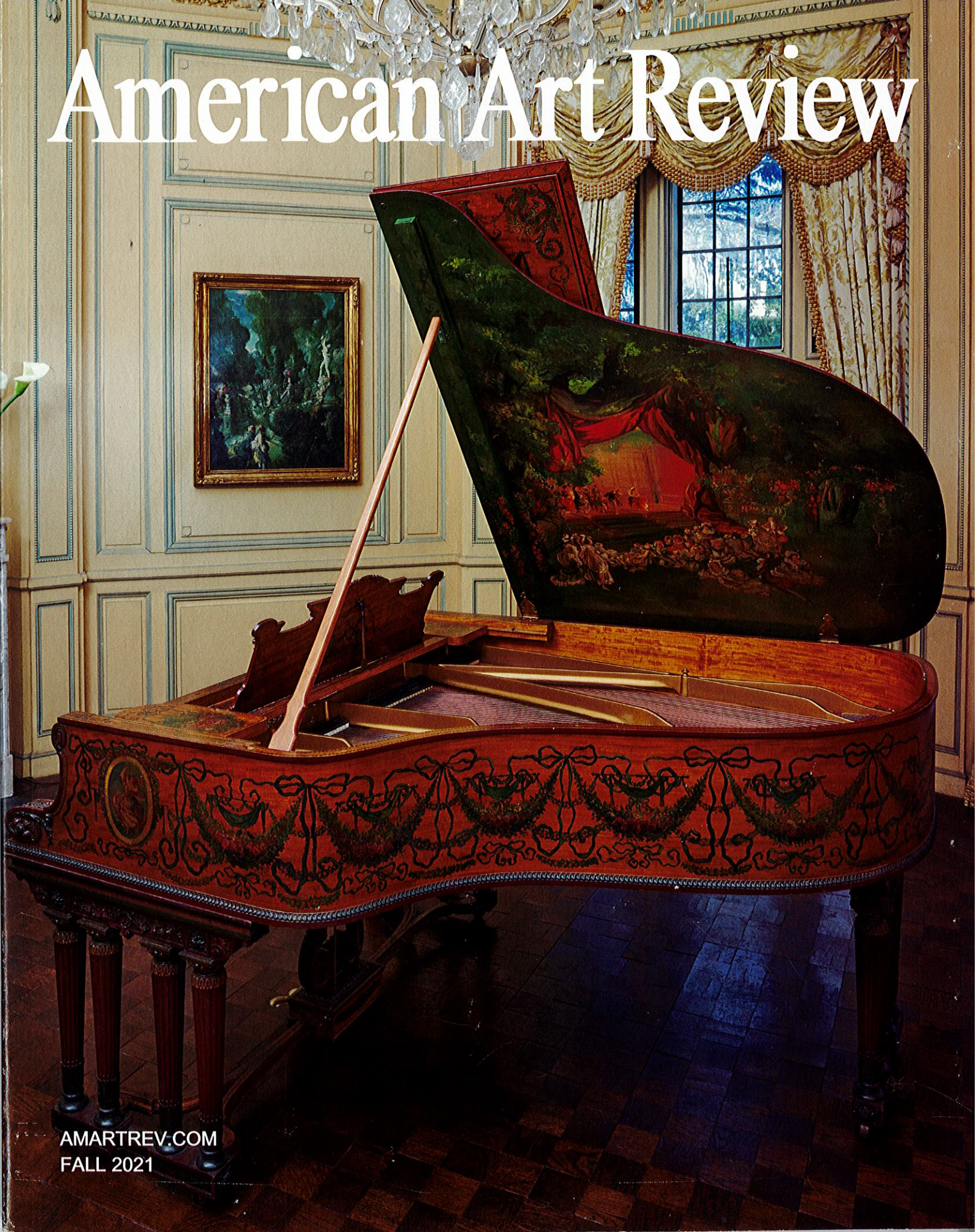


American Art Review



The Greenwich Paintings of John Henry Twachtman

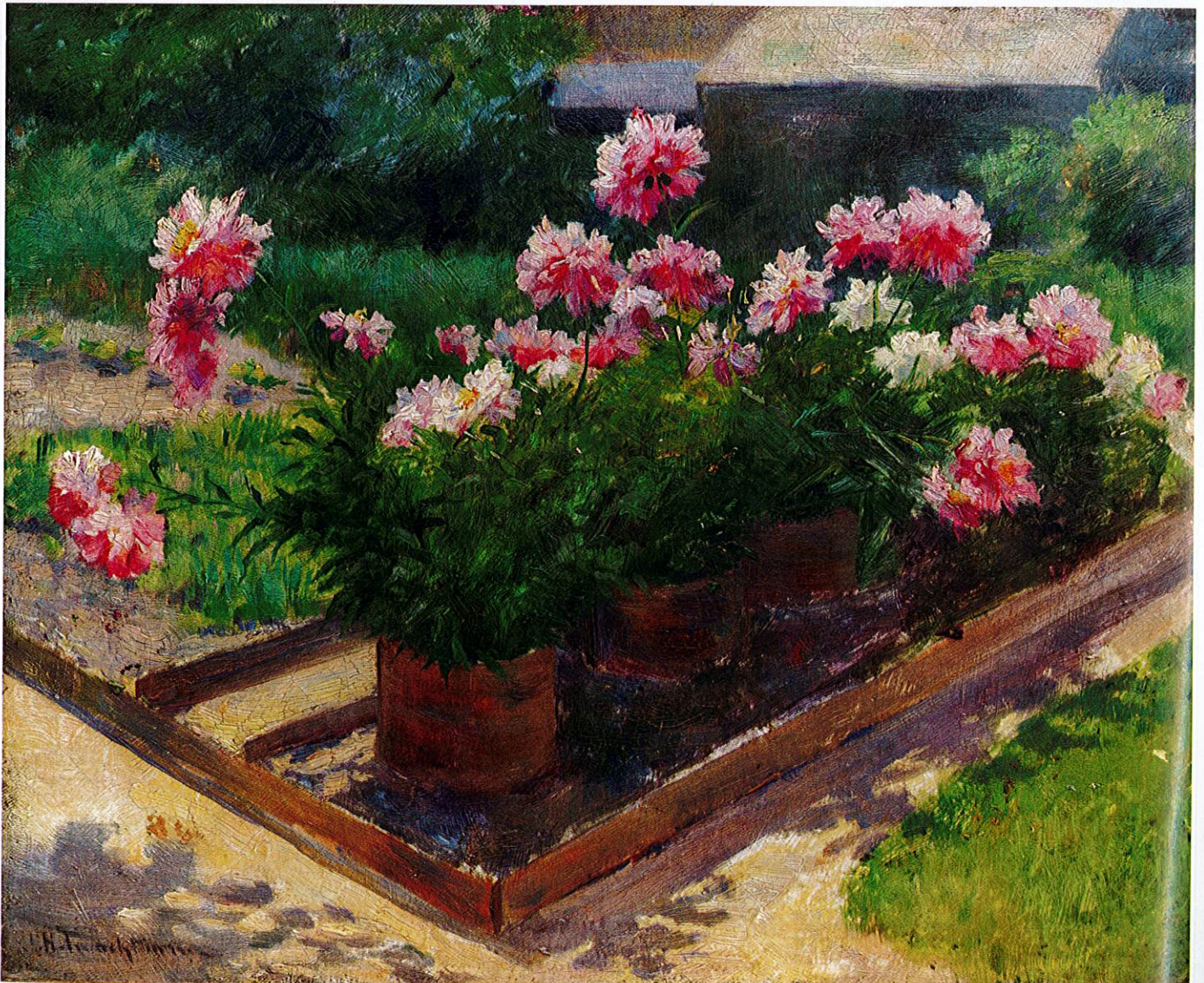
by Lisa N. Peters

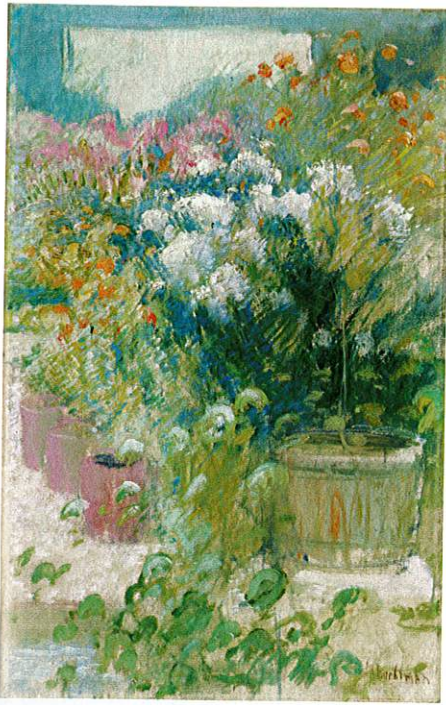
The Cincinnati-born artist John Henry Twachtman (1853-1902) reached artistic maturity while living from 1890 to 1899 in Greenwich, Connecticut. There he created the paintings of his home and property for which he earned a reputation as the most original of the leading American Impressionists. *Life and Art: The Greenwich Paintings of John Henry Twachtman* takes a new holistic approach

Life and Art: The Greenwich Paintings of John Henry Twachtman was to be on view at the Greenwich Historical Society, but has been postponed due to damage caused by Hurricane Ida. The museum is located at 47 Strickland Road, Cos Cob, Connecticut, 06807, 203-869-6899, www.greenwichhistory.org. Lisa N. Peters is the guest curator of the exhibition and the author of its forthcoming catalogue.

to Twachtman's Greenwich oeuvre, considering it as encompassing both his work and the aesthetic modifications he made on his property, with land and architecture as his media. The exhibition and its catalogue explore the interactive dynamic between art

and place that occurred over time, as Twachtman's involvement in his surroundings evolved. Demonstrating the coming together of life and art for Twachtman in Greenwich, the show suggests a paradigm for similar considerations of an artist's rela-





All illustrated images are by John Henry Twachtman unless otherwise stated.

ABOVE: *In the Greenhouse*, c. 1895-99, o/c, 25 x 16, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina.

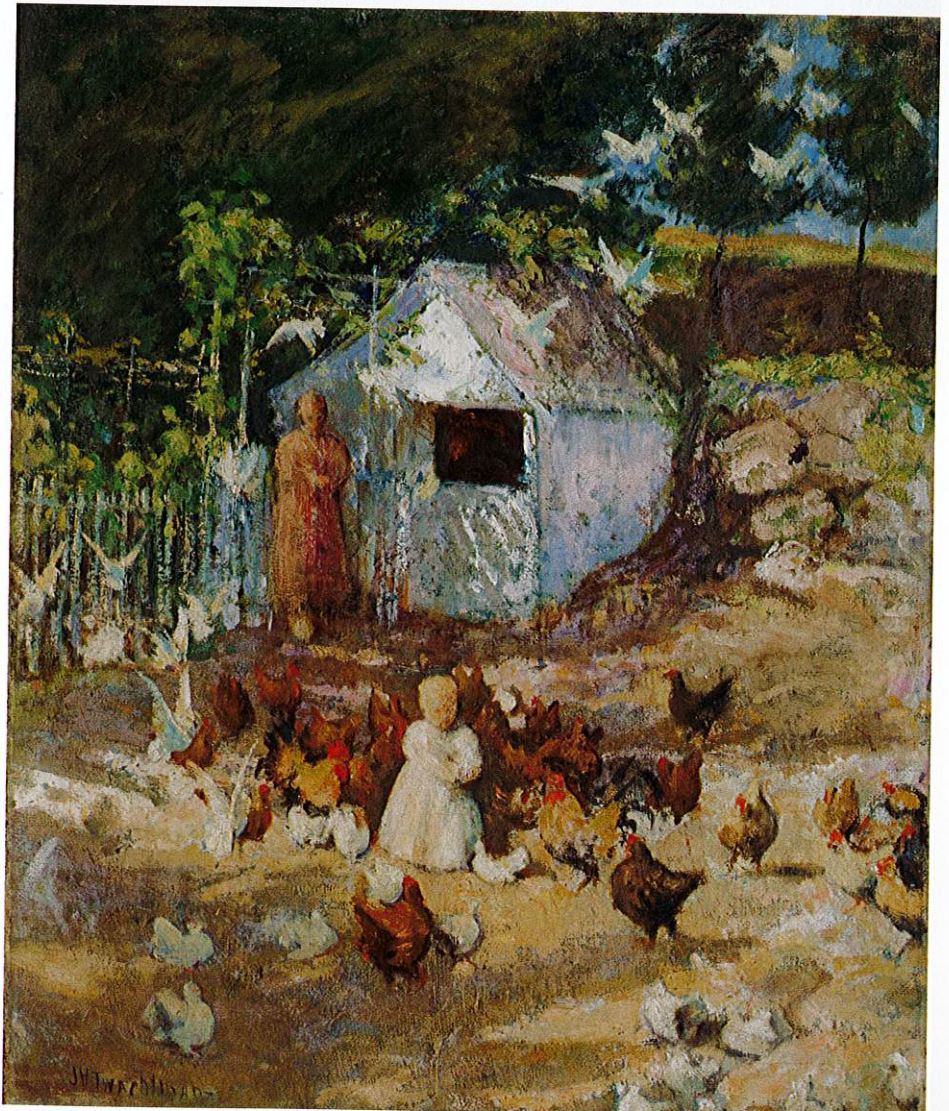
ABOVE RIGHT: *Snowbound*, c. 1892-93, o/c, 22 x 30, Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey, Museum purchase, Lang Acquisition Fund.

RIGHT: *Barnyard*, c. 1896-97, o/c, 30 x 25, Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, Connecticut, gift of the Fine Arts Collection of The Hartford Steam, Boiler Inspection and Insurance Company.

LEFT: *Pink Flowers*, c. 1895-99, o/c, 13 x 16, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida, gift of Elsie and Marvin Dekelboum.

relationship to home and work.

An aim of the exhibition was to determine the chronology of the changes Twachtman made to his home and its grounds during his Greenwich years and to use its findings as an aid in dating his work, which he did not date after 1883. This objective was addressed through historical sources and a close examination of the house itself (privately owned today), conducted by a team including John Nelson, its current owner; James Sexton, an architectural historian; Susan G. Larkin, an art historian who is the exhibition's consul-



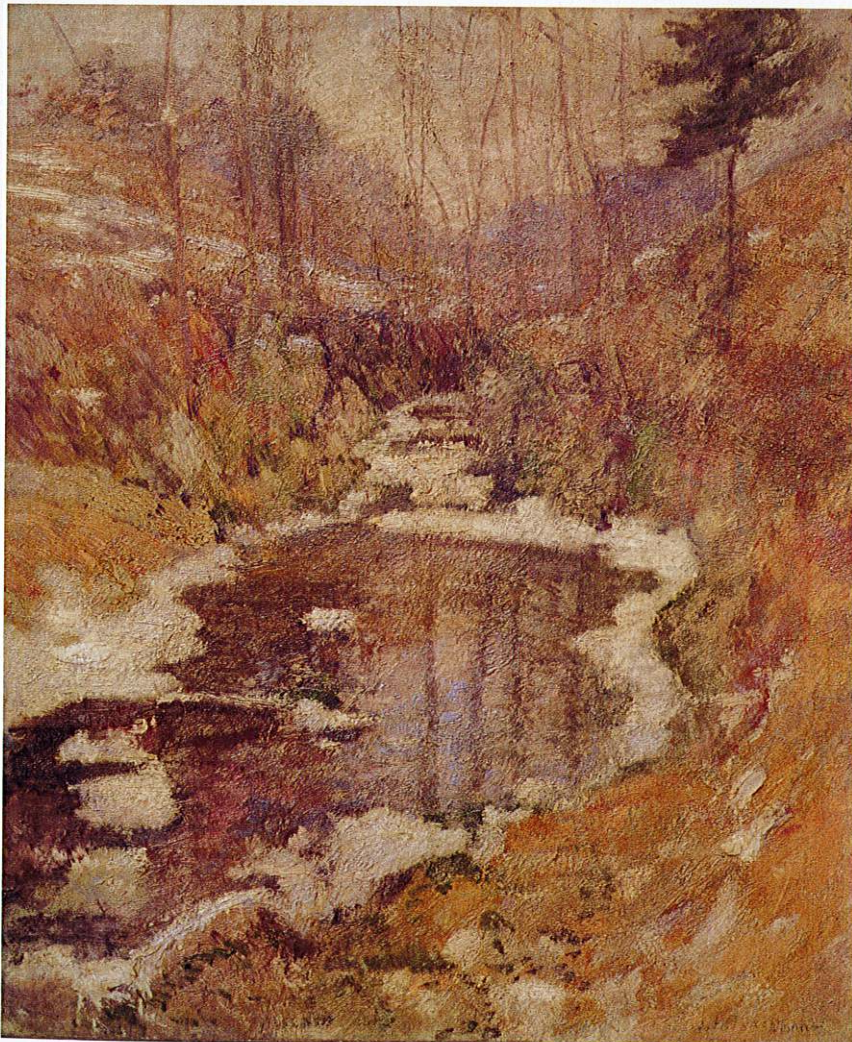


ABOVE: *The Old Homestead, Greenwich, Connecticut*, c. 1890-91, pastel on paper, 9 1/2 x 12 3/4, private collection.

LEFT: Robert Reid, *Spring Landscape*, c. 1896-99, o/c, 20 x 24, private collection.

BELOW LEFT: *Hemlock Pool*, c. 1895-99, o/c, 29 13/16 x 24 13/16, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, gift of anonymous donor.

RIGHT: *In the Garden*, c. 1895-99, o/c, 30 x 25, private collection.

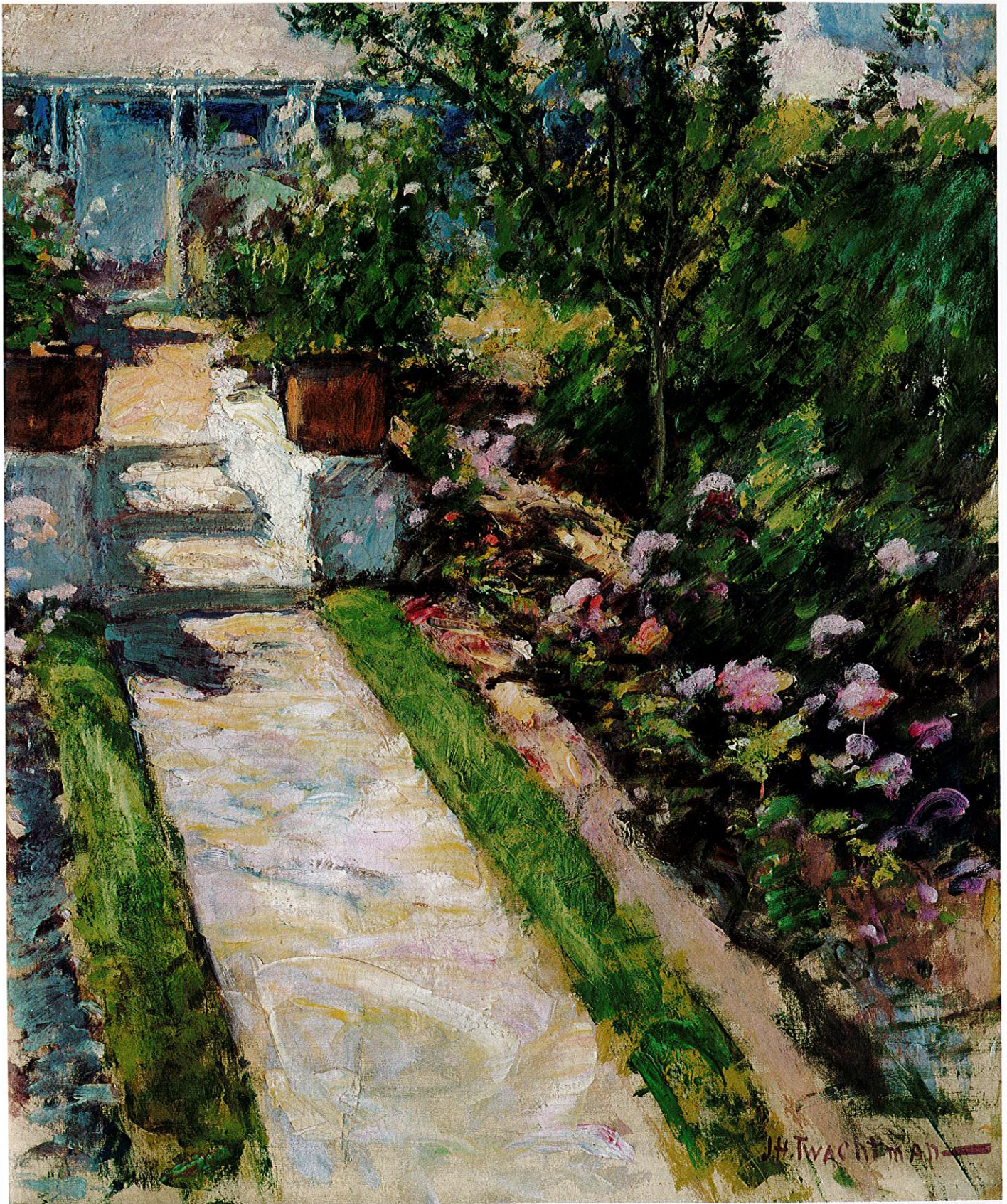


tant; Davide Strackbein, a trustee and former chairman of the Greenwich Historical Society, who is a specialist in Greenwich history; and Maggie Dimock, curator of exhibitions and collections, Greenwich Historical Society.¹

Twachtman was happiest in his life and art during his Greenwich years. From the beginning of his career, he recorded plein-air observations at home in America and on four trips to Europe between 1875 and 1885. The years 1885 to 1889 were a restless period, when he worked on cycloramas in Chicago and spent time in New York. In 1889 he came upon a piece of land, two miles north of central Greenwich in an area known as Hangroot.² There, on seeing Horseneck Brook winding through the hilly and rocky terrain, he knew immediately that it was the ideal place for his family and his art.

After his initial purchase of three acres of land in 1890, he realized the small farmhouse on the property was insufficient for his growing family, and he wrote to the architect Stanford White detailing the changes he intended to make to his home, including a sketch of his proposed western addition. His goal was to create a harmonious relationship between his home and the existing landscape.

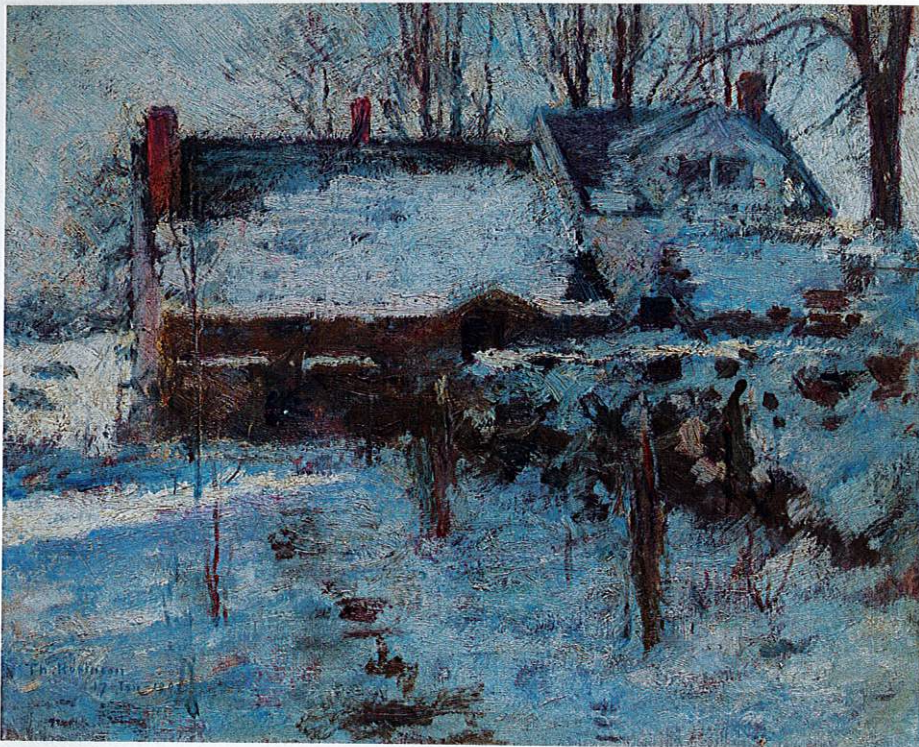
His next set of changes can be observed in a painting of his home by his close friend Theodore Robinson, dated



January 17, 1892. It reveals that by then Twachtman had lowered the eaves, erected an enclosed porch with chest-height stone walls, designed a new central doorway

with a small gable above it, and constructed a new chimney at the house's northeast edge. Robinson's image, in fact, documents a time when there were three chim-

neys on the house. Robinson positioned the home monumentally, seemingly barricaded against the elements, with its chimneys resembling lookout towers.



LEFT: Theodore Robinson, *Twachtman's House*, 1892, o/c, 27³/₄ x 31⁵/₈, private collection.

BELOW LEFT: *The Cabbage Patch*, c. 1895-99, o/c, 25 x 25, private collection.

RIGHT: *From the Upper Terrace*, c. 1892-93, o/c, 25 x 30, private collection.

ing protectively. The painting was related, even in Twachtman's era, to John Greenleaf Whittier's 1866 poem, *Snowbound*, in which a heavy winter's snow provides an occasion for a family to gather and tell stories.

Twachtman painted *From the Upper Terrace* in a bird's eye view from the hill above his barn, which can be seen in its lower left corner. The work suggests his presence, standing back to admire his self-created world. Crowned by trees, his redesigned house is the point from which all aspects of the scene emanate, including the serpentine lines of paths and Round Hill Road at the left. The cultivated garden behind the house spreads outward, blending into nature and conveying the unity between the home and its surroundings. Twachtman used the broken daubs typical of Impressionism to showcase his property, including the birdhouse at the work's center, where the family could watch purple martins gathering, and the well house shielded by bushes at the side of the road.

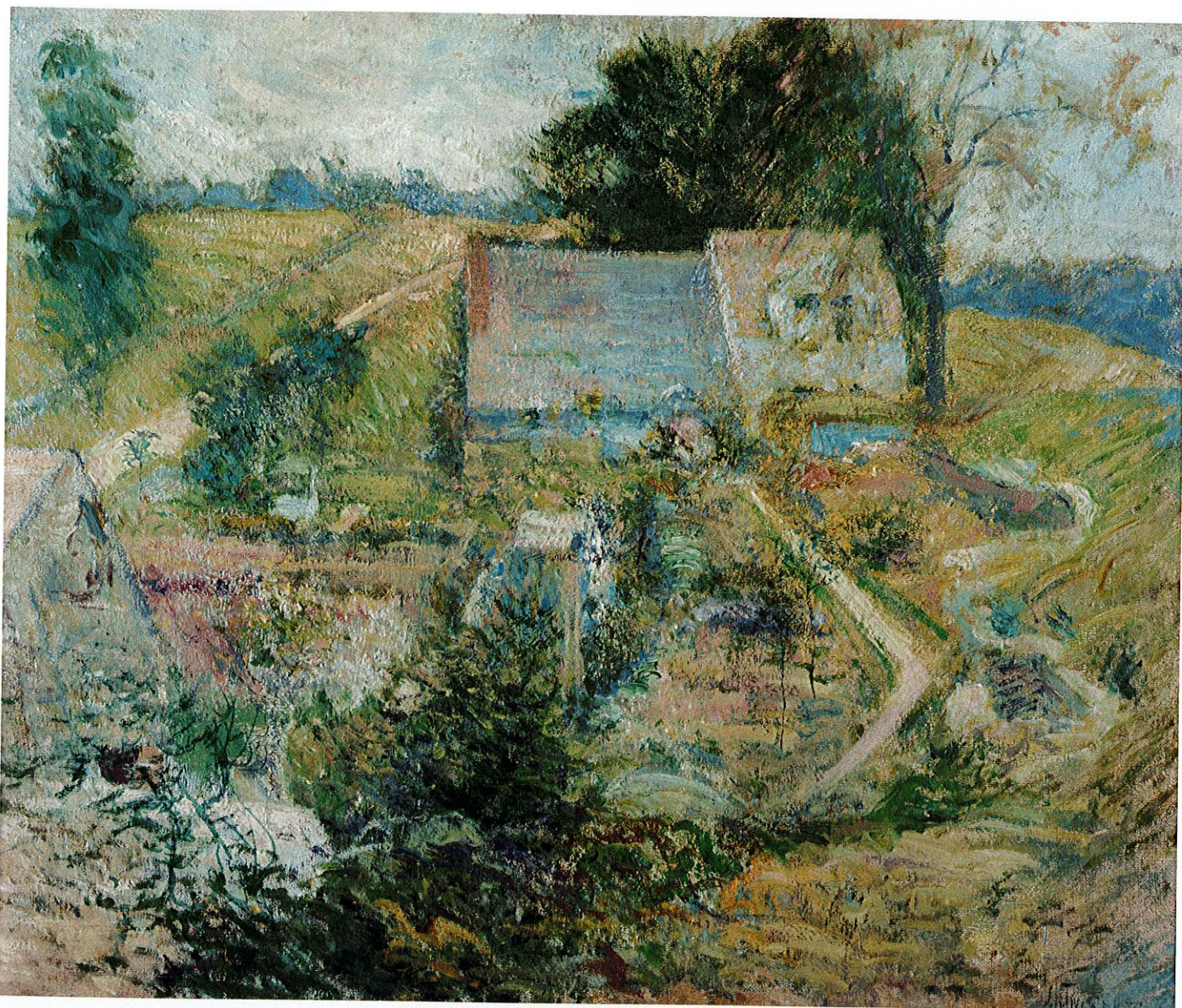
From the Upper Terrace was included in the 1893 exhibition at the American Art Galleries in New York of works by four prominent artists—Twachtman, his close friend Julian Alden Weir, and two French painters, Claude Monet and Paul-Albert Besnard. A critic compared it with a painting by Monet of his home in Vétheuil, France, remarking that Twachtman had taken a hint from Monet in his "preference for commonplace subjects made beautiful by light" but had depicted a home more "picturesquely situated" than Monet's.³

Twachtman created more views of the north side of his home—where the family spent time in the outdoors and where the garden flourished in the summer—than its south side. However, one of his most vibrant works is *September Sunshine*, representing the south facade after he had also lowered its eaves and constructed three dormers. From a northwest angle, he showed a partial view of his home in full sunlight. The glaring effect on walls painted a soft white makes the structure shimmer. By framing it between trees that arch



In *Snowbound* Twachtman also painted his home in its new form after its middle chimney had been removed. He stood be-

fore the barn that faced the house, capturing the latter as a cozy cottage-like dwelling, its dark red chimneys bracketing the build-



over it, he showed that the dwelling was meant to be appreciated aesthetically as a work of art.

Early views of Twachtman's home are self-reflective, suggesting that he was standing back to observe what he had created. Gradually he took more control of his environment, turning his home ground into a work of art in its own right. He became less beholden to nature, imposing aesthetic command over his surroundings. His paintings parallel this progression. In *The Cabbage Patch* he united the forms of the north facade and garden into a totality. Potted plants rest on the ledges of a small staircase, forming an altar-like arrangement in relation to the house that can be seen from a closer vantage point in *In the Garden*.

The linkage that occurs throughout Twachtman's work is evident in the rela-

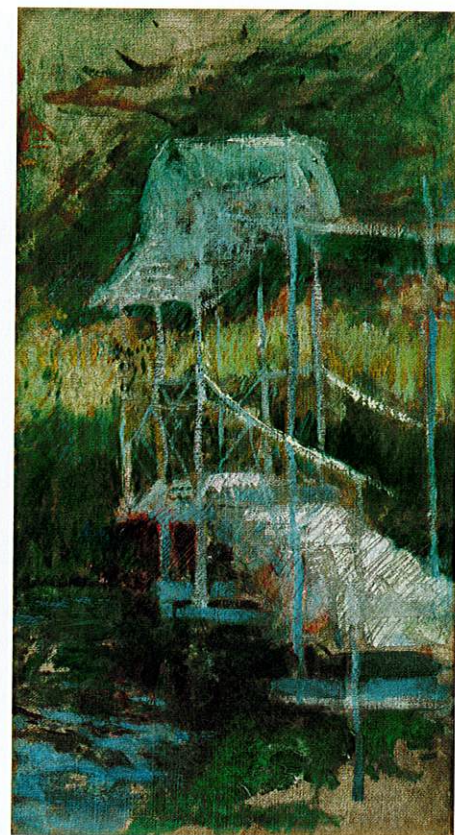
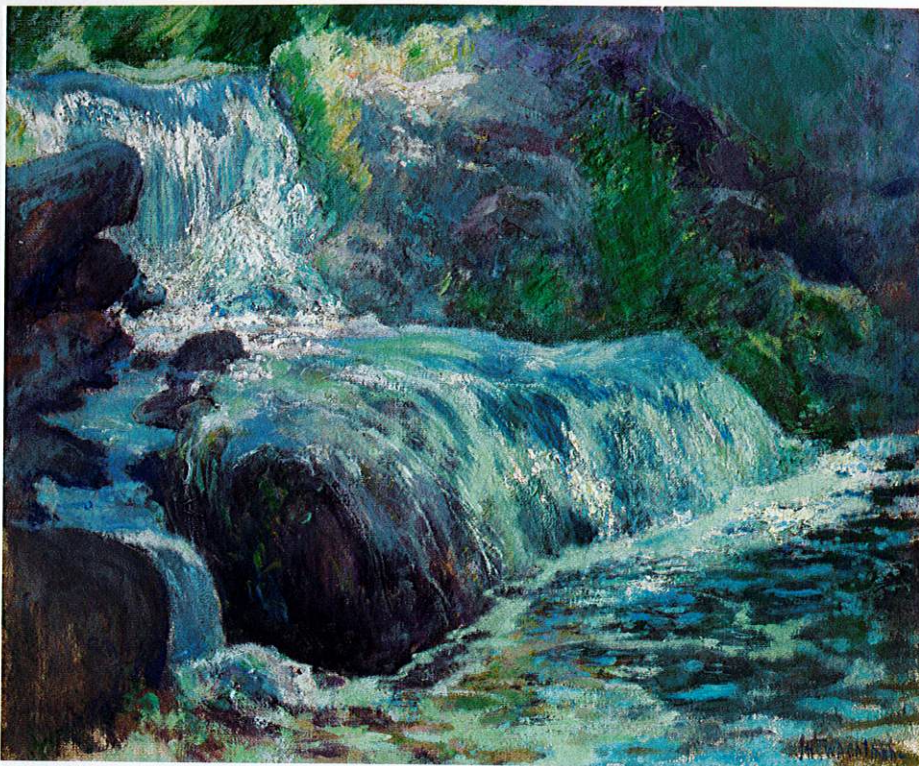
tionship between these two works. In the latter, the composition's geometry conveys Twachtman's sense of having gained mastery over the terrain. As Charles Caffin aptly noted in his 1907 *Story of American Painting*, in Greenwich Twachtman "absorbed the facts of his surroundings so completely that their very spirit entered into him, and it was the spirit that he strove to render."⁴

Greenwich Garden is signed by the artist's son, Alden, who began studying at the Yale University School of Fine Arts in 1897. Stylistically the work is characteristic of Twachtman, suggesting that he wanted his son to feel part of the creative process even if his participation was minimal. Within a square composition, Twachtman integrated a section of the north facade with the garden's flowers that radiate across the picture plane, achieving a flat-

ness suggestive of his love for Japanese prints, while joining life and art.

Barnyard is another work in which his son took part. Treating the age-old mother and child theme, Twachtman portrayed his wife standing in front of a chicken coop on the property and allowing their young daughter Violet the responsibility of caring for its chickens. Doves flutter and alight, as if to bless the scene's maternal affection. In *Pink Flowers* and *In the Greenhouse*, Twachtman's close vantage point and the vivacity of the flowers, along with their obvious tending, reveal his presence as the creator of the garden.

Twachtman also shaped his property at large. In a second purchase in 1891, he expanded his land to seventeen acres, crossing over Horseneck Brook. The brook and its Hemlock Pool—a calm, rock-edged body of



ABOVE: *Bridge in the Woods*, c. 1896-99, o/c, 26 x 14, private collection.

ABOVE LEFT: *Waterfall, Blue Brook*, late 1890s, o/c, 30 x 30 1/8, Cincinnati Art Museum, Annual Membership Fund Purchase.

BELOW LEFT: *September Sunshine*, c. 1892-94, o/c, 25 x 30, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas.

RIGHT: John Alden Twachtman and John Henry Twachtman, *Greenwich Garden*, c. 1895-99, o/c, 30 x 30, private collection.

water to the west of his home—were among his favorite subjects. Owning property on both sides of the brook must have enhanced his feeling of belonging to the land, which he expressed in *Hemlock Pool*. His intimate viewpoint in the vertical work draws the viewer into a close rapport with

its quietude and the energetic rhythm of the Art-Nouveau-like curvilinear rim of snow that has yet to melt along its edges. The painting is among many by Twachtman that demand sustained attention, gradually revealing their subtleties and thus eliciting a meditative experience on the part of the

viewer. Familiarity over time with his land enabled Twachtman to observe and record its nuances during each of the seasons with the versatility afforded by Impressionism.

In the late 1890s, Twachtman constructed a few versions of a white bridge over Horseneck Brook, using as his model the bridges in Japanese prints and Chinese ink washes. A view of the bridge shows it with a low span, while its delicate lattice-work and canopy indicate that Twachtman designed it as much for practical purposes as to enhance the land aesthetically. One of Twachtman's bridges was also painted by his friend Robert Reid. In a tonal image, the bridge glows softly adding a note of refinement to the landscape. At the time Twachtman constructed and painted his



white bridges, he could not have been aware of the Japanese bridge Monet built in his water garden in Giverny. The two artists independently perceived that bridges could beautify natural settings by providing ways of physically entering into them and enjoying them visually.

Toward the end of his Greenwich years, Twachtman created a small group of closely cropped images of Horseneck Falls. In these, including *Waterfall, Blue Brook*, he limited the depth of his scenes and set his horizon lines high, bringing

the enlarged forms of water and rocks close to the picture plane. The works exemplify his interest in seriality, which implies that a subject consists not of a solitary entity but of the multiple ways it is experienced. His late waterfalls are a summary of what his Greenwich life represented for him: vitality and stability, change and timelessness. *Waterfall, Blue Brook* was the only one of Twachtman's oil paintings to enter a public collection in his lifetime, when it was purchased in 1900 by the Cincinnati Art Museum.

A “painter’s painter,” Twachtman was revered by fellow artists but unsuccessful at marketing and selling his work. To his friends—who mourned his sudden death in 1902—he was too modern to be appreciated in his own time, and they predicted his due recognition would only occur in the future. Indeed, Twachtman’s work increasingly received attention in the twentieth century, when it entered many museum collections, and its abstract aspects were an inspiration to modernist artists including
(continued on 143)

Borein (continued from page 109)

The *Santa Barbara News-Press* summed it up this way: "We have known for a long time—and now we are beginning to believe—that history is not confined to dates, wars and edicts. We have known, and we are beginning to believe, that the most important history is not written words but rather in wordless records the phrases of which never become obsolete and the languages of which never become 'dead.' A 'keeper' of such records was Ed Borein, 'painter and etcher of the old West,' first-hand student of humanity, cowhand and philosopher.... With etching tool and brush, with acid and paint, Ed Borein 'wrote' the history of America's West, of a way of living and—all important—of a way of thinking, that will be part of America's strength long after the details of the West are forgotten. He 'wrote' history in a way that will be read and reread unnumbered times for generations to come."

Narrow Cove (continued from page 141)

experimenting with abstract visual language in response to social change and advancing technologies, Stieglitz steered Hartley and his circle—Georgia O'Keeffe, Arthur Dove, Charles Demuth and others—in the direction of professional recognition, personal awakening, and a new vision for American art. He also steered them to Maine and Ogunquit.

Hartley spent the summer of 1917 in Ogunquit living in a fishing shack in Perkins Cove at the behest of Field. He experimented with reverse painting on glass using metal leaf and oils. The motifs reflected Hartley's delight in drawing important connections between folk art and blocks of simplified forms that he detailed using patterns and black lines, much like the patterning and strong lines pictured in *Lobster Pots and Buoy*.

Hartley traveled widely throughout his career. Intent on exploring artistic and personal freedom, he established himself in brief residencies at the Taos art colony in New Mexico, in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and the Ogunquit art colony, with extended forays to California, Paris, and Berlin. Late in his career, determined to be recognized as "the painter of Maine," Hartley produced a series of expressive paintings representing local lobstermen and lumberjacks as well as the environments in which they worked.

John Marin (1870-1953), an early associate of the Ogunquit art colony, spent his first summer at Cape Split, Maine, in 1933 and a year later purchased a house there. He retreated to Cape Split each summer for the remainder of his life. Despite Marin's interest in representing the forests and coastline of Maine, he edged decidedly toward abstraction. His watercolors defied classification, and early critics of Modernism viewed Marin as a product of French Impressionism. Yet, he stands out in his grasp of modernist principles. Kandinsky's early abstractions and Chinese brush painting became a source for Marin's landscapes, whereas flat Cubist forms and the figure-ground relationships common to the Post-Impressionists were less vital to Marin's development. Marin was likely influenced by Matisse's calligraphic brushwork. He would have viewed Matisse's compositions at the Armory Show of 1913 and thereafter at Stieglitz' 291 gallery in New York.

Although Marin reworked many of his oil paintings, he maintained that direct observation of nature rather than its reconceptualization in the studio was vital to his watercolors. He had little interest in non-objective abstraction and little in common with his contemporaries of the New York School. *Cape Split, Maine, Seashore and Tree* was exhibited in the inaugural exhibition of the Museum of Art of Ogunquit in 1953, later renamed the Ogunquit Museum of American Art. Marin died at his Cape Split home a month after the exhibition closed.

Between 1830 and 1920 an estimated three thousand professional and emerging artists participated in a mass retreat from urban centers to over eighty rural and seaside American and European communities, residing for varying lengths of time. Today, the view from Narrow Cove and the heritage associated with Ogunquit continue to compel artists, connoisseurs, sight-seers, and sunbathers to the seacoast.

Twachtman (continued from page 79)

Marsden Hartley and Milton Avery.

Twachtman shaped his Greenwich environment to achieve a sense of completeness that he sought in his art and life. Together, his home ground and his art produced a recursive pattern: he increased his appreciation of his property by representing it; in turn, his paintings enhanced his enjoyment of his surroundings. As noted

by his student Eliot Clark, in these works "there is a feeling of home...of a country well beloved. The painter has, as it were, become a part of the thing painted."⁵ By depicting what he created aesthetically, through architecture and the land itself, he turned his paintings into commentaries on his artistry, making the nature of art their true subject. In this his work forms an autobiographical record of what he felt and experienced during his Greenwich years.

¹ Susan G. Larkin, Ph.D. is the author of *The Cos Cob Art Colony: Impressionists on the Connecticut Shore*, exh. cat. (New York: National Academy of Design in association with Yale University, 2001), and many other publications on Connecticut artists and American Impressionism.

² Beginning in 1867, Hangroot was the name used to refer to a neighborhood consisting of the homes of a few African American families, who were descendants of people enslaved by Greenwich's colonial settlers.

³ "French and American Impressionists," *Art Amateur* 29 (June 1893), p. 4.

⁴ Charles H. Caffin, *The Story of American Painting: The Evolution of Painting in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1907), p. 231.

⁵ Eliot Clark, *John Twachtman* (New York: privately printed, 1924), p. 42.

Mining (continued from page 131)

lying the geological forms that inspired him. The remaining mining buildings are dwarfed by the rugged hills that dominate the composition.

Painter Maynard Dixon is best known for his distinctive landscape paintings of the American West, as well as his iconic portrayals of Native Americans during the first half of the twentieth century. Industrial themes are unusual for him: in 1934 the Public Works of Art Project commissioned him to document the construction of what became the Hoover Dam. Mining themes are even more unusual for him. *Old Hoist, Ramsey Mine, Ramsey, Nevada* (one of several he made at this site in 1927), reveals his strong compositional skills in its striking verticality.

Among the most important legacies of New Deal art programs were the many murals that were commissioned in every state. The government funded a significant body of work in mostly representational styles that resulted in a national aesthetic that was characterized by a strong sense of place. Themes depicting local history and