Quiet Simplicity - Intro

In the years following the American Civil War, the socio-economic climate of the United States experienced more structural changes than in any previous period of the country’s history. The primary catalyst for this change came swiftly as the rural, agrarian foundation of American life gave way to the urbanization and industrialization of large city centers. With the general population no longer settled in the countryside and struggling to adapt to the pressures of modern life, it was natural for artists who lived, worked, and exhibited in thriving cities to look to the homestead for inspiration, Capitalizing on a universal sentimentality for quieter times, painters of this era idealized the rural settings of the past, rendered as nostalgic, pastoral retreats from urban existence.

This exhibition explores the work of major American painters from the late 19th and early 20th centuries whose compositions speak to this veneration of simplicity and exist under the category of genre, a French term which defines paintings of intimate scenes from everyday life—ordinary people in work or recreation, depicted in a generally realistic manner, and almost consistently focused on lower- and middle-class subjects. These artworks have been selected to showcase a critical dichotomy within the field of genre painting, and one hinged upon the fundamentals of a class-based society: work and leisure.

Artists featured in this exhibition demonstrate a keen understanding of the romanticized notions of work and leisure born of a bygone era, and illustrate precisely the differences in the lives of working-class and the genteel upper-class citizens. Subjects of leisure are often depicted out of doors; socializing, enjoying the beauty of a landscape, or indoors, taking pleasure in solitude or reading. Alternately, subjects whose lives revolved around work are frequently pictured in the midst of toil and are typically engaged in agriculture-based manual labor.

Annie Traquair Lang and Helen Turner used their unique position as female artists to show the ease and relaxation enjoyed by women in the upper tiers of society, depicting them socializing at outdoor fêtes in gestural, impressionistic styles, whereas artists like Luther Emerson Van Gorder, James McNeill Whistler, and David Ericson have chosen children as their subjects—capturing the pure innocence and contagious joy they exude while at play. In contrast, works such as Homer Dodge Martin’s painting of the solitary figure in The Clam Digger, Charles Warren Eaton’s Last Load Home and Carleton Wiggins’ Shepherd and Flock offer up bucolic scenes of farmers and shepherds and their special connection to the landscape, but also reveal a weariness and sense of loneliness at being isolated in nature.

While the tranquility of life in rural America at the turn of the 20th century remains unmatched in our current society, it is the tribute to the resilient, self-reliant spirit of the American homestead, the beauty of the landscape, and the luxury of leisure time that endure in these artworks.