The Eight: An Art Movement

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The Eight: An Art Movement

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

The movement of the early 1900s known as the Eight was an important cultural movement for the world of art, exhibitions, and individual artists alike. Although the Eight weren't as massively revolutionary as they would have liked to be, they were a very effective tool to spark change in the art scene at the time. They were nonconformist painters who helped to pave the way for the rise of private art exhibitions and the power of the artist as an individual.

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The eight artists that made up this eccentric group—Robert Henri, Everett Shinn, George Luks, Maurice Prendergast, John Sloan, Arthur Davies, William Glackens and Ernest Lawson—didn't start out with the intention to change the world of art. They were quite fortunate that timing was on their side, which gave their cause momentum. The art world was on tumultuous ground, and this group of eight men, masterminded by Robert Henri, was there to give the added push that was needed.

The art world that predated Henri and the Eight was in turmoil. Artists were unhappy with the main art organization, the National Academy of Design in New York. In 1877, a significant number of artists left the National Academy of Design. They broke away and founded the Society of American Artists, which gave the artists a bit more freedom. The Society closely resembled the Salons of France during this time (Reich 7). The process of painting selections by the jury was unfavorable for Henri and his contemporaries. Henri wanted a better way of showcasing his and others' work. The Society of American Artists wasn't overly successful on its own, so in 1906 Henri played a role in merging these two separate artist groups back into one (Reich 7). This was the perfect opportunity for the formation of the Eight because there was now a large target group that could be addressed, as opposed to two separate groups to win over (Milroy 45).

Timing was favorable for Henri's somewhat rebellious actions, but if it weren't for his predecessors, then the establishment of the Eight as a powerful movement would have been much more difficult. In 1898, Charles De Kay founded the National Art Club in New York City in the hopes of bringing the arts community, which consisted of artists, painters, sculptors,
architects and museum/art school administrators and patrons together. The National Art Club established an art forum in which to discuss and display fine art (Milroy 34). This was one of the first "individual" clubs that was separate from the National Academy of Design. In 1904, De Kay's Art Club hosted a loan exhibition which featured some works by Henri, Luks, Prendergast, Glackens and Sloan. This was a major step for the groundwork of the Eight because this exhibition gave these artists press and critics were impressed with the selected paintings (Milroy 38). Specifically making a name for himself through this exhibition was Robert Henri. He was gaining recognition as an influential leader. Sadakihi Hartmann, a critic, referred to Henri as "the patriarch of the Cafe crowd" and as the leader of "a new movement" (38). Even though Henri hadn't established the movement known as the Eight, he was making waves for when the time came a few years later for the movement to take shape.

The tension within the arts community revolving around the National Academy of Design was growing and, by 1907, Henri and some of his friends suffered from the maltreatment that the Academy showed to some of its showcasing artists. The jury procedure that the Academy used was as subjective as it was frustrating. In this show in question, Henri had three paintings that were going to be included in the exhibition. In the first round of jury voting, two of the paintings received the unanimous vote of a "1" ranking, guaranteeing their inclusion in the show. The third painting received a ranking of "2." Henri would have been satisfied with these rankings until the second round of voting when one of his pieces was downgraded to a ranking of "2" after having been unanimously voted in. Due to the ranking process of the Academy, Henri pulled two of his three paintings from the exhibition (Milroy 22). This show was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Henri officially broke from the National Academy of Design in 1908 (Reich 7). The only option that was available to Henri and his friends was a private gallery showing; behold the birth of the Eight (Reich 8). Henri didn't leave the ranks of the Academy jury quietly. He created quite a controversy in the newspapers trying to stir up support for the newly formed Eight. Everett Shinn was a friend of Henri and the other group of six men at this time, which consisted of Sloan, Lawson, Davies, Luks, Glackens and Henri, but he wasn't a strong advocate of establishing what would become the Eight until the controversy broke out with the Academy in 1907. He gladly joined their ranks then and helped them achieve the forceful movement that was to come (Reich 8).

On April 4th, 1907, the group of six met and pooled $50 from each in order to help them financially secure a place to hold their now independent exhibition.
On April 13th, they had $300 and found an old store building that they could use, which was called "The West Twenty-third Street Gallery" due to its location (Reich 9). Shinn had an interest in the movement before, but it wasn't until they had found this Gallery that he resurfaced enough to make a difference to them and to officially join them as the seventh member of the Eight movement.

Rent for one year at the West Twenty-third Street Gallery was $1500, an astronomical price that the men could not afford. Luck turned around for them, however, when Arthur Davies got in contact with William Macbeth, the owner of the Gallery, and asked if they could rent a space for two weeks in either the fall or winter. Davies also contacted his friend, Maurice Prendergast, and opened the show up to his work as well, making Prendergast the eighth and final member of the movement's octuplet. Macbeth consented under the conditions of a $500 guarantee and 25% of the sales. The deal was agreed upon and the show was set for opening on the 3rd of February, 1908 (Reich 9).

Accepting William Macbeth into their ranks would prove to be one of the best choices that the group ever made. Macbeth's galleries had been running for sixteen years, gaining credibility and recognition. If it weren't for Macbeth's success before the Eight even formed, then this monumental exhibition wouldn't have been as well received by the public, critics, or the press. According to Elizabeth Milroy, "William Macbeth helped to make the public accept the idea of the Eight show as a reasonable alternative exhibition, rather than a call for revolt" (80). The exhibition got mixed reviews, but the public favored the show greatly.

In the two weeks that the show ran, 300 visitors would pass through within an hour. The show ended up making $4000 in sales. The set up of the exhibition was different from that of anything the Academy had ever done. The men hung their own work, and they decided what they wanted to display. Also, there were eight spaces of equal dimension so the work was showcased completely democratically (Reich 9). This type of exhibition fit Henri's vision because he wanted a showcase in which there was no jury and no prize distinction (Reich 10).

For the most part, the exhibition at Macbeth's gallery was well received. There was mixed praise and criticism for the raw look at life that these painters took on (Reich 10). Four of the painters, Henri, Davies, Luks and Prendergast, received praise for their innovativeness, while the other four, Sloan, Shinn, Lawson and Glackens, were criticized for being too "thoroughly French in spirit" (Milroy 48). One reporter, James Hunker, from The Sun said that, "any young painter recently returned from Paris or Munich—the Munich of secessionists—would call the exhibition of the eight painters very interesting but far from revolutionary." However, he also said "that their exhibition would teach Americans to tolerate and even encourage sincere experimentation" (Milroy 48). Many did,
however, view the Eight as a "rebellion group" but they did not achieve political separation from the status quo (Milroy 45). The show in New York at Macbeth gallery was so successful that the paintings were shipped off to the Pennsylvania Academy where they were also showcased for two weeks. After that show, Sloan organized the show to move on to eight other large cities starting in September of 1908: Chicago, Toledo, Detroit, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Bridgeport and ending the circuit in May of 1909 in Newark, New Jersey (Milroy 48-51).

As the popularity of the Eight grew, so did differing press reactions. Typically, Glackens, Lawson and Shinn were favored. Henri received criticism that his work was "not representative of the artist at his best" (Milroy 51). Davies' press was positive enough with comments such as "charmingly poetic." Prendergast was looked upon with either admiration or disbelief and Luks and Sloan received equally mixed reviews (Milroy 51). W. H. Fox of the Indianapolis News thought the exhibition was "one of the most interesting collections brought together in the history of American art" (Milroy 51). Conversely, a Chicago Evening writer called the artists "tangential personages" and then completely dismissed the exhibition altogether (Milroy 51). A reviewer from the Toledo Bee said, "these eccentric eight are by no means rebels against the Academy or its traditions; they are merely individualists, bound together in a league of originality and unconventionality (51).

Even if the reviews weren't always positive, at least these eight painters were getting the attention that they wanted in the beginning. They had the individual freedom to achieve it by setting up and designing the layout and included pieces of their own exhibitions. They may not have been political radicals or even social rebels, but they were doing what they felt needed to be done in the art community: giving artists an alternative outlet for their work, disconnected from the confines of the National Academy of Design.

It is said that no press is bad press, and even with somewhat negative press, the Eight were still making waves. In February of 1908, regardless of the controversy and a Portuguese murder trial in the news, the Eight still received press coverage with radical rhetoric such as "rebellion" and "revolt" which were terms used by journalists to define them in the women's column of many papers (Milroy 77).

The one institution that didn't seem to take notice of the Eight, however, was the National Academy of Design itself. Even during the inception of the Eight and Henri's breaking away from the Academy, it did not respond. "The Academy issued no official public rebuttal, relying instead on the good will of the discriminating few among the exhibition-going public who would disregard the controversy" (Milroy 23). It seems that the Academy was hoping that by not publicly recognizing the Eight that they might go away. That was not the case, however.

The press latched on to the fact that the Academy was not taking the public bait that the Eight had indirectly thrown to them. By "dubbing the association 'the Eight,' it [the press] paired Nationalism with the struggle against marginality in portraying the artists as a valiant band of patriots battling the monolithic National Academy" (Milroy 27). The press was showing how "eight" individuals were trying to take on the massively powerful Academy. The Eight
weren't afraid to get involved and make waves, and the Academy was staying silent. By doing so, the press was insinuating that the Eight had a considerable amount of power. Perhaps they actually did win against the organization that they were fighting.

Despite the issue with the process of the jury, the issue of greatest concern that the Eight had with the Academy was the fact that there were more artists and painters in New York City than in London or Paris, and yet there were limited opportunities for exhibitions. Art exhibitions were gaining international praise and attention at this time and yet, considering the power the New York City could invoke, there was very little being done to accommodate artists. There were no facilities established that could hold comprehensive exhibitions of contemporary art in the way that the Eight, in particular Henri, and the rest of the art communities felt that New York should. The small facilities that existed couldn't come close to showcasing all of the art clubs and artists within the state of New York as a whole. This was the Academy's responsibility. There was much inequity within the New York art communities (Milroy 33).

The art community was petitioning for an exhibition hall that would be equipped to hold everybody. "A great exhibition hall would in effect constitute an expanded and centralized marketplace, readily available to New York artists and regularly accessible to an audience of educated buyers" (Milroy 34). A facility such as this was not considered by the Academy, so in order to showcase the work of Henri and his friends, they had to create their own exhibition site, which led the way for other artists, regardless of how much the Academy ignored their actions. The press that the Eight received helped to make them less politically ambiguous. The works that they were painting were controversial, as was the press, but they were painting things that made political statements, such as scenes of the Civil War. These painters were trying to be trendsetters by the topics that they painted. These eight men were doing something that many artists and critics alike didn't think possible; they were breaking away from the main art body, the National Academy, and becoming successful even without its help. As Milroy said, "the implications of 'secession' feared by Stieglitz were exploited," yet these men did so with authority and determination, making Stieglitz's fears unwarranted (45). These artists were creative from their hearts and they weren't afraid to let that be known to the public. Even before the Eight exhibition took place, in January of 1908, six of the eight men, excluding Prendergast and Davies, made contributions to De Kay's

"Special Exhibition of Contemporary Art" which showcased the works of artists such as Mary Cassett, Eduard Steichen and Richard Kent, making this a very diversified group of different generations, as well as politically different (45). Despite what critics and some of the press may have said, there was a sense of political acuteness to this group of eight men.

The impact of the movement known as the Eight had a lasting effect on the art community. After the showcasing of the exhibition that was "The Eight," the ideals behind Henri's vision didn't disappear. The Eight caused "the natural turn of events which resulted in the 1910 Independent Show and the Armory Show of 1913;
freeing subject matter and technique from the previous stifling academic restrictions, and inaugurating the Independent Movement, which legitimized artist-organized, jury-free group exhibitions” (Pearlman 20). The Eight did for the rest of the art community what Macbeth did for the Eight. If there is an arena in which action can manifest itself, then it will. The Eight got the opportunity to shine via

Macbeth and consequently, the Independent Movement got its opportunity from the success of the Eight.

Due to the fact that academic painting differed so significantly from what the Eight were doing, all but Davies tried his hand at teaching, in order to break the mold. Not surprisingly, Henri was a very determined, powerful teacher. A student, C.K. Chatterton said, "his teaching seemed revolutionary at the time. We hung on his every word" (Pearlman 21).

Perhaps when Henri was treated unfairly by the Academy in 1907 he didn't set out to change the world of art. The fact is though, he did: "Exhibiting together as ‘The Eight’ in 1908, they transformed art exhibitions into political statements and media events, and shifted forever the relationship between the American artist and the American public" (Milroy 15). With the help of Macbeth, the Eight were able to create art that spoke to the masses, whether it be politically, socially, or just for entertainment purposes. People came out to see the Eight during the two weeks it was in New York partly because of the controversy that it stirred up, but also because they were painting things that affected real people. The public could relate and therefore they came out to see what all the fuss was about.

The Eight "were also authors of a system of self-imaging and promotion that set a pattern for many compatriot successors. Important cultural issues underlie their shared history and the role of the artist in American society, publicity, self-promotion, and the marketing of art; the internal politics of American art exhibitions... the concepts of ‘modern art’ and ‘modernism’ among American artists and their audiences" (Reich 15). The Eight may not have been rebels, but they were trying to change a system in which their visions did not fit. They were successful in doing so because their legacy still lives on today in art history and in the process of art exhibitions. Though ignored by the Academy, their actions did not go unnoticed: "The Eight... made a collective impression, along with the novelists of the time, whose work resembled theirs as a record of celebration of the American scene" (Reich 10). These eight men truly paved a new way for American artists in the 1900s. Their influence is felt still throughout the art communities as seen in the progression of art as a way of life, as expression and as something to embrace and showcase. The Eight were not so-called political rebels, but more accurately, vessels of social change and artistic expression.
Works Cited


Paintings:

Figure 1: Glackens, The Boxing Match n.d.

Figure 2: Shinn, Ballet in the Park n.d.

Figure 3: Sloan, Night Windows 1910

Figure 4: Luks, Daughter of the Mines 1923 (Reich 47)

Figure 5: cover photo: World Magazine 2 February 1908 (Milroy 45)

Figure 6: Lawson, Spring Night, Harlem River 1913 (Milroy 98)

Figure 7: Henri, Salome 1909 (Milroy 86)

Figure 8: Prendergast, Salem Willows 1901 (Milroy 50)

Figure 9: Henri www.google.com

Figure 10: Davies www.google.com

Figure 11: Lawson www.google.com