

# Robert Vonnoh, American Impressionist

by Wendy Greenhouse

**R**obert William Vonnoh has long been recognized as a pioneering figure in the development of American impressionism. The radical coloristic brilliance and dramatic impasto of some of his early paintings distinguished him among his contemporaries and in posterity as one of the most advanced first-generation American practitioners of impressionism. As an influential teacher at the Pennsylva-

nia Academy of the Fine Arts in the 1890s he helped to nurture not only a taste for impressionism but individual self-expression, a value that proved fundamental in the advances of the next generation. Yet Vonnoh remains little known beyond scholarly circles, and that almost entirely for his radical impressionist work of the late 1880s and early 1890s.

Like many other members of his artistic generation, he lived well beyond impressionism's transition in American artistic

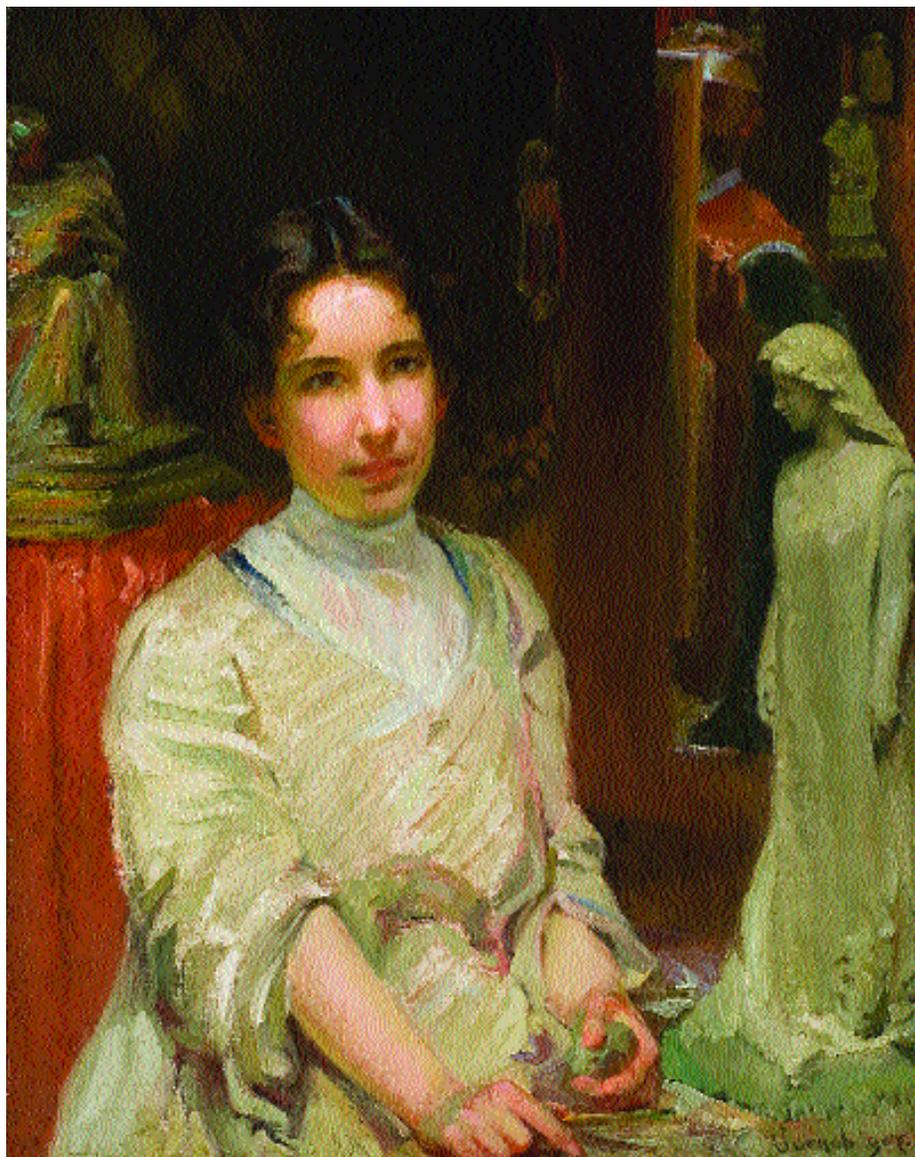
*Robert Vonnoh, American Impressionist* is on view through June 27, 2010, at the Butler Institute of American Art, 524 Wick Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, 44502, 330-743-1711, [www.butlerart.com](http://www.butlerart.com). Organized by Madron Gallery, Chicago, and the Butler Institute of American Art, the exhibition is accompanied by a 36-page soft-cover catalogue.

All illustrations are by Robert Vonnoh.

RIGHT: *Poppies*, 1888, o/c, 13 x 18, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana, James E. Roberts Fund.

BELOW RIGHT: *November*, 1890, o/c, 32 x 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Joseph E. Temple Fund.

LEFT: *Portrait of Bessie Potter Vonnoh*, 1907, o/c, 30<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 24, Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, Connecticut.



practice from a revolutionary mode to an establishment badge of genteel resistance to the challenges posed by urban realism, abstraction, and other radical “isms” of the new century. By the time the groundbreaking Armory Show of 1913 shocked the American public with the art of the European avant-garde, Vonnoh’s art was regarded as the embodiment of old-fashioned gentility, dignity, and reserve. Throughout his long career his production was notably bifurcated not only between landscape and figure and portrait painting but within each of those genres between a manner informed by impressionist color and light and a more academic, tonal approach. Encompassing something of Vonnoh’s range, the twenty works in the present exhibition offer an opportunity to appreciate the artist’s work more broadly and to assess the nature of his practice as an American impressionist painter.

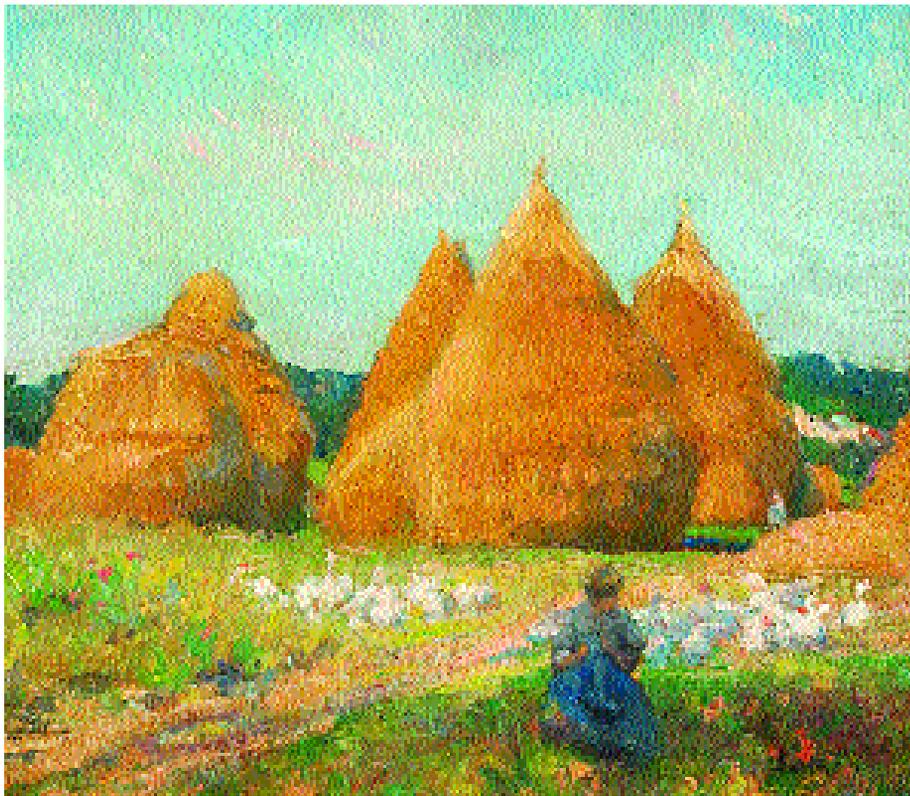
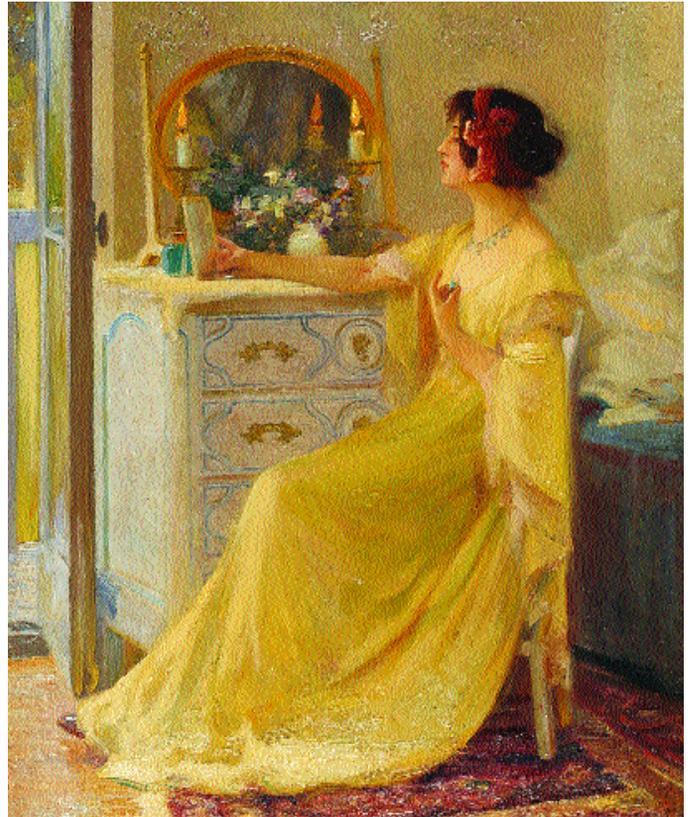
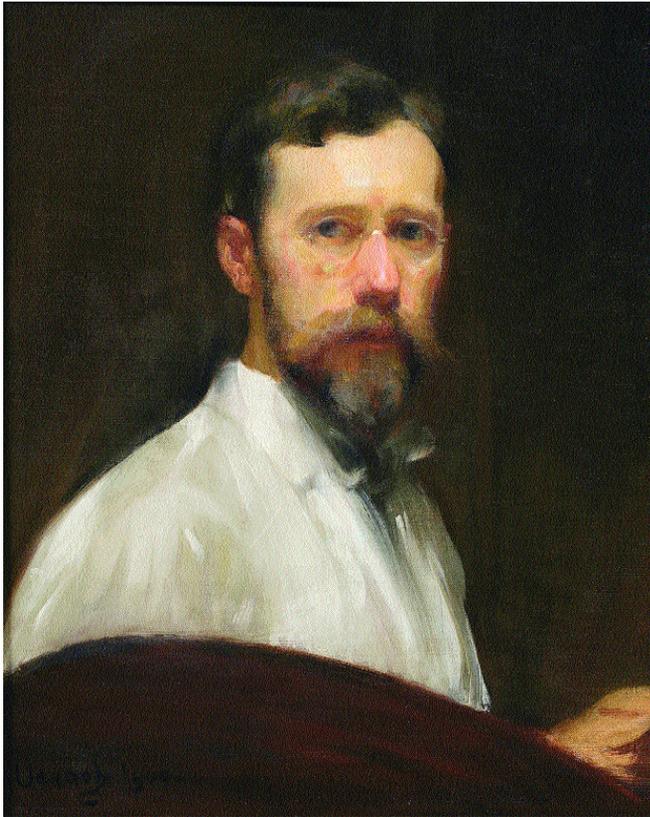
Vonnoh shared his modest origins and high aspirations with many in his artistic generation. Born in Hartford, the son of a German immigrant cabinetmaker, he was raised in Boston and at the age of fourteen, inspired more by the ambition to draw than to paint, he decided to become an



artist. The young artist first worked in the lithographic firm of Armstrong and Company, and he pursued formal study in two schools devoted to industrial design, the Boston Free Evening Drawing School and the Massachusetts Normal Art School. Both institutions imparted skills in mechanical drawing, with form and color taught only as adjuncts to industrial design.

Graduating in 1879 from the Massachusetts Normal Art School, Vonnoh soon began teaching there and at several other local drawing academies, while exhibiting his portrait drawings at the Boston Art Club. By 1881, he was able to finance further study in Paris. Vonnoh enrolled at the private Académie Julian, one of the most popular art schools for the increasing number of American art students in Paris. The pedagogy of the Académie emphasized careful draftsmanship and the figure, with instruction largely limited to critiques by the professional painters who comprised





ABOVE: *At the Dressing Table*, 1912, o/c, 36 x 30, Dr. and Mrs. Jay Tartell.

ABOVE LEFT: *Self Portrait*, 1900, o/c, 24 x 20, National Academy Museum, New York.

LEFT: *Tending the Flock*, c. 1908, o/c, 18 x 21, Godel & Co., Inc., New York.

RIGHT: *A Glorious Moment*, o/c, 18 x 22, Madron Gallery, Chicago.

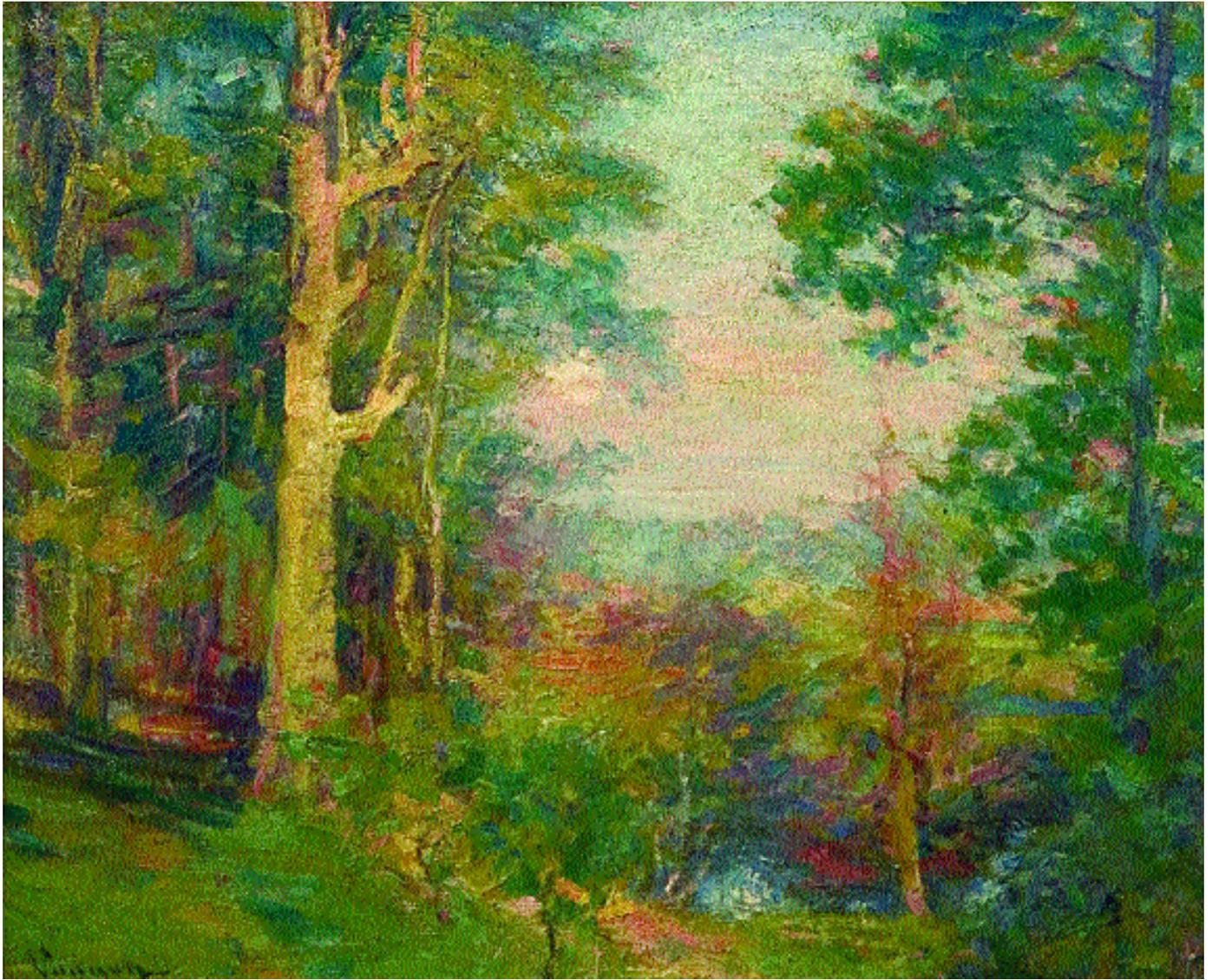
training, Vonnoh in 1883 launched himself as a teacher with an appointment to the Massachusetts Normal Art School, supplemented with instruction at the Cowles Art School. In 1885 he moved on to teach painting at the more prestigious Museum of Fine Arts School. Following his own training both in the industrial schools and at Julian, he stressed competence in drawing as the foundation for figure painting.

Outside Boston, he debuted with portraits at the annual salon at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and at the cosmopolitan art displays at Chicago's Interstate Industrial Exposition, in 1883 and 1885, respectively. By that time, however, Vonnoh had begun to work in landscape as well. As early as 1881, he exhibited a drawing of a New Hampshire scene at the Boston Art Club, and two of the three canvases he sent to Chicago for

the faculty. His teachers, Jules-Joseph Lefebvre and Gustave Boulanger, worked closely together in an atmosphere that encouraged independent stylistic development. From them he absorbed the requisite

skills for painting fashionable portraits in the current style, utilizing a dramatic pose against a plain dark background, fluid brushwork, and skillful modeling.

On the prestige of his Parisian academy



the 1887 Interstate Industrial Exposition were images of coastal Massachusetts.

In the mid-1880s, a group of advanced Boston painters began to broadcast their interest in the new mode known as impressionism. Boston painters Lilla Cabot Perry (Vonnoh's former classmate at the Cowles School) and John Enneking, both of whom would serve as catalysts for local interest in impressionism, were among Vonnoh's associates. Although he later claimed to have not seen Claude Monet's work until 1889, Vonnoh visited the French impressionist exhibition at the Mechanics Building in Boston in 1883, as well as the impressionist collection the Durand-Ruel gallery displayed in New York three years later.

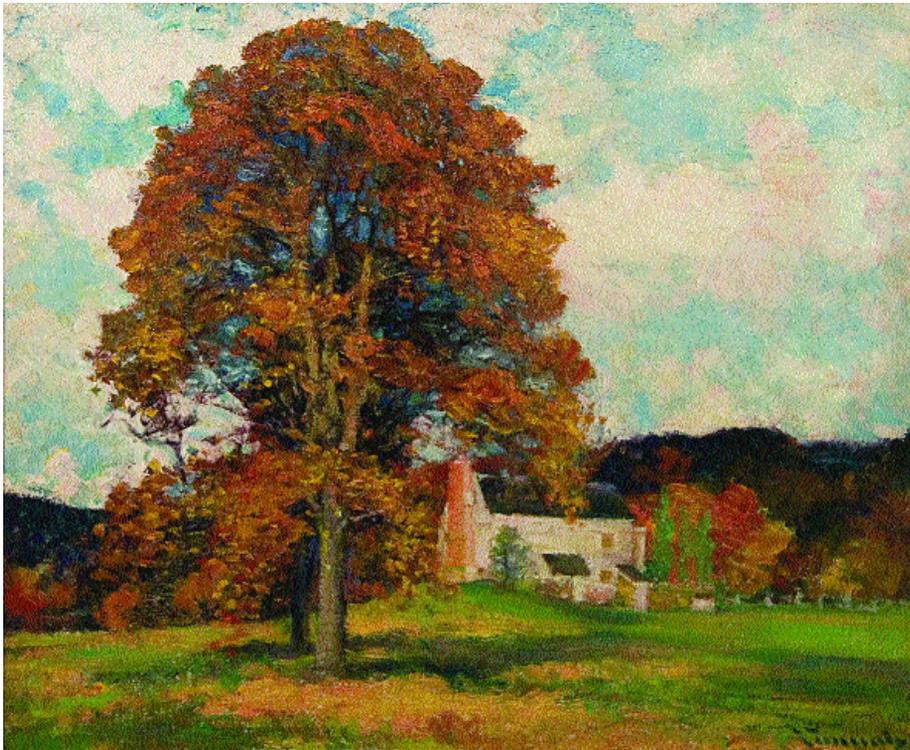
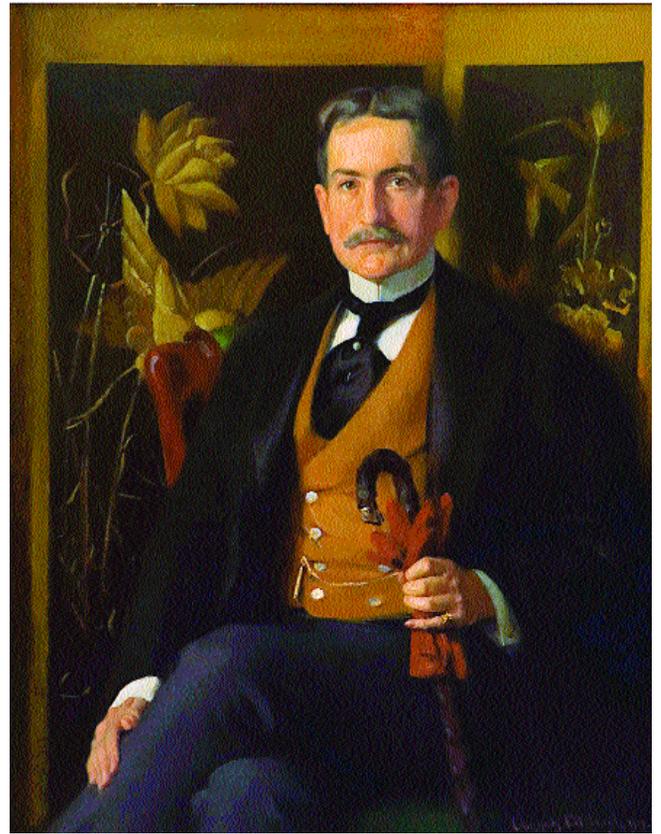
In 1887 Vonnoh returned to France for an extended stay that marked a turning point in his young career. The previous year, the artist and his bride had honey-

mooned at Grez-sur-Loing, a two-hour train ride south of Paris. Close to Barbizon and the romantic Forest of Fontainebleau, the rural village with its picturesque medieval bridge and tower had been a popular international artists' colony since the early 1870s. Adherents of the Grez school, many of them admirers of the work of French painter Jules Bastien-Lepage, depicted Grez's distinctive features, particularly its quaint weathered architecture and traditionally garbed peasant inhabitants, using muted, harmonious tones in structured compositions with high horizons to effect a compelling combination of heightened naturalism and poetic evocation. Vonnoh's own elegiac *November* epitomizes this style, but the divided strokes of pure color in the painting's foreground hint at the artist's fuller engagement with impressionism.

The year before he painted *November*,

Vonnoh had undertaken more daring experiments in pure color and broken brush strokes in the paintings of poppy fields that declared him "a devoted disciple of the new movement in painting." In *Poppies* the horizon is pressed close to the top edge of the image or eliminated altogether for an abstract effect heightened by the application of unmixed pigment seemingly directly from the tube. This work has been cited as evidence of Vonnoh's awareness not only of Monet's brilliant poppy field paintings but also of post-impressionism.

Like other Americans in Grez, Vonnoh was preoccupied with local rural life and its setting, rather than pure nature, as the subject of landscape painting—even in compositions in which no figures appear. In *A Sunlit Hillside* the village's picturesque architecture, viewed from a position that suggests its organic, even accidental devel-



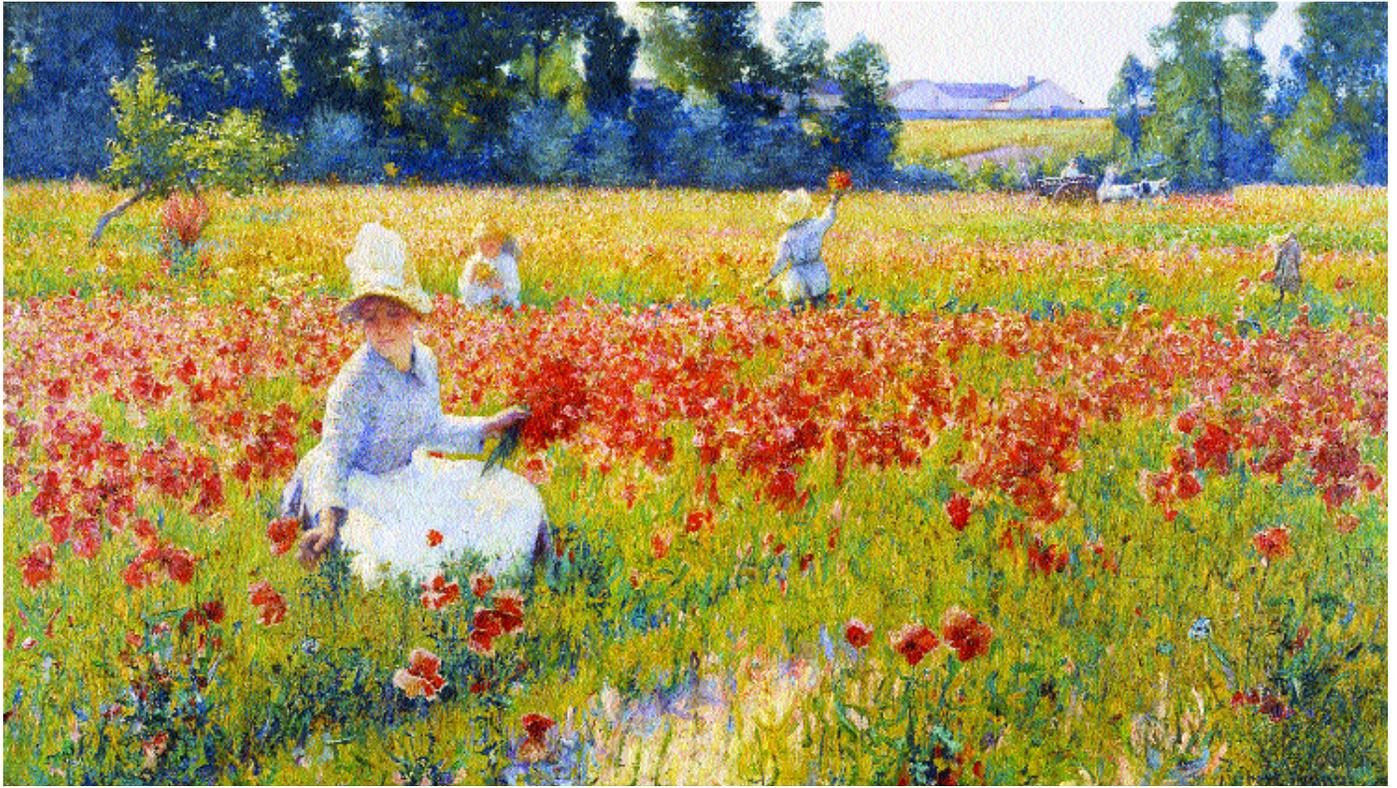
opment, tangibly evokes the specific setting, independent of painterly brushwork and bright light and color. This sense of place was among the qualities that won American critics to Vonnoh's impressionist

paintings at a time when the American art public largely was baffled by French impressionism's radical disregard for finish, draftsmanship, tonal relationships, and other academic conventions.

Although landscape paintings dominated Vonnoh's output during his Grez sojourn, the artist was clearly calculating his reception back home and priming himself for the lucrative, relatively reliable career of a fashionable portraitist. While still abroad, he selected for exhibition paintings that spanned the full range of his varied abilities, from landscape to narrative figural works with interior settings.

Vonnoh had exhibited his work at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts as early as 1883. In 1892 the Academy's sixty-second annual exhibition featured two galleries devoted to Vonnoh's paintings. He had already taken a post as the Academy's principal instructor in portrait and figure painting, hired both for his skills in those essential fields and for his reputation as an impressionist painter.

A popular teacher, Vonnoh imparted academic fundamentals while encouraging students to abandon not only black but also sienna and umber, all traditionally used as the basis for the shadowed tones of academic painting. Among his students were Robert Henri, John Sloan, and William Glackens, future urban realists in the circle later dubbed the Ashcan school. Vonnoh was undoubtedly the catalyst for Henri's



ABOVE: *In Flanders Field*, 1890, o/c, 58 x 104, Butler Institute of American Art.

RIGHT: *Landscape*, 1890, o/c, 20 1/2 x 17, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, gift of Cynthia Bing.

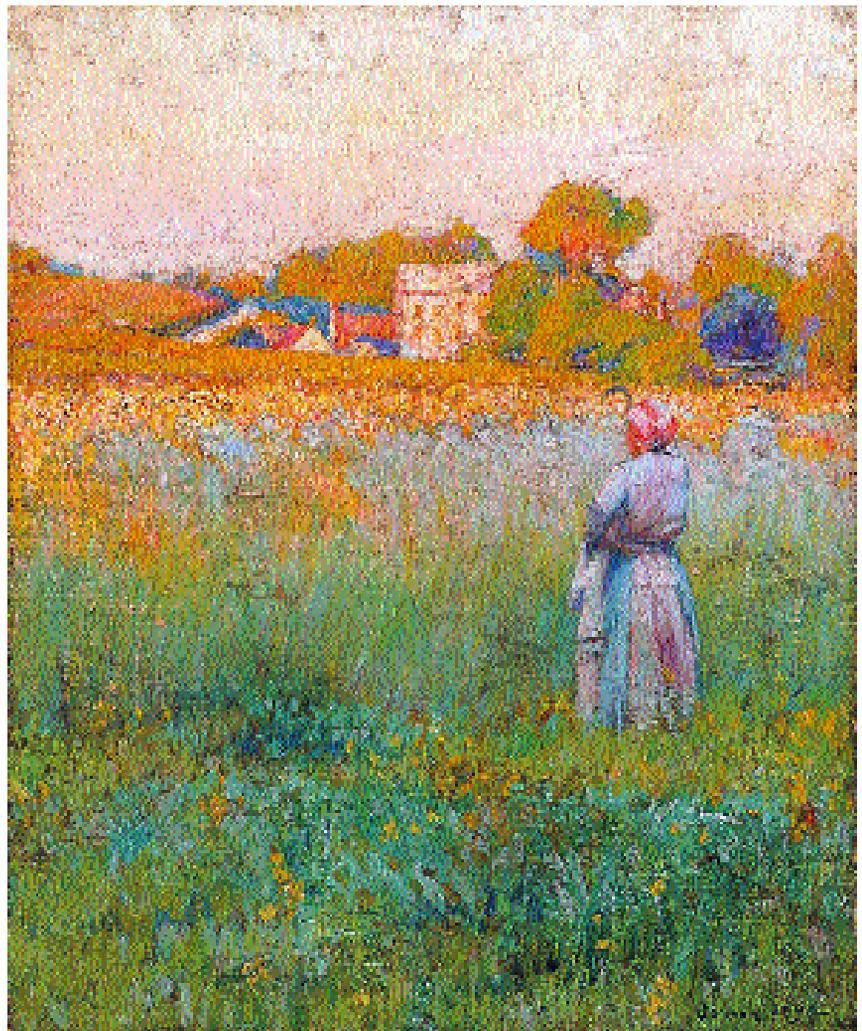
ABOVE LEFT: *Portrait of a Gentleman, Pittsburgh*, 1899, o/c, 40 x 32, Madron Gallery, Chicago.

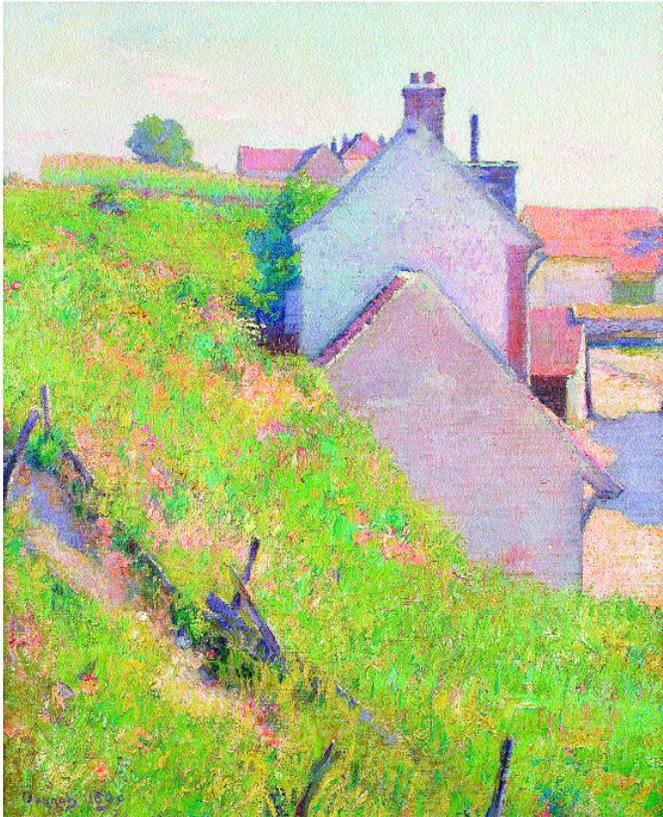
ABOVE FAR LEFT: *Springtime in France*, 1890, o/c, 21 x 17 1/2, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of Raymond J. and Margaret Horowitz.

LEFT: *American Autumn*, o/c, 25 x 30, Madron Gallery, Chicago.

brief involvement with impressionism. But his more long-lasting influence was probably on the development of a modified impressionist aesthetic among landscape painters working in Pennsylvania's Bucks County after the turn of the century.

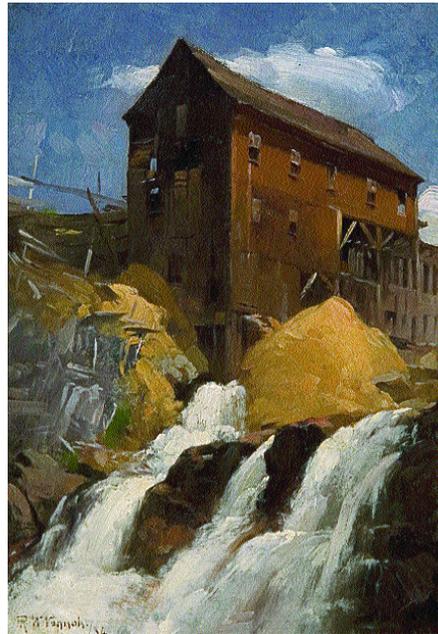
Vonnoh retained his ties to Philadelphia even after resigning from the Academy in 1896, finding portrait commissions there and serving on the juries for and exhibiting in the Academy's annuals; he would return to teach there between 1918 and 1920. Vonnoh's resignation from the Pennsylvania Academy's faculty signaled his ability to support himself purely by his art; it undoubtedly was prompted also by





his increasing presence in Chicago, where he opened a studio and dabbled in real estate. Vonnoh first visited the city in 1892, joining the influential circle of his old friends writer Hamlin Garland and sculptor Lorado Taft. Among Taft's many mentorees then working in his studio on decorations for the World's Columbian Exposition was a rising young sculptor, Bessie Potter, with whom Vonnoh developed a particular friendship; his painterly technique is said to have influenced the "impressionist" modeling and lively surfaces of the sculpted portraits and mother-and-child groups that soon brought Potter considerable local acclaim.

When the World's Columbian Exposition opened in 1893, the painter's thirteen paintings were prominent in the gargantuan international art display and garnered an award. The following year, Vonnoh sent to the Art Institute's annual exhibition two works that were greatly admired as examples of advanced impressionism—not landscapes but a portrait and an ambitious work of outdoor genre. Acknowledged in reviews of New York exhibitions of the 1890s, such as the Society of American Artists annual of 1893, as an exemplar of "the schooling of the latest Impressionism," Vonnoh had "leaped into popularity



here in Chicago," enthused Garland in 1894, for "what other man is there today in America who can paint both landscapes and portraits half as well as he?" In both genres, the artist displayed an impressionist penchant for divided strokes of bright color that at a distance resolved themselves reassuringly into familiar forms.

By 1896 Vonnoh was said to have painted more portraits of Chicagoans than

ABOVE: *Portrait of Jerome Orrel Eddy*, 1894, o/c, 32 x 26, Mr. Val Yachik.

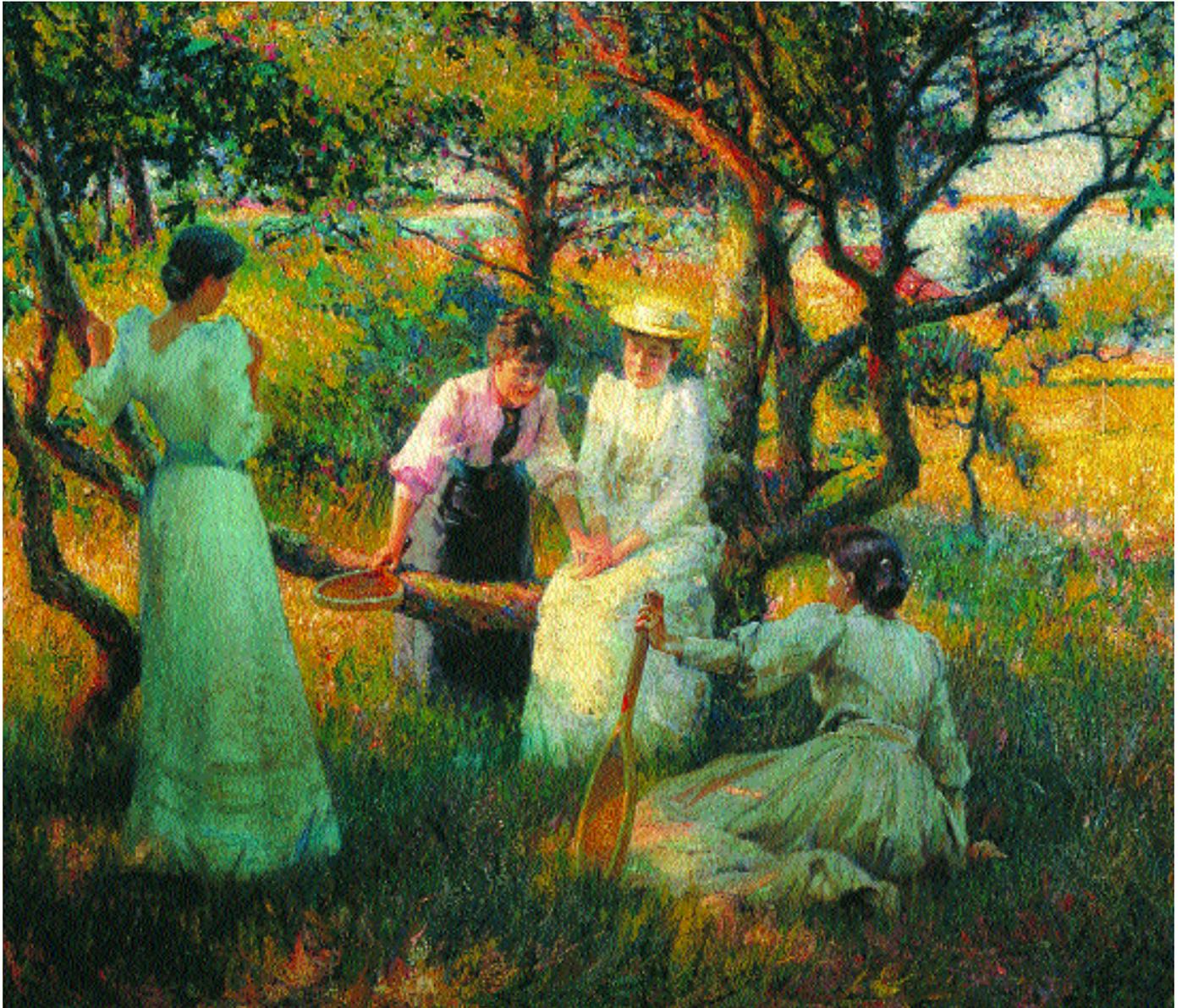
ABOVE LEFT: *A Sunlit Hillside*, 1890, o/c, 25 x 21, National Academy Museum, New York.

LEFT: *The Mill*, 1884, o/c, 15 3/4 x 13, Madron Gallery.

RIGHT: *The Ring*, 1892, o/c, 60 1/4 x 72 1/2, private collection.

any other living artist, rivaling even the prolific George P. A. Healy of an earlier generation. Among his most important sitters was Bessie Potter, with whom Vonnoh had developed a more than merely professional relationship: in 1899, shortly after the death of Grace Farwell Vonnoh, the painter and sculptor married, and thereafter New York City became the hub of their rather peripatetic existence.

With his wife, Vonnoh was active in the movement to develop cooperative studio-residence buildings for artists in Manhattan, and he maintained a New York studio until 1907 and a New York address nearly until the end of his life. The Vonnohs also traveled to France in 1900 to view the Exposition Universelle in Paris and rented a house at Grez. Vonnoh spent much of the following years in the village, especially between 1907 and 1911 and af-



ter 1922. By 1907 the Grez colony had long since declined in significance; however, the place had a special hold on Vonnoh and offered perpetual stimulus to creativity in his work as a landscape painter.

Vonnoh sought equivalent inspiration for landscape painting closer to New York, where he was often confined by portrait commissions, many from institutional patrons, and by professional activities. By the turn of the century he had become better known as a painter of portraits than of landscapes, but even away from Grez he sought a toehold in rural surroundings. In 1905, the Vonnohs first visited the bustling seasonal art colony in Old Lyme, Connecticut. In 1916 they purchased a large property with an old house in Lyme. He and Bessie became regular exhibitors

with the Lyme Art Association. However, his primary business at Lyme was to paint.

In 1925 Vonnoh's eyesight began to fail, but as his output declined he promoted his work ever more energetically. He continued to exhibit not only at Lyme but also at the National Academy and at the Pennsylvania Academy. Active as a jurist and organizer for the annual exhibitions at those institutions, he busied himself circulating joint shows of his and Bessie's work to venues throughout the country, often traveling to oversee installation.

When Vonnoh died in Nice, France, at the age of seventy-five, he was hailed as a versatile artist, although one best known for portraits "built up...solidly with regard to academic tradition." His reputation today seems equally one-sided, focused al-

most exclusively on the most daringly impressionist canvases of his second Grez sojourn. Set in the context of his multifaceted production, Vonnoh's achievement reveals itself as more complex than those works suggest. As a painter both of portraits and of landscapes, he emerges as a genuinely experimental practitioner. In his own approach to the synthesis of impressionist technique and academic values, Vonnoh privileged both the aesthetic integrity of color and design and the "significance" of the thing represented, fulfilling his era's complimentary definition of a "conservative impressionist."

—For annotation see the accompanying exhibition catalogue from which this article has been adapted.