product of a Midwestern upbringing. He belonged to the first wave of American Impressionists (included Cassatt, Sargent, Robinson, DeCamp, Twachtman, Chase, etc.) who painted at Giverny in the 1880s with Claude Monet. There is very little written about him and his work appears to have suffered an unfortunate amount of undeserved obscurity both in his lifetime and since his death in 1932. He was the son of a German immigrant who ran a general store in Midway, Ohio. He ran away at 15 and joined a circus becoming a tumbler something he continued to do to amuse his fellow artists! At 17, he studied painting at the University of Cincinnati's School of Design where he met his lifelong friend, Joseph DeCamp. The two friends decided to study in Munich where the Royal Academy was beginning to attract a growing number of American students. He arrived sometime

in 1878. Frank Duveneck soon became the acknowledged leader of the contingent of Americans and they became known as Duveneck's Boys. After much urging by his fellow students, Duveneck, known for his "dark" impressionism started his own school in Polling, a Bavarian village. In 1879, the group went to Florence to continue their studies moving the contingent to Venice for the summers where they met Whistler. The earliest and best surviving painting by Wendel from this period is *Venice* from 1881, a small oil that shows Wendel's awakening interest in effects of light and atmosphere.

He returned to the U.S. where he exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts making his first public appearance on the American art scene. Two years later found him living in Rhode Island. In '85, he traveled to Paris and painted during he summers at Giverny., part of the first wave of American artists to do so. In '88, he was at Duveneck's side when his wife of two years died suddenly. He was an empathic friend who helped Duveneck through this very difficult time.

This was a turning point in Wendel's career. He was introduced by Monet, who later spoke warmly of his association with Wendel, to the esthetic possibilities of light, atmosphere and color. Wendel returned to America in 1889 and held an exhibition in Boston where it was noted by critics that he adhered to impressionism particularly in the heightened colorism and his use of purple shadows. One critic who said that he was an imitator of Monet noted that he was "Monet and jam" but that he came the closest of the Boston Impressionists to handling the Monet style with effect. He took from his experience with Monet a freedom of brushwork applied with a lightness of touch that suggested the shimmer of lightness and air. It was a fusion of the influence of French art and our own traditions. His contribution to the new vision of American Impressionism, according to John Bauer, director Emeritus of the Whitney Museum (who organized an exhibit of Wendel's work in 1976), was marked by a gentle lyrical feeling and a light touch all his own.

Wendel returned to the U.S. in 1888 with his friend Frank Duveneck and painted again in Rhode Island. He gave an exhibition in Boston with Theodore Robinson but it received little attention conflicting with a large Monet exhibition. He married in 97 and like many artists supported himself by teaching (at Wellesley College and at the Cowles Art School in Boston). After their wedding, the couple took a trip to France and Italy for over a year where Wendel continued to paint. Upon their return, they settled in Ipswich, Mass where his wife's father had owned large tracts of land that Wendel farmed until his death in 1892. While living in Ipswich, Wendel maintained a studio in Boston that was ravaged by fire destroying many of his canvases. (This may in part account for his relative obscurity.)

Some of his finest works, including *The Butterfly Catchers* and *Bridge at Ipswich* were painted in Ipswich or Gloucester between 1900 and 1915. They combine the intimate qualities of his Giverny works with a new brilliance of light and color inherent in the American landscape itself.

Wendel and his wife Philena (Stone) had two children, Mary and Daniel who are the children in *The Butterfly Catchers*. (They, in fact provided a great deal of information about their father to John Bauer for the Whitney Exhibition). He captures children, his children caught in the gleeful pursuit of butterflies in a landscape rich in color and atmospheric, with a shimmer of lightness and air.

In 1917, Wendel became ill and painted little afterwards dying in 1932 in Ipswich.

Resources:

- American Impressionism, Wm. H. Gerds, second edition
- American Impressionists Abroad and at Home, Paintings from the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. Barbara Weinberg and Susan G. Larkin
- American Impressionism, Hellbrunn Timeline of Art History
- Introducing Theodore Wendel by John Bauer, Art in America 64, Nov-Dec.