



Maurice Prendergast
American, 1858 - 1924

Salem Cove

c. 1915/1918

oil on canvas

overall: 61.4 x 76.5 cm (24 3/16 x 30 1/8 in.)

framed: 85.1 x 99.7 x 6.7 cm (33 1/2 x 39 1/4 x 2 5/8 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Prendergast

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1985.64.33

ENTRY

In November 1914, Maurice Prendergast and his brother, Charles, left Boston and moved to New York, where they lived at 50 Washington Square South. Among their neighbors was their good friend William Glackens (American, 1870 - 1938). By this time, Maurice was regarded as a leading American modernist who “found respect and acceptance in his newly adopted city” where “the Armory Show helped to stimulate an environment in which modern art flourished.” [1] A major exhibition of his work at the Carroll Galleries in 1915 was an immense success, and prominent collectors such as John Quinn, Albert Barnes, and Ferdinand Howald vied for his work.

During this late phase of his career, Prendergast summered regularly in New England resort towns, such as Annisquam, Gloucester, and Salem in Massachusetts, and Ogunquit and Brooksville in Maine. His standard working procedure was to paint watercolors during the summer and then translate them into large exhibition paintings when he returned to his studio in New York. *Salem Cove* is a particularly fine example of the many shore scenes that the artist produced between 1914 and 1923. It features people enjoying leisurely activities,

such as promenading, swimming, or simply sitting near the water's edge with sailboats passing by. Generalized types, mostly well-dressed women wearing bonnets and carrying parasols, occupy the foreground of Prendergast's decorative, friezelike composition. The painting is closely related to the smaller *Summer Day, Salem* [fig. 1] and, like many of the late works, employs a high horizon line broken by islands and trees. Prendergast's bright palette and mosaiclike facture contribute to the festive, optimistic ambience of the scene and reflect the pointillist techniques of neoimpressionists like Georges Seurat (French, 1859 - 1891) and Paul Signac (French, 1863 - 1935). [2] The idyllic subject matter, brilliant color, and sensuous paint application are also indebted to Glackens.

Even though the titles of many of Prendergast's late paintings indicate that they represent specific sites, he never intended them to be topographically accurate. *Salem Cove* is a highly personal and timeless vision of a leisurely existence that preoccupied the artist for his entire career. Nancy Mowl Mathews noted that "as an advocate of the leisure spots of the Massachusetts Coast, Prendergast helped to transform the national image of New England from a maritime power and industrial giant to [a] picturesque vacation destination." [3]

Prendergast had first visited the historic town of Salem at the turn of the century and painted a number of views of Salem Willows, an oceanfront area with a popular amusement park that is still one of the town's attractions. Salem Willows was made a public park in 1858 and during the 20th century became a summer destination for working-class Bostonians because it was accessible by the newly built streetcar system. Consistent with the artist's penchant for idealization and generalization, there is no indication here that Salem Cove was near a major industrial port. The scene, like all of Prendergast's late paintings, is far removed from the harsher realities of the day. Mathews speculated that Prendergast's anachronistic, escapist aesthetic appealed to his patrons who "sought the optimism in timeless idylls that they had once derived from the spectacles of modern life." [4]

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

Salem Cove

© National Gallery of Art, Washington



fig. 1 Maurice Prendergast, *Summer Day, Salem*, c. 1915–1918, oil on canvas, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA, Gift of Mrs. Charles Prendergast, 86.18.80. Image: Petegorsky / Gipe photo

NOTES

- [1] Dominic Madormo, “Prendergast and His Critics,” in *Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Charles Prendergast: A Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Carol Clark, Nancy Mowll Mathews, and Gwendolyn Owens (Williamstown, MA, 1990), 69.
 - [2] For a discussion of Prendergast’s late work, see Nancy Mowll Mathews, *Maurice Prendergast* (Williamstown, MA, 1990), 36–38.
 - [3] Nancy Mowll Mathews, *The Art of Leisure: Maurice Prendergast in the Williams College Museum of Art* (Williamstown, MA, 1999), 22.
 - [4] Nancy Mowll Mathews, *The Art of Leisure: Maurice Prendergast in the Williams College Museum of Art* (Williamstown, MA, 1999), 47.
-

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The plain-weave linen fabric support has been lined with wax and mounted on a nonoriginal stretcher. The artist applied oil paint in mostly thick, opaque masses, with numerous areas of low impasto, over a thin white ground. The painting is in excellent condition. The surface is coated with a thin layer of synthetic resin varnish.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

PROVENANCE

The artist [1858-1924]; gift 1924 to his brother, Charles Prendergast [1869-1948], Westport, Connecticut; by inheritance to his wife, Eugenie Prendergast, Westport, Connecticut; purchased June 1984 by Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia; gift 1985 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1934 Possibly Maurice Prendergast Memorial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1934, no. 109.

1940 Selections: 1820-1920, Walker Galleries, New York, 1940, no. 6.

1986 Gifts to the Nation: Selected Acquisitions from the Collections of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1986, unnumbered checklist.

1999 An Enduring Legacy: Masterpieces from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1999-2000, no cat.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 164, no. 59, color repro.
- 1990 Clark, Carol, Nancy Mowll Mathews, and Gwendolyn Owens. *Maurice Brazil Prendergast and Charles Prendergast: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Williamstown, Massachusetts: Williams College Museum of Art, 1990, p. 310, no. 439.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 266, repro.

To cite: Robert Torchia, “Maurice Prendergast/*Salem Cove*/c. 1915/1918,” *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/66431> (accessed September 27, 2024).