

R.H. Ives Gammell and His Students

Robert Douglas Hunter
Richard F. Lack
Samuel Rose

American Classical Realism
at Maryhill Museum of Art



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R.H. Ives Gammell (1893–1981) was one of the last American artists whose training can be traced back to the French academic tradition of the late 18th and 19th centuries. He studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and at Académie Julian and Atelier Baschet in Paris, but his work owes much to the paintings of Jacques-Louis David (French, 1748–1824), Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (French, 1780–1867) and Jean-Léon Gérôme (French, 1824–1904). Gammell's work was also influenced by teachers William Sergeant Kendall (American, 1869–1938), with whom he studied from 1908–1911, and Boston artist and teacher William McGregor Paxton (American, 1869–1941) who mentored him from 1928–1930.

After 1930, Gammell was painting large canvases with mythological and biblical themes, but he recognized that he was out of step with the times. This realization and other stress factors caused him to suffer a nervous breakdown in 1939. As he recovered, he began work on a book—*Twilight of Painting*—and a series of paintings that became his magnum opus, 23 large works that together comprise *A Pictorial Sequence by R. H. Ives Gammell Based on The Hound of Heaven*, completed in 1956.

In 1950, the artist founded Gammell Studios in Boston to ensure that the classical painting tradition would be preserved. As a teacher he worked with no more than three or four students at a time. By the 1960s, he was influencing a growing number of young painters and his first students were on their own, painting and, in some cases, teaching. The work of three of these—Richard F. Lack (1928–2009), Robert Douglas Hunter (1928–2014) and Samuel Rose (1941–2008)—may be seen here. According to Lack:

Gammell was a severe taskmaster from the old school. He demanded much from his students and demanded even more of himself. Since the best teaching comes from example, he provided for us a wonderful role model to follow. Despite the fact that he was born to wealth, he worked harder than anyone I ever knew. . . . He was the quintessential professional in all things and demonstrated what it was like to be a dedicated painter, one who served his art rather than himself.

The art of R.H. Ives Gammell. . . gives us a glimpse into the past, an almost forgotten past that, it seems to me, would be folly to lose. He succeeded in a miraculous way to paint pictures that technically rival those done in former times, no easy feat as anyone who tried it can attest. At the same time, he struggled with conceptions that embodied some of the most advanced discoveries of contemporary psychology. He is of his time and in many ways outside his time, qualities that often lead to greatness.

Steven L. Grafe, Ph.D.
Curator of Art



R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893–1981), ***Frances Easton Tufts***, 1923, oil on canvas, 35" x 28"; Gift of Paul and Emily Keller, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 2006.12.3

This work was among the portraits that Gammell painted in the years after he returned to Boston from Paris and the war. He received his first mural commission in 1920 and executed subsequent decorations in private homes and public buildings. This activity continued throughout the 1920s.

In recalling the period, Gammell said:

I came to a wholesome realization of the immense distance yet to be traveled before I could claim even a moderate degree of competence. I also saw very clearly that Paxton was the only teacher available who could guide me along the way and that Boston was, for the time being, the best place for me to work. Fortunately, I found it a very different Boston from the one I had disliked before the war. At about this time a number of extremely bright young people from other parts of the country moved to the New England city...



R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893–1981), *Ulysses and Tyro (Odysseus and Tyro)*, 1933, oil on canvas, 54" x 64"; Gift of R.H. Ives Gammell, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1949.4.2

Ulysses and Tyro is among several history paintings that Gammell created after he left the daily tutelage of William McGregor Paxton. The narrative comes from Homer's *Odyssey* and tells of Ulysses consulting with the wives and daughters of heroes in the Underworld. Homer wrote, "Then the women, the wives and daughters of heroes came.... A crowd they thronged around the black blood, and I considered how best to question them, and this was my idea: to draw my long sword from its sheath and prevent them drinking of the blood together. Then each came forward, one by one, and declared her lineage, and I questioned all."

After drinking of the sacrificial blood, Tyro was the first to speak. She, like Ulysses, was a victim of the sea god Poseidon. Then, Ulysses listened to the stories of the other women. As a result, his bond with his own mother—who he also met in the Underworld—was reaffirmed.

When Paxton saw the work, he reportedly said that the group of women was the best thing that Gammell had painted up to that point. None of his comments about the rendering of Ulysses are extant, and that figure is less successfully formed than the others.



R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893–1981), *The Dream of the Shulamite*, 1934, oil on canvas, 81½" x 67"; Gift of R.H. Ives Gammell, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1949.4.1

This painting is typical of Gammell's academic style and it pays homage to the earlier work of Jean-Léon Gérôme (French, 1824–1904). It specifically references Gérôme's *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1866) and *Phyrné Before the Areopagus* (1863).

The work is based on Song of Songs 5:7 (KJV): "The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the wall took away my veil from me." Here, the old priest recognizes the purity and innocence of the young Shulamite woman. Conversely, the drunken soldiers have missed her essential purity and respond lasciviously. Although the narrative illustrates a Bible text, it also symbolically represents the artist's concern that ideal beauty has been lost in the modern world. The desire to combine realistic subject matter and symbolic content was at the center of Gammell's beliefs about art and imbued his approach to teaching.

In a 1959 letter to Maryhill's director, Gammell wrote, "Somehow the passage from the Song of Solomon ... became a symbol to me of the sad predicament of idealism, of ideal beauty, of the artistic ideal, especially in this brutal age."



R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893–1981), **Janitor's Boy**, c. 1940, oil on canvas, 48" x 38"; Gift of R.H. Ives Gammell, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1950.7.1

According to Stephen A. Gjertson's biography of Richard F. Lack in *Richard F. Lack, Catalogue Raisonné, 1943-1998*:

Gammell was a man of intense conviction, immense learning, and total dedication to his art. He knew more about the art of Western painting than most artists of his time in America. Freed by family circumstance from the need to make a living from his art, he was able to create a sometimes eccentric, yet highly original body of work that was finely designed and well executed. Unlike the artists of the Boston School, Gammell's art dealt with the most profound human concerns—humanity's constant preoccupation with the enigma of its condition and position in the cosmos, and with the mystery of the relation of our mind and imagination to powers and forces beyond us.... The greater part of Gammell's work was considered bizarre and out of fashion by most of the art world during his maturity.



R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893–1981), **Panel XI from *A Pictorial Sequence by R.H. Ives Gammell Based on "The Hound of Heaven,"*** 1941–1956, oil on board, 79½" x 29¼"; Gift of the R.H. Ives Gammell Studios Trust, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 2000.14.12

This painting is Gammell's interpretation of part of the 23rd line of "The Hound of Heaven": "...would clash it to." In summary, the Goddess of Love was born from the sea. There she rises remote and untouched from the waters of birth, which for the Protagonist are the bloodstained reminders of misguided sensuality, dragging him down to the lowest depths of the self where monsters lay waiting and whence there is no return.



R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893–1981), **Panel XIII from *A Pictorial Sequence by R.H. Ives Gammell Based on "The Hound of Heaven,"*** 1941–1956, oil on board, 79½" x 29¼"; Gift of the R.H. Ives Gammell Studios Trust, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 2000.14.14

Lines 84–86 of the poem are referenced in this painting: “I was heavy with the even, When she lit her glimmering tapers, Round the day’s dead sanctities.” Through his experience of the natural world, Gammell’s Protagonist responds more fully to the symbols and rituals of his religious heritage, which have their roots in the cyclic movement of the seasons.



Left and right: R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893–1981), **Panel XVIII from *A Pictorial Sequence by R.H. Ives Gammell Based on “The Hound of Heaven,”*** 1941–1956, oil on board, 79½” x 29¼”; Gift of the R.H. Ives Gammell Studios Trust, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 2000.14.19; and a **preliminary sketch** for the same work, 1941–1956, oil on board, 39¾” x 16¼”; Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 2012.17.1

This preliminary sketch and panel illustrate Gammell’s interpretation of Line 143 of “The Hound of Heaven”: “I dimly guess that Time in mists confounds.” His Protagonist reaches the final stage in his confrontation with death—which marks the end of life and its unfulfilled desires and grave regrets. Tormented by remorse for a past that time has consumed, the Protagonist must confront the only reality that time has left to him, his own mortality.



R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893–1981), **Panels I and II from *Fragments of an Uncompleted Cycle***, 1950s–1970s, oil on Masonite, 39” x 13”; Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 2014.4.1 and 2

During the last decades of his life, R.H. Ives Gammell worked on a series of small works called *Fragments of an Uncompleted Cycle*. The images explore themes that are implied but not fully developed in his *The Hound of Heaven*. Taken as whole, the *Fragments* reveal the artist’s personal and philosophical evolution and suggest that his earlier sense of hopelessness and desperation were replaced by more positive emotions.

The paintings in *Fragments* were meant to hang between the panels of *The Hound of Heaven* series. These two would have appeared between Panels I and II and II and III of that cycle. The image of bells would have been placed between an illustration interpreting the first line of Francis Thompson’s poem—“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days”—and a panel representing the poem’s third line, “I fled Him, down the arches of the years.”



R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893–1981), *The Night of Forebeing*, 1962, oil on board, 31" x 23"; Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1964.15.1

Gammell's work frequently illustrated historical, allegorical, and literary subjects and *The Night of Forebeing* refers to a symbolic concept preceding the creation of man as suggested by Shakespeare's Sonnet 107: "... the prophetic soul of the wide world, dreaming on things to come." It also draws inspiration from a line written by Sir Thomas Browne: "In the chaos of preordination, and night of our forebeings," as well as Francis Thompson's Pascal ode, "From the Night of Forebeing."

The Night of Forebeing is an image that Gammell first considered in 1935, decades before the work was completed. At that time, he was contemplating new ways of working, having previously used only classical and biblical themes. He was experiencing considerable self-doubt. While looking for new intellectual and artistic direction, he instead continued finding evidence of "the realm of mystery, terrible with monsters and madness, which is the heart of modern, so seemingly civilized, man."



R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893–1981), ***A Litany for Martyrs***, 1966, oil on canvas, 64" x 42"; Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1968.13.1

In *A Litany for Martyrs*, Gammell revisited a theme he had explored previously in the 1938 painting, *A Song of Lamentation*—the prayer of the afflicted when they are overwhelmed. The artist drew inspiration from Psalm 102, which begins:

Hear my prayer, LORD;
let my cry for help come to you.
Do not hide your face from me
when I am in distress.
Turn your ear to me;
when I call, answer me quickly.

According to Richard Lack, this work conveys in a symbolic way the suffering of millions of human souls who were sacrificed to the stupidities of war and the injustices of tyranny. Here, Gammell chose to use contemporary, rather than classical and biblical references, to shape his composition.



Robert Douglas Hunter (American, 1928–2014), *The Little Leaguer*, 1956, oil on canvas, 27½" x 19½"; Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1963.12.1

Robert Douglas Hunter graduated from Vesper George School of Art in Boston in 1949, then studied with R.H. Ives Gammell from 1950–1955. He taught at Vesper George School of Art from 1950–1983 and at the Worcester Art Museum from 1965–1975.

Hunter was known for his still life paintings, as well as for landscapes and portraits. His career spanned 60 years and he produced countless works. During a 1980 interview he said, "Painting is easy... It's seeing that is hard."

Although classically trained painters appear to paint exactly what they see, each painting is carefully crafted to project an ideal. This idealized portrait reflects the concept of youth and innocence as well as a boy playing baseball. The subject was the son of the artist's neighbors.



Robert Douglas Hunter (American, 1928–2014), *The Chinese Bowl*, c. 1958, oil on canvas 30" x 24"; Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1963.12.2

Robert Douglas Hunter's still life compositions examine harmonies of shape, color, and values. They generally include objects that were selected for their aesthetic qualities and not their functions. His goal was to accurately portray the impression of light falling across forms. The title of this work refers to the red lacquer bowl in the right foreground. The painting was purchased after a 1958 Maryhill Museum of Art exhibition of work by the students of R.H. Ives Gammell.

In 2005, Hunter said:

We strive in our early years to learn our craft; therefore, we search for a master teacher who has demonstrated this in his own work. Afterwards, there comes a long period of growth during which we experiment, embracing some ideas for fuller development and discarding others not useful to our creative needs. When our work begins to reveal individuality, it is still essential to pursue an honest observation of nature interpreted within the framework of varied compositions of our invention. If we fail at this point, we run the risk of displaying mannerisms that will inhibit our artistic growth.



Robert Douglas Hunter (American, 1928–2014), *Still Life with Three Lemons*, c. 1958, oil on canvas, 12½" x 27½"; Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1963.12.3



Robert Douglas Hunter (American, 1928–2014), *Still Life on a Damask Drape*, 1977, oil on canvas, 16" x 24"; Gift of Harry Keller, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1997.13.1



Richard F. Lack (American, 1928–2009), *Still Life with Chrysanthemums*, 1959, oil on canvas, 27" x 32"; Gift of Dr. Gerard J. Timmer, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1999.10.2

Richard Lack began his artistic career during the 1940s, when he enrolled in the Minneapolis School of Art. His interest in the classical tradition soon led him to the Boston atelier of R.H. Ives Gammell. Lack studied with Gammell from 1950–1956 and is acknowledged as one of Gammell's most versatile and influential pupils.

In 1957, Lack returned to the Minneapolis area where he continued promoting the tradition of the Boston School. From 1969–1992, he ran Atelier Lack, a full-time studio-school that trained more than 100 artists in the classical painting tradition.

In addition to participating in group shows, the artist had solo exhibitions at Maryhill Museum of Art on three occasions: August 15–September 15, 1963; August 15–September 15, 1966; and September 15–November 15, 1988.



Richard F. Lack (American, 1928–2009), **Reading**, 1961, oil on canvas, 42" x 48"; Gift of Dr. Gerard J. Timmer, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1999.10.1

After returning to the Minneapolis area in 1957, the artist and his wife purchased a home and Lack built a studio designed to simulate lighting conditions recommended in the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci. Once established, the artist began painting diverse works—still life, portrait, genre, landscape, and imaginative paintings based on myths, history, and the psychology of C.G. Jung. During his 63-year-long career, Lack completed more than 1,300 paintings, drawings, pastels, sketches, etchings, woodcuts, and watercolors.

The subject of this painting is the artist's wife, Katherine.



Richard F. Lack (American, 1928–2009), *Still Life: Duck and Pheasant*, 1961, oil on canvas, 30" x 19½"; Loaned by James G. Scripps, L-25-1

Richard Lack purchased this brace of stuffed wildfowl as props for this painting. He later took them to his atelier where they were used by his students. They were lost during a 1975 atelier fire.

The artist said:

I feel that if painting is to have a future, this future lies in re-discovering the language of the past and using it in a thoroughly contemporary way.... Skillful drawing, fine composition, lovely color, when combined with creative imagination, is never out of date. The pendulum always swings back to nature. Without this periodic rediscovery, the language of painting would become a dead and empty mannerism.



Richard F. Lack (American, 1928–2009), *The Concert*, 1961, oil on canvas, 21½" x 19½"; Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1963.5.4

The subjects of this work are Katherine Lack and a friend, Warren Woodworth. Maryhill Museum of Art purchased the painting during Lack's 1963 solo show. It was one of 16 works included in that exhibition. His 1966 Maryhill Museum show included 33 paintings.

In 2000, Lack said:

My art has been a lifetime search to express the beauty, variety, and endless delight I find in the visible world. Whether it is the play of light on the varied surfaces and textures of a still life, the character, personality, and uniqueness of a human head, or the mood and color of a landscape, the visible world has always acted on me as an inspirational catalyst for my creativity.... My subject matter ranges from still life and landscape to portrait and figure compositions, using both the contemporary world and the world of imagination. I try to create pictures that embody both a personal sense of beauty and craft of the highest order.



Samuel Rose (American, 1941–2008), **Attachments**, 1967, oil on board, 30½" x 32½"; Gift of Samuel Rose, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, 1968.7.1

Samuel Rose (American, 1941–2008) was a native of Cleveland, Ohio. He studied for 17 years with R.H. Ives Gammell at the Fenway Studio in Boston. Rose was considered one of the most unique of the Boston School painters. During the 1960s, he created numerous surrealistic compositions. He later began painting still life and genre subjects.

During his lifetime, Rose exhibited widely and won numerous awards for his work. This work was painted in 1967 and won the 1968 Julius Hallgarten Prize at the National Academy of Design in New York. Rose gave the painting to Maryhill Museum of Art that same year.

Further Reading

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