WALL TEXT

## GERTRUDE KÄSEBIER'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE EIGHT: PORTRAITS FOR PROMOTION

On February 3, 1908, an exhibition opened to great fanfare at Macbeth Galleries in New York. The day before the opening, the *New York Herald* trumpeted "Secession in Art," and the *World* published a full-page article on the front page of their Sunday magazine about "New York's Art War and the Eight Rebels." In the coming weeks, the *New York Times* and the *Philadelphia Press* covered the exhibition in detail, and articles appeared in national magazines, including *The Craftsman*, *American Art News*, and *Current Literature*. It was an impressive outpouring of interest for a 13-day exhibition of 63 paintings by artists who regularly exhibited in the city. The exhibition of the Eight would become a watershed in the history of American art.

The enthusiastic press coverage was the result of a year-long campaign orchestrated by the artists to promote their work and their ideas about modern American art. Although they were not an organized group, the participants in this exhibition—Robert Henri, John Sloan, William Glackens, George Luks, Arthur B. Davies, Everett Shinn, Ernest Lawson, and Maurice Prendergast—would become known as "the Eight" months before the show opened.

Many publications printed the artists' portraits alongside their works, putting faces to the narrative of artistic rebellion. The portraits were made by New York photographer Gertrude Käsebier, a committed modern artist in her own right. Elegant, individualized, and free of studio props and conventional poses, Käsebier's portraits expressed the modern outlook of her subjects.

## EIGHT AMERICAN PAINTERS

The painters who became known as "the Eight" were not an organized group or school, and the 1908 exhibition was the only occasion when they exhibited together. Four of the Eight—John Sloan, William Glackens, George Luks, and Everett Shinn—began their careers as illustrators for newspapers in Philadelphia, where they met Robert Henri. One by one, the Philadelphians moved to New York and turned their attention to painting. As early as 1901, Henri was organizing exhibitions that featured his friends and likeminded artists. Around this time, all of them were interested in portraying the city and its working-class inhabitants, which gained them little favor with art critics and exhibition juries, who found their subject matter coarse.

In New York, the Philadelphia painters befriended the three other artists who would complete the Eight. Ernest Lawson shared their interest in city subjects, though he worked in a high-keyed impressionist palette and often painted the city from a more distant, picturesque perspective. In 1906, along with Luks, Glackens, and Shinn, his nomination to the National Academy of Design was rejected. A painter of dreamy landscapes and nudes, Arthur B. Davies had enjoyed solo

exhibitions at Macbeth Galleries since 1896 and had cultivated collectors, including the photographer Gertrude Käsebier. Despite his success, he shared Henri's frustration with the conservative juries at the National Academy. Davies was friends with Boston-based painter Maurice Prendergast, who also exhibited at Macbeth Galleries. Prendergast spent time in New York each year to keep up on developments in the art world, and also submitted work to the National Academy—where it was often rejected by the Academy's jurors.

The moniker, the Eight, came from the press. The name was inspired by the Ten, a group of impressionist painters who seceded from the Society of American Artists in 1898, when they felt that group was becoming too conservative. Unlike the Ten, members of the Eight continued to exhibit at the National Academy and in other juried exhibitions around the nation.

## A PROTEST EXHIBITION

In 1907, George Luks' painting *Man with Dyed Mustachios* was left out of the annual exhibition at the National Academy of Design. In response to this and other rejections of his associates' works, Henri pulled two of his paintings from the show. He complained in the newspapers about the Academy's conservatism and its failure to accept works by innovative younger artists. Within weeks, Henri was planning a protest exhibition for 1908. Through friends in the press, over the next year, the artists positioned themselves as rebels fighting against entrenched interests. This was the age of the "yellow press" and the newspapers embraced this story of artistic revolution.

Still working as a newspaper illustrator, Sloan understood the importance of images in the press. He volunteered to photograph one painting by each artist and gathered the portraits taken by Käsebier for distribution to the media. Sloan's diary is punctuated with references to sending out photographs to newspapers and magazines. In the months leading up to the exhibition, comic illustrations circulated among the friends, mocking the efforts—led by Sloan and Henri—to drum up interest in the press. In the cartoon below, which remains in a private collection, Luks pictured them as a band, with Henri as the conductor and Sloan banging the drum.

## GERTRUDE KÄSEBIER

Gertrude Käsebier bridged the worlds of fine art photography and professional portraiture, making her an ideal photographer for modern artists like the Eight. Käsebier took up photography in her late thirties—originally to make photographs of her children—while studying portrait painting at the Pratt Institute. She worked with a chemist and a professional photographer to learn the trade and opened a New York studio in 1897, but it was her art background that differentiated her work.

In her early portraits, Käsebier placed her clients against dark, textured backgrounds and posed them in a manner that recalled Old Master paintings. She often used natural side lighting, rather

than the typical photographer's skylight, and portrait sessions could take hours while she got to know the sitter and tried different poses. She printed her negatives again and again—sometimes experimenting with different printing techniques—until she achieved the result she wanted. Like much modern art of her day, Käsebier's compositions emphasized broad masses, rather than minute detail. Her photographs looked like works of art, rather than commercial portraits.

Käsebier participated in the most important photography exhibitions at the moment when photographers, artists, and critics were arguing for the artistic potential of the medium. Her work caught the eye of the art critic Charles Caffin, who included her in his influential book, *Photography as a Fine Art* from 1901. Alfred Stieglitz, photographer and gallery owner, featured Käsebier in the inaugural issue of his influential magazine *Camera Work* in 1902, and, when he founded the Photo-Secession that year, she was a charter member of the highly selective group.

With her artistic style and public recognition, Käsebier's studio attracted artists and writers. She photographed Davies as early as 1904, and they became friends. She purchased his paintings, and it is likely that he encouraged Henri to visit her in 1907.

## CRITICAL RESPONSE

The Eight's publicity campaign was highly successful, drawing visitors as well as critical attention. A writer for the *Evening Mail* reported that "Macbeth's gallery scarcely opens in the morning before the crowd begins to arrive." Despite the bombastic headlines, the exhibition reviews were relatively balanced. While some critics were negative, others were enthusiastic about "the new men." Mary Fanton Roberts, writing in *The Craftsman* as Giles Edgerton, declared the Eight "representative of the best that America has yet achieved in painting."

Writers noted the diversity of styles on display: one described it as "the jangling and booming of eight differently tuned orchestras." Most reviews praised some artists and scorned others. The *Evening Mail* declared two of Henri's portraits to be "masterpieces of characterization, and amazingly fine in every respect of skill and feeling," but called Prendergast's studies of St. Malo "artistic tommy-rot."

The headlines and reviews resulted in crowds at the gallery, and seven works were sold, earning nearly $4,000. The show attracted interest around the nation, and the artists quickly organized a tour, arranging substitutions for works sold or promised to other venues. The exhibition of the Eight would visit nine cities in 1908 and 1909. Despite the extraordinary success of this undertaking, the Eight would not exhibit as a group again. Instead, they were involved in other groundbreaking projects, including the Exhibition of Independent Artists in 1910 and the Armory Show in 1913.