Expressions of Identity
How men perceive themselves influences what they see and how they create their surroundings. A people or a nation may identify or locate themselves in a variety of conceptual molds: particular religious or philosophical dogmas, the natural landscape, the existential here and now, or an epoch of the historic past. For Americans, the preoccupation with national identity has produced a varied body of commentary, literature, and art containing both superficial and profound statements on the nature of American culture. Typically, periods of intense physical and social change have led to alternating visions of the American experience. And while many periods can be pointed to, the era of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has produced some of the more diverse expressions of American art. Here, within the same space-time continuum, exist the low-slung Prairie houses of Frank Lloyd Wright and the Renaissance palazzos of McKim, Mead and White; the futuristic compositions of Joseph Stella and the tradition-laden paintings of Kenyon Cox; the simplified oak furniture of Gustav Stickley and the Colonial Revival highbacks of A.H. Davenport. The visual and philosophical differences in these works have been viewed as representing on one side a nativistic, modern-oriented spirit, and on the other side, a conservative-academic viewpoint tied to sterilized Old World traditions. Later generations have easily grasped the modern work, while the conservative work has been viewed as an anachronism caught in the web of the past and having little if any relation to American civilization and identity.

Yet the conservative, largely European-oriented art had an impact in its time; overwhelmingly popular, the art projected an image of culture and civilization that many people approved of. Partaking of the air of genteel idealism and higher service, the art also gave a sense of release from the stuffy confines of Victorianism. An art and architecture of superb craftsmanship was produced, one of wealth with tinges of exoticism that delighted in ornamental richness for its own sake. Investigation of the art and the surrounding corpus of literature and activity indicates that many people felt it implied a special connection with the grand traditions of history representing what they identified as the "American Renaissance."

The term "American Renaissance" concerns the identification by many Americans—painters, sculptors, architects, craftsmen, scholars, collectors, politicians, financiers, and industrialists—with the period of the European Renaissance and the feeling that the Renaissance spirit had been captured again in the United States. Concurrently, the Italian Renaissance (1420–1580) came into focus through the work of scholars and provided initial identification for many Americans. This was the Renaissance with a capital R. In time, other Renaissance manifestations were admired and seen as providing important models: France and England of the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, America in the formative years of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and other countries, including the original sources for the Renaissance, Greece and Rome.

Analogies with the Renaissance were obvious. The American robber baron had been preceded by the Italian and French merchant princes. Artists found an affinity with the Renaissance, identifying each other in terms such as “Old Master” or with personalities such as Bramante and Benvenuto Cellini. Many aspired to the Renaissance example: Stanford White designed buildings, magazine covers, jewelry, furniture, and picture frames; John La Farge painted, wrote art criticism and history, and designed stained-glass windows (Fig. 3) and interiors; Charles Adams Platt was an architect, landscape architect, painter, and etcher. The collaboration between architects, painters, sculptors, decorators, and landscape architects in world’s fairs, public buildings, and city plans received confirmation by the example of the artistic unity in High Renaissance Rome. To some, the periods were comparable. Augustus Saint-Gaudens exclaimed after the initial planning session of the World’s Columbian Exposition: “This is the greatest meeting of artists since the fifteenth century!” The painter Theodore Robinson claimed that many of his comrades “persuaded themselves for a year or so that the days of the Italian Renaissance were revived on Manhattan Island.” The past spoke to today claimed Bernard Berenson, a Boston-educated boy soon to become the world authority on Renaissance art, who wrote in his first book: “We ourselves, because of our faith in science and the power of work, are instinctively in sympathy with the Renaissance. . . . the spirit which animates us was anticipated by the spirit of the Renaissance, and more than anticipated. That spirit seems like the small rough model after which ours is being fashioned.”

According to the ideas of the American Renaissance, the art of the past could provide useful sources for the development of a national American art. While the reliance on sources or authority would be important, what would be produced would be a unique American art; it would be tied together not only by styles, but also by a unity of tradition and approach. Senator James McMillan, the “father” of the 1901-1902 Senate Parks Commission Plan for Washington, D.C., predicted the future of governmental architecture: “It is the general opinion that for monumental work, Greece and Rome furnish the styles of architecture best adapted to serve the manifold wants of today, not only as to beauty and dignity, but as to utility.” To this end the American Academy in Rome was founded. Charles F. McKim, one of the prime leaders of the school, felt that just as other countries had gone to Rome to learn “the splendid standards of Classic and Renaissance art,” so must Americans, and he added, “I pity the artist who does not feel humbled before its splendid examples of art.” But ultimately a new art resulted, for, as John La Farge claimed in speaking about the Academy: “We are going to be established in Rome. . . . This is in itself a statement that we too are rivals of all that has been done, and intend to rival all that shall be done, and we can then feel that the old cycle is closed and that a new one has begun.”

The American Renaissance, by both definition and action, was intensely nationalistic. It appropriated images and symbols of past civilizations and used them to create a magnificent American pageant. America became the culmination of history for an age that believed in progress. Prime Minister William Gladstone of England noted: “Europe may already see in North

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2 Harry W. Desmond and Herbert Croly, Stately Homes in America (New York, 1903), p. 251; and Harold D. Cater, Henry Adams and His Friends (Boston, 1947), p. 404.

3 John La Farge was referred to as “old master” in a letter, Charles L. Freer to Jacoci, quoted in Susan Hobbs, “John La Farge and the Genteel Tradition in American Art: 1875 to 1910,” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1974), p. 74. Charles McKim was known as Bramante and his partner Stanford White as Benvenuto Cellini; see Charles Moore, The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim (Boston, 1929), p. 57. Another expression of identification, “Burnham was a Roman of the Augustinian age,” is found in Charles Moore, Daniel H. Burnham, Architect, Planner of Cities, vol. 1 (Boston, 1921), p. 67. Moore was a participant in a number of the significant planning schemes of the period such as the Washington Plan of 1901-1902, the Chicago Plan of 1906-1909, and finally as member, 1910-1915, and then chairman, 1915-1937, of the Commission of Fine Arts.
America an immediate successor in the march of civilization." The civilization envisaged for America was a public life, one of the street, the park, the square, or the mall, of large monuments, memorials, and public buildings in the eternal style, adorned with murals and sculptures personifying heroes and symbolizing virtue and enterprise. Several commentators of the period claimed the United States needed a national Valhalla, and in a sense this was attempted with the great arch in Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn (Fig. 4), the projected “Pantheon” of national heroes in Washington, D.C., or the Hall of Fame at New York University. The projected vision could be caught in a variety of places—ascending the stairs at the new Library of Congress,

4 Quoted in Moore, Daniel H. Burnham I, p. 47.
8 Moore, McKim, p. 260.
9 "Mr. La Farge on Useless Art," *Architectural Record* XVII (April 1905), p. 347.

FIG. 4
FIG. 5
Arch of the Rising Sun from the Court of the Universe,
Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco,
1915. McKim, Mead and White, architects.
Rendering by Jules Guerin (1866–1946).
Watercolor on paper;
101.6 x 96.5 cm. (40 x 38 in.).
COLLECTION: San Francisco Public Library, California.
PHOTO: Schopplein Studio.

FIG. 6
Viking ship with Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building in background, World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893.
Charles Dudley Arnold (b. 1844), photographer.
COLLECTION: Avery Library, Columbia University, New York City.
strolling on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia, or visiting any of the dream cities of the great expositions that dotted the American landscape in these years: Buffalo, Saint Louis, San Francisco (Fig. 5), and others. Walking among the lagoons of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, one could find a Viking ship (Fig. 6) lying next to backdrops of Imperial Rome, Renaissance Florence, Bourbon Paris, and the Far East. Literally all the history of mankind lay at the fingertips of Americans.

The American Renaissance can also be viewed as an imperialistic expression of American culture, not only in the appropriation of forms and symbols from foreign cultures, but also in the creation of the American empire. The Spanish-American War (Fig. 8), the Big Stick of Teddy Roosevelt (Fig. 7), the White Fleet (Fig. 9), the Panama Canal, the Latin American adventures of Woodrow Wilson, are all part of the breast-thumping spirit that could move the architect Stanford White, when reproached for importing so many art treasures to decorate homes, to claim: "In the past, dominant nations had always plundered works of art from their predecessors; . . . America was taking a leading place among nations and had, therefore, the right to obtain art wherever she could."

12 Quoted in Lawrence G. White, Sketches and Designs by Stanford White (New York, 1920), pp. 24–25. The recognition of this aspect can be found in a number of places. One is a page from a European magazine of the period that is pasted in a McKim, Mead and White Office Album (vol. VII) devoted to the Charles H. Barney House (now in the Avery Library, Columbia University, New York City). Shown is a photo of a French Renaissance fireplace with the caption: "La cheminée d’Avignon dans la Salle d’Assemblée" and below this in large letters: "Dépouilles de la Véritable Europe Dans la Neuve Amérique." On the opposite page is a photograph of the same mantel in the Barney House. Also written in ink is the note, "W.R. Hearst—California," probably indicating that Hearst bought it from the Barney estate when the house was broken up.

Edith Wharton was especially sensitive to this issue, and in The Custom of the Country (New York, 1913), she uses the forced sale of Boucher’s famous Saint-Désert tapestries as a symbol of the transfer of power from the decaying old European aristocracy to the new American plutocrats.
The American Renaissance was by nature an art and architecture of capitalism, and this it celebrated publicly and privately. The American Medici spent their time in Italian palazzos for city homes and clubs, Georgian mansions for suburban homes, and French châteaux for resort country cottages. A setting of aesthetic leisure was orchestrated, one of confidence and complacency. With proper means, the American could escape either physically or vicariously into a world of impressionistic pastels inhabited by thin elegant virgins wrapped in diaphanous gowns seated in front of exedras. The money came from the exploitation of the coal in Coketown and the seamstress in Hell's Kitchen who helped to pay Mr. Morgan's library and the City Beautiful visions commissioned by many.

FIG. 9
Return of the Conquerors,
September 29, 1899.
Edward Moran (1829-1901).
Oil on canvas; 91.4 x 137.2 cm.
(36 x 54 in.).
COLLECTION: U.S. Naval Academy Museum, Annapolis, Maryland.
FIG. 10
Panorama, Court of Honor of the World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893.
From left to right: Administration Building, Richard Morris Hunt (1827–1895), architect; Columbian Fountain, Frederick MacMonnies (1863–1937), sculptor; Electricity Building, Van Brunt and Howe, architects; Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building, George B. Post (1837–1913), architect; Republic Building, Daniel Chester French (1850–1931), sculptor; peristyle, Charles B. Atwood (1848–1895), architect. Charles Dudley Arnold (b. 1844), photographer.
COLLECTION: Avery Library, Columbia University, New York City.
FIG. 11
businessmen’s organizations. Patronage was especially the prerogative of the very rich. The Vanderbilt family, railroad and real estate entrepreneurs, were the quintessential patrons in the years 1876 to 1917, constructing a sequence of at least seventeen large houses, several of which cost in excess of $1,000,000, and at least one, Biltmore at Asheville, North Carolina, that cost $5,000,000. Society and wealth found an outlet in the vision of an American Renaissance, and among its patrons were the Astors, the Whitneys, the Morgans, the Goelets, the Rockefellers, the Fricks, the McCormicks, and others.

The artist played a leading role. He could provide a setting of leisured elegance bearing the patina of class and taste for people who were frequently one generation removed from overalls and shovel. Fittingly, the artist designed the currency of capitalism—Augustus Saint-Gaudens did the ten- and twenty-dollar gold pieces (Fig. 12), James E. Fraser did the Buffalo nickel, Victor D. Brenner did the Lincoln penny, Adolph Weinman did the Liberty dime, and Kenyon Cox did one-hundred-dollar bills (Fig. 13). The artist did not play an avant-garde role, rebelling against society and the inequalities of wealth. Rather, he became part of the elite, and Stanford White, John Singer Sargent, and Edith Wharton stare out from the photographs of costume balls, the opening of Tosca, and twelve-course dinners.

Integral to the elitism was a spirit of noblesse oblige that found a release in the grand public gestures of the American Renaissance. The period saw the foundation of many of America’s major cultural institutions: libraries, museums, orchestras, operas, and universities. These were founded by the wealthy through direct gifts and philanthropic organizations. The large European Old Master holdings of many art museums were tied directly to

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FIG. 12
Twenty-dollar gold piece, Liberty side, 1907.
Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907).
Diameter 3.2 cm. (1\frac{1}{4} in.).

FIG. 13
Design for a one-hundred-dollar bill, 1912.
Kenyon Cox (1856–1919).
Pencil on paper; 30.1 x 45.7 cm.
(11\frac{7}{8} x 18\frac{1}{8} in.).
COLLECTION: The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, Gift of J. D. Cox.
FIG. 14

Chicago, View Looking West, of the
Proposed Civic Center Plaza and
Buildings, Showing It as the Center of
the System of Arteries of Circulation
and of the Surrounding Country. From
The Plan of Chicago, 1909
Daniel H. Burnham (1846–1912) and
Edward H. Bennett (1874–1954), planners.
Rendering by Jules Guerin (1866–1946).
Watercolor on paper; 74.6 x 104.8 cm.
(29⅛ x 41⅛ in.).
COlLECTION: Burnham Library of
Architecture, The Art Institute of
Chicago, Illinois.
both a vision of America equaling the Old World in artistic property and to the pillaging activities of Bernard Berenson, Stanford White, and others. Reform and the City Beautiful movement interlocked; the same individuals promoted educating the immigrant and beautifying elevated railroad stations. Messages of patriotism and citizenship were implicit in all of the public art and architecture. Frequently funded by the wealthy, the gestures can be interpreted cynically as a subterfuge by the elite to patronize the masses or idealistically as an acknowledgment of wealth's responsibilities.

In civic art—the City Beautiful movement—can be found a culmination of the aspirations of the American Renaissance impulse. The roots of the City Beautiful movement can be traced back to mid-century and the various park and sanitary commissions, but it was in the 1890s that the dual influences of the period's expositions and various reform movements crystallized a new sense of civic grandeur. The appeal in its widest bounds was "to bring order out of the chaos." Across the country, municipal art leagues, civic improvement associations, and city art commissions were formed that combined the talents of businessmen, architects, artists, and the new professions of city planner and administrator. The movement followed the United States flag overseas to the new colony of the Philippines, where Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett produced plans for Manila and the new capital at Baguio. Burnham and Bennett's plan for Chicago, 1906–1909, is certainly the best known and one of the most comprehensive of the City Beautiful plans (Fig. 14). The impressionistic renderings by Jules Guerin and Fernand Janin turn grayish commercial Chicago into Parisian boulevards and Venetian lagoons. Consummating the City Beautiful movement was Congress's establishment of the Commission of Fine Arts in 1910 to guide the development of Washington, D.C., and to carry forward the work of Senator James McMillan's Park Commission of 1901–1902 (Fig. 49).

The large civic beautification and decorative schemes were portrayed as quintessentially "American and democratic." Will Low, a leading muralist, claimed that "every American artist . . . should be born with a missionary spirit," and with all seriousness wrote that the White City of Chicago represented "a realization that art of the people, for the people had come to us." In the large public building with a comprehensive decorative scheme, the American identity was found; or as Edwin Blashfield, another muralist, wrote: "The names of public buildings are the century-marks of the ages. . . . wherever the footprints of the spirit of civilization have rested most firmly some milestone of human progress has risen to be called the Parthenon or Notre Dame, Giotto's Tower or Louvre, and to teach from within and without, by proportion and scale, by picture and statue, the history of the people who build it; to celebrate patriotism, inculcate morals, and to stand as the visible concrete symbol of high endeavor." In buildings such as The Boston Public Library (1887–1895; Fig. 15), can be grasped most firmly the aspirations of the American Renaissance. Financed with public funds but supported by the cultural and economic elite of Boston, the building, in their eyes and the eyes of its creator, Charles McKim, ranked on a par with any of the great monuments of the past. Built in the form of a large Renaissance palazzo, the calm form and light pink

13 In 1878 an article in Atlantic Monthly (quoted in Neil Harris, The Land of Contrasts: 1880–1901 [New York, 1970], p. 19) complained that workers had begun to regard "works of art and instruments of high culture, with all the possessions and surroundings of people of wealth and refinement, as causes and symbols of the laborer's poverty and degradation, and therefore as things to be hated."


16 Will H. Low, A Painter's Progress (New York, 1910), pp. 193, 251. A similar gloss on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was used by Louis Sullivan in "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered" (1896) in Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings (1947), p. 213.


FIG. 15
The Boston Public Library, 1887-1895.
McKim, Mead and White, architects.
FIG. 16
Entrance. The Boston Public Library, 1887-1895. McKim, Mead and White, architects. Statues of Science and Art by Bela Pratt (1867–1917); relief panels over doors by Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907); central panel and seal designed by Kenyon Cox (1856–1919) and executed by Augustus Saint-Gaudens; rondels by Domingo Mora.
FIG. 17
Milford granite exterior contrast with the dark colors and excited picturesque of its neighbors. Encrusted with fragments and memories of European origins, the building stands aloof and withdrawn, a sanctum of idealism against the clamor of Copley Square. To Ernest Fenollosa, the library was "the veritable Assisi of American art." At the entrance, twin statues by Bela Pratt personifying Science and Art guard the main doors. Above the central portal is the seal of the library, designed by Kenyon Cox and carved by Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Also in the center, carved into the belt course and the frieze are the phrases: "Free to All" and "Built by the People and Dedicated to the Advancement of Learning" (Fig. 16). On the inside, an elaborate spatial and decorative sequence contains statues and memorials of heroes and patriots by Louis Saint-Gaudens and Frederick MacMonnies and murals by artists such as Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (Spirit of Light), Edwin Austin Abbey (The Quest of the Holy Grail; Fig. 17), and John Singer Sargent (The World's Religions). Rich marbles, ceiling paintings in the Venetian and Pompeian styles, bronze doors by Daniel Chester French, the noble spaces, the stairhall, the courtyard, and the great reading room across the front give the message that this is not merely a building for housing books, but a ritualistic center of civilization.

19 Ernest F. Fenollosa, Mural Painting in the Boston Public Library (Boston, 1896), p. 25.