Starting a Conversation

A new exhibition of artworks from the National Academy of Design creates a dialogue between artists across the centuries.
By Jeremiah William McCarthy
and Diana Thompson

It is no exaggeration to say that the fine arts
collection of the National Academy of Design
in New York City is like no other. Whereas
Britain’s historic Royal Academy of Arts and France’s
premier Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture
required of members a reception piece (an artwork
ranging in importance from chef d’œuvre to durable
example) and still other institutions, such as the Uffî
Gallery, amassed legendary collections of artist self-
portraits, the National Academy of Design for 155
years required of Academicians both diploma works
and portraits.

Fig. 1. Self-Portrait by John Singer Sargent (1856–1925),
1892. Signed “John S Sargent” at upper left and dated “1892”
at upper right. Oil on canvas, 21 by 17 inches. The paintings
illustrated are in the National Academy of Design, New York.
Photograph courtesy of the American Federation of Arts
(AFA), New York.

Fig. 2. Claude Monet by Sargent, c. 1887. Signed “John S
Sargent” at upper left. Oil on canvas, 16 by 13 inches.
These two submission rules—the first, issued in 1826 and still enforced today, of a “specimen of...own production in the Arts of Design,” and the second, effective from 1839 to 1994, of a portrait of the artist, whether a self-portrait or one painted by a fellow artist—have resulted in one of the most fascinating and idiosyncratic collections of American art in the nation. At the start of 2017 we began work on *For America: Paintings from the National Academy of Design*, a traveling exhibition and accompanying scholarly publication that would take as its subject the dialogue between an Academician’s portrait and her or his diploma work. By presenting artists’ portraits in tandem with representative works from their oeuvre, our aim is to offer an unprecedented glimpse into the ways certain American artists have viewed themselves and their painted worlds over nearly two centuries.
The works on exhibition demonstrate myriad approaches to the academy’s diploma requirements. In some cases, the artists can easily be integrated into the terrains conjured by their work, and to revealing ends. When viewed in isolation, for example, the protagonists of George Tooker’s intimate and haunting *Voice II* (Fig. 7) belong fully to the world of paint. And in the artist’s *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 6), Tooker greets his viewer with staring eyes and an enigmatic smile—just another character alongside his imaginary subjects. Yet, when the two works are viewed together and we notice Tooker’s hand resting on the ledge as if about to cross the threshold of his portrait into our own flesh-and-blood world, our attention is immeasurably rewarded. Both works toy with the border between image and reality, suggesting the permeability and interdependence of those two realms. As Tooker revealed in a late-in-life interview with the writer Justin Spring: “In general I think that when I make a picture I’m unscrewing the top of my head and taking a look inside to see what’s in there.”

Although the academy’s revised constitution of 1839, as well as subsequent revisions, stipulated a time limit of one year after election for...
demicians, the rank preceding National Academician, in the same year. While some of Chase’s critics perceived an aloofness in his figures, the artist’s emotionally stirring portrait of Blum (Fig. 3) forges a deeper connection between two of the Academy’s well-known gems, *Two Idlers* (Fig. 4) and *The Young Orphan* (Fig. 5), framing each in a new light. In some cases, artists have submitted portraits for both of their diploma presentations, allowing us to visually document peer networks or circles of influence. John Singer Sargent offered a profile of his friend Claude Monet (Fig. 2) as his diploma work to stand alongside his own likeness (Fig. 1), signifying their bond and the older artist’s decisive influence on the younger’s development and production.

The Academy’s collection is also populated with pairs that defy easy explanation. Consider Abbott H. Thayer, whose diploma portrait (Fig. 9) was long thought to be an autograph likeness, until the discovery in the 1980s of a cache of letters at the academy revealed the work to be from the hand of the artist’s frequent travel companion George F. Of executed the portrait just in time to meet the one-year submission deadline submitting diploma portraits, this regulation was rarely, if ever, enforced. As a result, a lengthy gap between an Academician’s diploma portrait and diploma work could provide an artist the opportunity to demonstrate growth, or to smuggle into the collection an alternative approach to their initial submission. For example, Felicie Waldo Howell Mixter’s *Self-Portrait* and *City Waterfront*—painted at least twelve years apart—document not only changes in her painterly technique but also her ever-evolving ideas concerning representation. Her self-portrait is a searching meditation, painted when she was just twenty-five years old, and it possesses none of the hard-edged, analytical certainty that governs her later landscape.

While we should not assume that all Academicians intended their two submissions to be viewed in tandem—surely, some presented what was ready at hand and met the criteria, or offered the academy a work they deemed less salable on the open market—many duos suggest otherwise. Robert Frederick Blum and William Merritt Chase were intimate friends: the two traveled through Europe together in the first half of the 1880s, frequently depicted one another, and were elected Associate National Academicians.
strongly suggested by the academy’s council, likely with the understanding that at some point it would be finished by Thayer himself. Left today in its unfinished state, the work vibrates with uncanny intensity when viewed alongside Thayer’s diploma work, *Winter Landscape* (Fig. 8), echoing the eccentric Academician’s sketchy, formally innovative style.

New research brought other exciting discoveries. For example, Susan Rather, professor of art history at the University of Texas at Austin, was tasked with offering a careful reading of academy founder Samuel F. B. Morse’s self-portrait miniature—the earliest work in the exhibition (Fig. 16). Until now, most scholars considered Morse to be self-taught, and his emergence as a painter has not been the subject of thorough investigation. Marshaling supporting evidence ranging from Morse family archival documents...

Fig. 8. *Winter Landscape* by Abbott H. Thayer (1849–1921), 1902. Signed and dated “Abbott H. Thayer/Jan 1902” at lower right. Oil on canvas, 29 ¾ by 34 ¾ inches.

Fig. 9. *Abb[ot][sic] H. Thayer* by George E. Of (1876–1954), date unknown. Oil on canvas, 20 by 16 inches.
to newspaper advertisements of the day. Rather uncovered the identity of the “self-taught” artist’s first teacher: the engraver and miniaturist Thomas imbrede.

An emerging scholar, Kimia Shahi, a PhD candidate at Princeton University, was drawn to George Wesley Bellows’s *Three Rollers* (Fig. 12). Bellows was a student of the influential and important teacher Robert Henri—himself one of the most celebrated artists of his generation—and he painted this impressive seascape alongside Henri on a trip the two took together in July and August of 1911 to Monhegan Island, Maine. That same year, Henri depicted Bellows in his academy portrait (Fig. 13), and Henri’s vision of Bellows alongside Bellows’s vision of Monhegan literalizes a connection between painting and place. Reuben Tam, a Hawaiian-born painter who likewise sought inspiration on Monhegan, developed a lasting connection to the Maine coastline. As Shahi notes in her catalogue essay, “Notwithstanding his considerable success during his lifetime and acquaintance with artists such as William Baziotes, Max Beckmann, and Georgia O’Keeffe, Tam occupies a much less prominent place in histories of American modernism than
either Henri or Bellows. Yet his innovations in landscape painting, and the complex conceptual vocabulary he formulated therein, demonstrate the great need for, and promise of, additional scholarship on his work.

As the academy is a living institution that counts 460 of today’s leading artists and architects as members, we invited eighteen current Academicians, such as Catherine Opie and Fred Wilson, to write about individual works in the collection for the catalogue and the galleries’ interpretative texts. These reflections, recorded alongside the paintings that inspired them, constitute another pairing of sorts. Visual artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Fig. 10), a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation in Montana, responded to Albert Bierstadt’s *On the Sweetwater Near the Devil’s Gate* (1860), which depicts a stretch of the Sweetwater River and a natural gorge in present-day Wyoming. She reminds us that Bierstadt’s peaceful vision was contemporaneous with the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, which required the Native population to relinquish the northwest section of Wyoming, part of Idaho, a piece of Canada, and half of Montana. As a result, many tribes were incarcerated at Fort Missoula, faced with starvation and smallpox. Her words are a telling reminder that the art of this country means...
many things to many people, and that both the ideal and idea of America will constantly be investigated by its most advanced artists.

An academy, by its nature, is an exclusionary organization, and throughout its history, on occasion, the National Academy has been resistant to change in one form or another. Until 1869 the membership body was drawn exclusively from the New York City area, and until the turn of the century, Academician were culled from the previous year’s annual exhibition. In 1967 Hughie Lee-Smith became only the second African-American National Academician; exactly forty years earlier, Henry Ossawa Tanner had broken that barrier to become the first. And in 1992 the academy nominated and elected its first female president, the painter Jane Wilson, who held the position for two years. That said, as this is a collection built by artists and not by acquisition committees or museum officials—artists’ art history, so to speak—there are remarkable portents within the academy’s holdings, years ahead of their time, which we have highlighted whenever possible. For example, rather than a likeness of himself, Charles White submitted Matriarch (Fig. 14)—a portrayal of his great-aunt Hasty Baines, born into slavery in 1857 on the Yellowley plantation in Ridgeland, Mississippi—as his diploma portrait. Painted 110 years after her birth, in the thick of a decade rife with political and social unrest, the deeply personal work stood for White as a symbol of wisdom and courage, universal themes also explored in his mature work Mother Courage II (Fig. 15). After extensive conservation, Matriarch will now be on view for the first time in nearly four decades, and today, as ever, the colloquy between the two paintings is edifying.
Sections of this article are excerpted and adapted from the catalogue for the traveling exhibition *For America: Paintings from the National Academy of Design*, organized by the American Federation of Arts for the National Academy of Design. The exhibition will be on view at the Dayton Art Institute in Ohio through June 2, 2019, and will travel to seven more US venues through January 2022.

1 Our decision to focus exclusively on painting stems from the early concerns of the National Academy’s founders: sixteen self-declared painters, one sculptor, two architects, and five engravers. 2 Justin Spring, “An Interview with George Tooker,” *American Art*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 2002), p. 80. 3 The one-year rule for submissions only applied to Associate National Academicians from 1839 through 1843; beginning with the constitution of 1844, the one-year rule for submissions applied to both Associate National Academicians and National Academicians. In 1994 the associate class of membership, which typically preceded the National Academician class of membership, was eliminated. 4 Wendell Stanton Howard’s assessment that Chase “never sounded those notes that come from the depth of the human heart” is symptomatic of that approach to his work; see “A Portrait by W. M. Chase,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, vol. 113 (June 1906), p. 698.

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Selecting recent work for inclusion was a difficult undertaking, so we defined our task as follows: to end with paintings by current members whose work addresses contemporary concerns while harking back to the storied history of both this institution and this nation. Although the portrait requirement for Academicians was eliminated more than twenty years ago, many have continued to pay homage to it. Thus, Peter Saul’s diploma work, a self-portrait (Fig. 17)—the only one the artist has made up to this point—is a fitting work to end the project, bookending founder Samuel F. B. Morse’s self-portrait. It is our belief that these paintings provide mirrors for the present, ways of imagining and grappling with the past, and, finally, dreams for a possible future.

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Fig. 15. *Mother Courage II* by White, 1974. Signed and dated “Charles•White ’74” at lower right. Oil on canvas, 49 ¾ by 39 7/8 inches.


Fig. 17. *Self-Portrait* by Peter Saul (1934—), 2013. Signed and dated “Saul (in circle)/ ’13” at lower left. Acrylic on canvas, 60 by 55 inches.