

Everett Shinn: Operatics

by Geoffrey K. Fleming

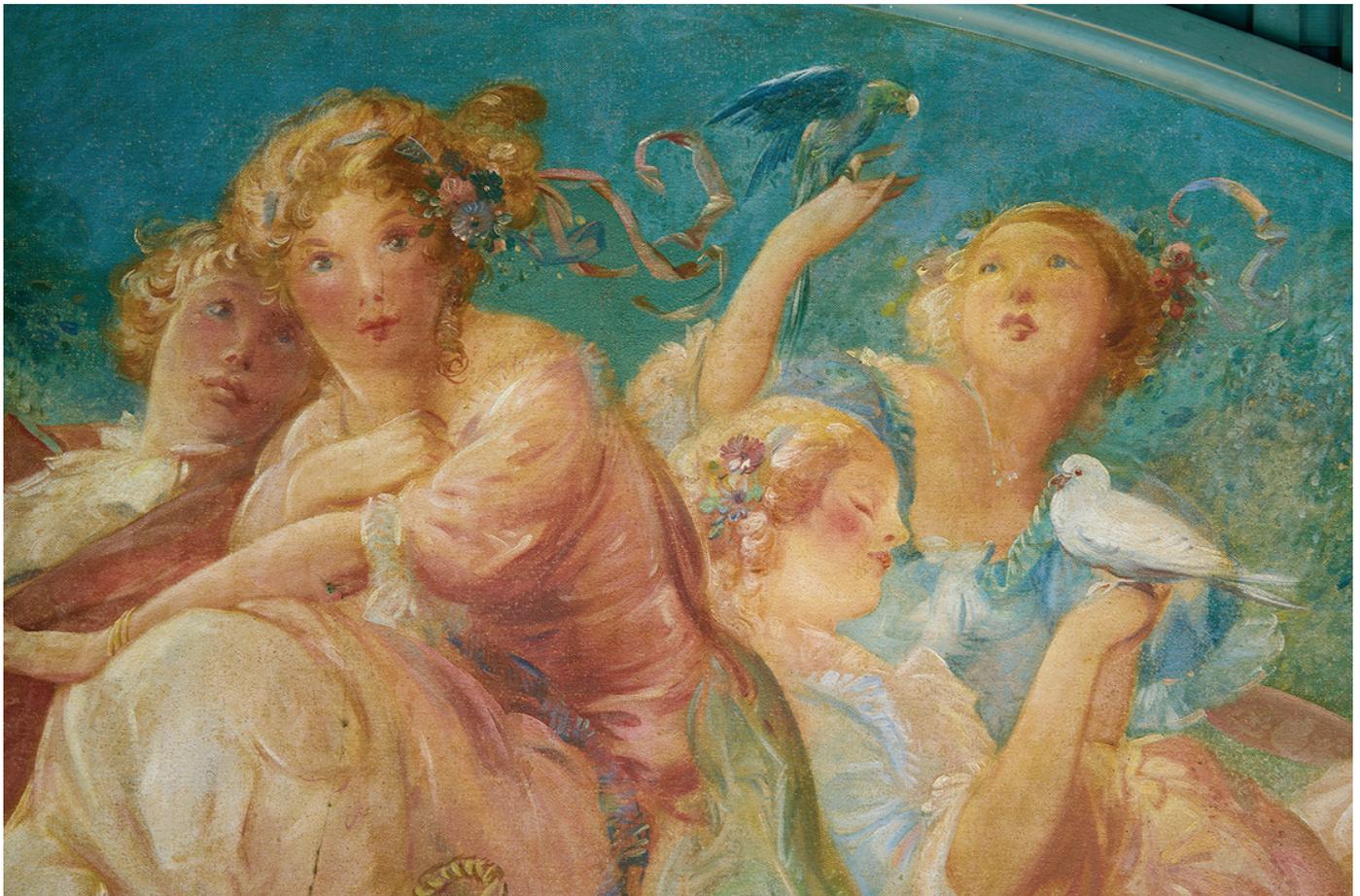
When most American art lovers think of Everett Shinn (1876-1953), they immediately turn to his drawings and paintings of beautiful women, his nostalgic views of the American circus, his delicate illustration work, or his views of the theater scene of the early twentieth century. Shinn was also an accomplished muralist, working for years to decorate public buildings and numerous theaters, including the famous Belasco (Stuyvesant) Theater in New York City. But he also decorated private homes and, on occasion, even furniture.

Shinn was born in Woodstown, New Jersey, in 1873 (or 1876, according to



Everett Shinn: Operatics is on view through November 14, 2021, at Planting Fields, 1395 Planting Fields Road, Oyster Bay, New York, 11771, 516-922-9210, www.plantingfields.org.

some sources), the third child of Josephine Ransley and Isaiah Conklin Shinn. Raised in a Quaker household, it was said that Shinn was an “...undisciplined boy fond of sweets, acrobatics, and the circus.” Shinn was not originally trained as a painter, but studied engineering and industrial design. One of his first jobs was working for a gas fixtures company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Perhaps to aid in his design work, Shinn decided to take classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where





All illustrated images are by Everett Shinn and in the Planting Fields Foundation, Coe Collection, unless otherwise stated. Photography by David Almeida for Planting Fields.

ABOVE AND RIGHT: Interior of the Tea House at Planting Fields, furnishings, light fixtures, two painted lunettes, 1915, each lunette: o/c, the east (fireplace) wall mural measures 48 x 96, and the west (window) wall mural measures 38 x 96.

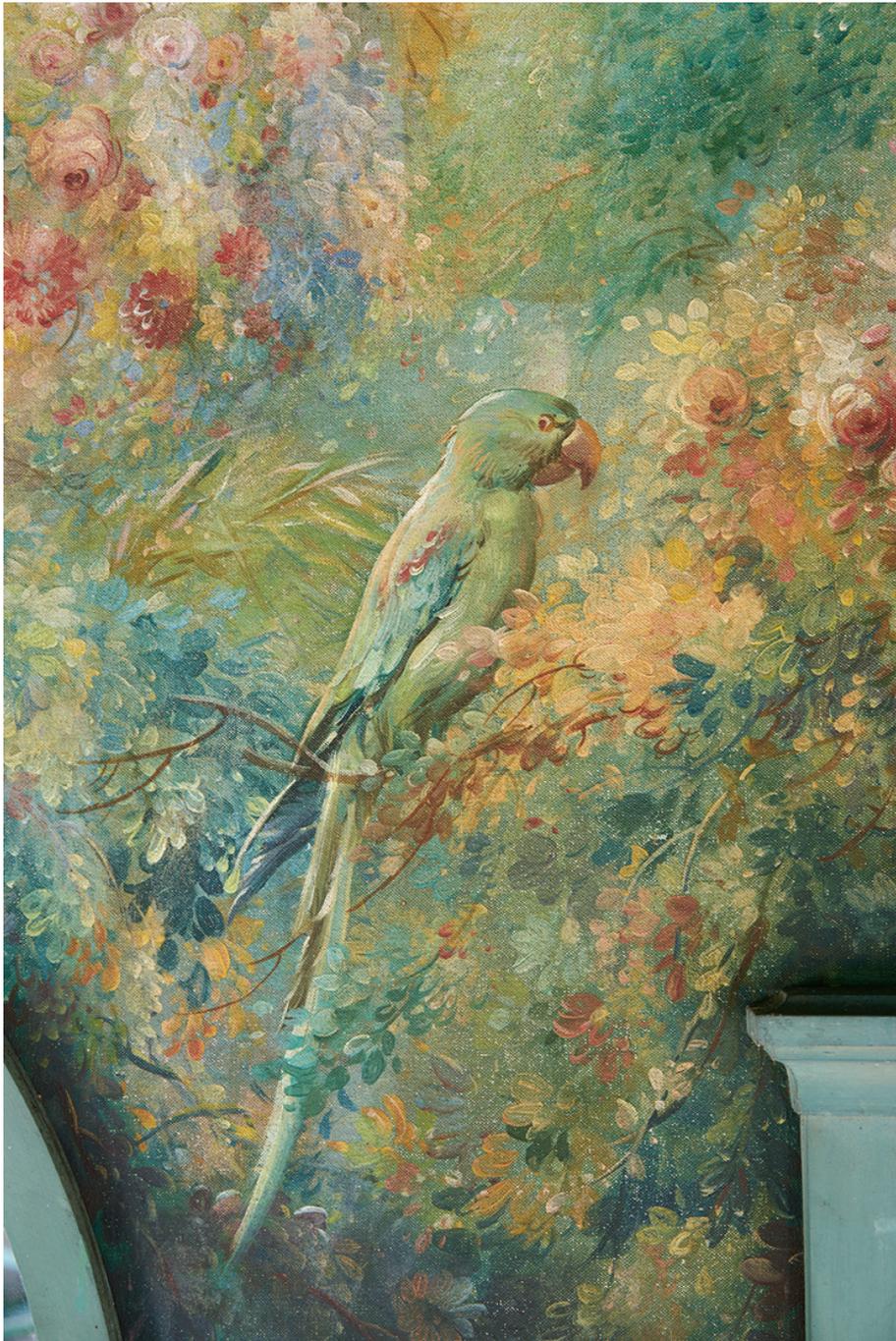
ABOVE LEFT: Exterior of Tea House.

LEFT: Detail of east wall lunette.

he studied under Thomas Anschutz. He soon began his initial artistic career as a staff artist for the *Philadelphia Press*.

This was an opportune time to join the newspaper business in Philadelphia, as several of the artists that would eventually make up "The Eight," such as William Glackens and George Luks, either worked alongside Shinn at the *Press* or just down the road for one of its competitors. Such is the case with John Sloan, who was employed at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. As





ABOVE: Painted sides of octagon table.

LEFT: Detail of east wall lunette.

ABOVE RIGHT: *One of ten paintings for Mai Coe's Dressing Room*, c. 1920, o/c, 17 1/2 x 40.

CENTER RIGHT: View of the tea house from the Italian garden.

BELOW RIGHT: View of the heather garden at Planting Fields.

Edith DeShazo explained in her book *Everett Shinn 1873-1953: A Figure in His Time* (1974): "...the Press art department became a meeting place for men both on the staff and off with similar artistic and literary interests."

But Shinn was more interested in receiving national, not just regional, attention. He began "hounding" the editors of *Harpers Weekly* in the hopes of getting his works included in their massively popular publication, seeing it as a launching platform for a more prominent career. After its

famous editor and owner, Colonel George Harvey, relented, he commissioned Shinn to paint a view depicting the Metropolitan Opera House during a snowstorm. Satisfied in the result, Harvey published the pastel in the February 17, 1900 edition of the *Weekly*. Aware that further study was needed to hone his craft, Shinn departed for Paris that same year and spent time in London as well. A number of his drawings of both cities were included in a 1900 exhibition at Goupil's Gallery in Paris.

Like so many members of "The Eight,"

Shinn initially had an interest in depicting the hard lifestyle of America's lower class urban life. However, the trip to Paris shifted his attention towards the incredible beauty and glamour of the upper classes, their elegant and fashionable outfits, and their evening activities out and about. This was especially true of the vibrant, rousing, and exciting night life found in and among European and American theaters and performance halls, scenes which would feature prominently in his paintings, drawings and later mural work.

Upon his return to America, Shinn began to regularly exhibit his works in prominent exhibitions held at the Art Institute of Chicago, Pennsylvania Academy and in the early exhibitions of "The Eight," the first of which he participated in during the 1906 season. In 1910, his work was included at the Macbeth Gallery show for the group. The following year Shinn completed his famous murals depicting steel workers from the Roebling Steel Mill and ceramic workers from the Maddock Pottery for the city council chambers of the city hall in Trenton, New Jersey.

Shinn was asked but declined to take part in the infamous 1913 Armory Show, being too busy with private commissions of both mural and interior decoration to create a work he would have likely found



suitable for inclusion. This was no accident. Shinn had developed a close, personal relationship with the noted collector, decorator and architect Stanford White (1853-1906), who had promoted him to friends and clients. This clientele grew and mural projects, such as the one completed for Trenton and those for private clients elsewhere, occupied more and more of Shinn's time going forward.

Planting Fields is unique because of the long connection between Shinn and the owners of the Planting Fields estate, Mai and William R. Coe. When the Coes selected the 409-acre site for their estate amongst the farm fields overlooking Oyster Bay, New York, they had an aesthetic hand in selecting who would create and design their new property. Sargent and Lowell and the Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts, created the setting for their new home, incorporating rolling lawns, formal gardens, meadows, paths as well as greenhouses to keep the main house in flowers year-round. Walker & Gillette, the noted architectural firm, was chosen to settle a new stone house designed in the English Tudor-Revival style into these landscapes. To decorate the vast sixty-five room house, they added incredible antiques and period works of art while also commissioning living artists, such as Robert Winthrop Chanler and Shinn, to enhance their surroundings even further.

Among the works featured in *Everett Shinn: Operatics* is the elaborate piano completed in 1906 for the noted Broadway playwright Clyde Fitch, who was arguably the most popular playwright working on Broadway from roughly 1890 until his death in 1909. His plays ranged from





ABOVE AND LEFT (on wall): *Fête Champêtre*, 1905, o/c, 35 1/2 x 26 1/2.

LEFT AND BELOW LEFT: *The Clyde Fitch Piano*, 1906, oil on mahogany Steinway piano, collection of Rick Smith, The Piano Exchange of Glen Cove, New York.

RIGHT: *Group of Figures on a Garden Terrace* (study for the Stuyvesant Theatre murals), c. 1907, o/c, 9 3/4 x 11 3/4, collection of Jonathan Sherman.

BELOW RIGHT: *Nudes in a Park*, 1913, red chalk on paper, 24 1/2 x 20.



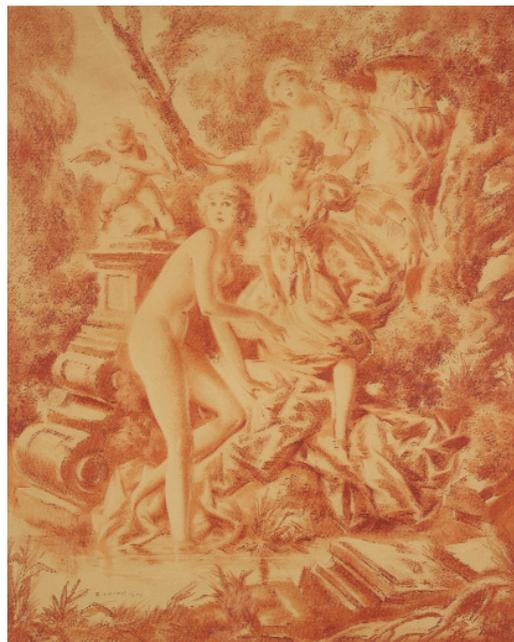
farces and social comedies to historical dramas and melodramas and sometimes featured prominent female characters, including Lily Bart from Edith Wharton's book *The House of Mirth*. The designer Elsie de Wolfe, who helped to decorate many of Fitch's lavish homes and also later worked for the Coes, once said of him, "He knows more about women than most women know about themselves."

The carved, mahogany piano decorated by Shinn was manufactured by Steinway & Sons and was finished with neo-rococo scenes depicting gardens and floral bouquets and festoons. On the interior of the lid is a garden scene featuring an outdoor performance under the direction of the playwright Molière in a canopied alcove surrounded by greenery. The piano exemplifies Shinn's interest in the decorative while looking back to previous eras for inspiration, but also takes note of the times in which it was created, a period when French



style was very much in vogue amongst the wealthy of America.

Shinn was first engaged by the Coes in 1915 to decorate a building in one of their gardens, and after their first home burned in 1918, he took up work again in 1920 as they progressed on their new residence. He completed ten murals for Mai Coe's dressing room and a series of murals for the decoration of the "tea house" at Oyster Bay. The murals add a theatricality to a house which is, in reality, a "set" created to impress. In both cases, just like in the design of the piano, the murals look back to the Rococo period and the works of prominent French painters such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard. This should be no surprise, for as early as 1905 the prominent art critic Henri



Pène du Bois had said of Shinn that he was "a Fragonard of the present time."

The works created for the dressing room, which was designed by Elsie de Wolfe, are shaped as slender panels which fit above and between the door and window openings in the room and complement the painted furniture chosen for the space. While they relate to earlier works by artists like Fragonard, the figures have a decidedly modern look to them. The stage created in the dressing room was enhanced further during Mai Coe's lifetime, featuring six pedestals "on which were perched live cockatoos which [were] sometimes motionless, their mauve and blue and pink feathers fitting beautifully into the color schemes."

The "tea house" decoration includes

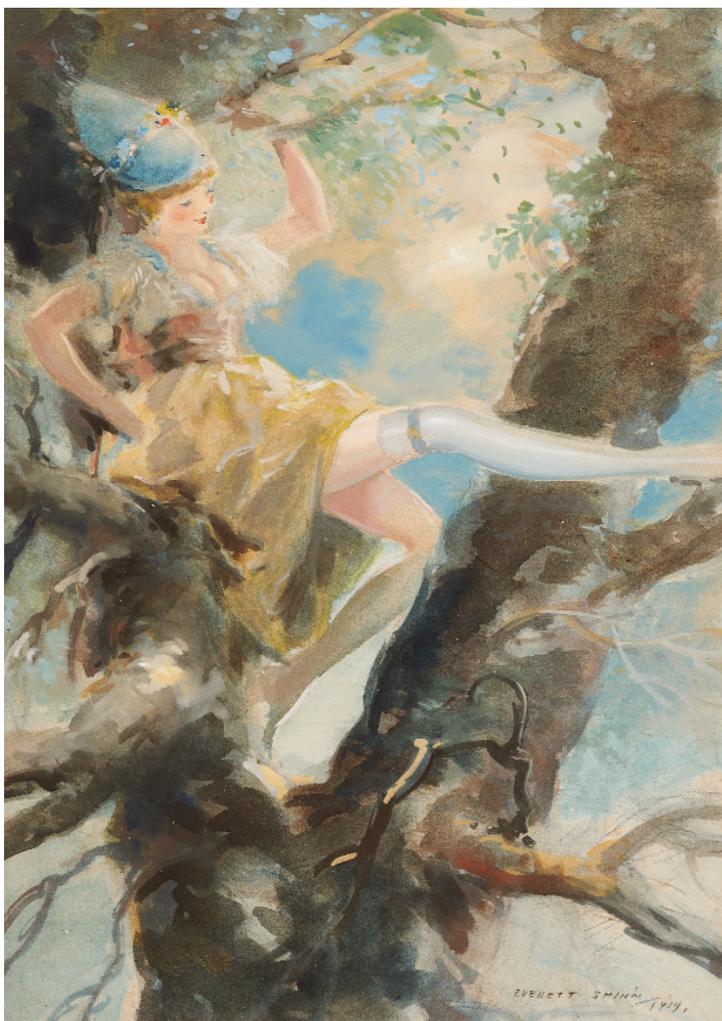


LEFT: *Group of Figures at a Garden Fountain* (study for the Stuyvesant Theatre murals), c. 1907, o/c, 9³/₄ x 11³/₄, collection of Jonathan Sherman.

BELOW LEFT: *Lady in a Tree*, 1914, pastel on paper, 18¹/₂ x 14.

RIGHT: *Dancer in a Tutu for Mrs. Coe*, 1914, color lithograph, red chalk on paper-board, 14 x 14.

FAR RIGHT: *Decorative Painting for Mai Coe's Dressing Room*, c. 1920, o/c, 57¹/₂ x 22¹/₂.



painted and decorated furniture and lattice covered walls and ceilings. At each end of the space are demilune shaped murals created by Shinn that anchor the space. Again, the space was designed by de Wolfe. Placed high and close to the ceiling over the fireplace, the first of Shinn's murals features frolicking young women in a garden while the one placed at the opposite end of the structure depicts a trio of young women lying and relaxing in a garden landscape. Once again, Shinn utilizes the neo-rococo style to add to the theatricality of the space. At the time they were created, critics noted that Shinn's murals created for the Coes were "a little more spirited, a little more humorous, there is in them a faint reaction to life today, so that while they are definitely born of the courts of the Louis, they are in a measure just as definitely work of a modern painter."

In addition to these larger works, a number of more intimate sketches and drawings are included in *Everett Shinn: Operatics*. Two small oil sketches are of particular note as they are studies of the types of figural scenes planned for the Belasco theater. They were created c. 1907 as work began on the theater, which included lighting fixtures by Louis Comfort Tiffany and rich woodwork and other decoration in addition to Shinn's elaborate murals. One depicts figures gathered on a terrace while the other depicts figures gathered around a garden fountain. Together, they aided Shinn in the design layout of the large murals for the theater.

Another of Shinn's early works, *Dancer in a Tutu*, is an excellent example of the types of paintings created by Shinn that were based in his deep interest in the theater. The painting shows a ballerina stretching as she prepares to go onstage, reaching out to one of her slippared feet. One drawing in red chalk, *Nudes in a Park*,



which depicts female figures in a wooded landscape, continues to exemplify Shinn's interest in combining the historic with the modern. Though the overall feel of *Nudes in a Park* appears fully eighteenth century in style, the top female figure in the work appears to be sporting an early twentieth-century hat. An additional, larger painting titled *Fête Champêtre*, showing a pair of women wandering into an elegant, planned garden, hints at the work the Coes did in planning the elaborate stage which would eventually become Planting Fields Foundation and Arboretum State Historic Park.

As the decades progressed, Shinn ended up outliving all the other members of "The Eight" and continued to produce works that harkened back to the early days of his career, images that showed his unwavering ability to capture the contemporary scene "in a spontaneous, non-academic manner." As was not uncommon at the time, Shinn appears to have either been penurious or outlived any wealth he might have accrued during his career. He even complained later in life to galleries he used to frame his works that their prices were outrageous and that instead of paying cash he would much prefer to make a trade of a painting to settle his accounts. He was made a National Academician in 1949 and died in 1953, aged eighty.

Mai Coe suffered from illness for the last years of her life, tragically dying at the age of forty-nine in 1924. In 1949, William R. Coe deeded the Planting Fields estate to the state of New York to become a state park, an act that guaranteed its future. This gift would allow all the world to enjoy what he and Mai had created on Long Island, from elaborate gardens and rare plants to the wonderful pastels, paintings and murals created by Everett Shinn.

—The information in this article is drawn from a number of sources, including the catalogue *Nico Mubly: Pastoral (Indoors/Outdoors)—Everett Shinn: Operatics*, published by Planting Fields Foundation (2021).

