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Childe Hassam (artist)

American, 1859 - 1935

***Allies Day, May 1917***, 1917

oil on canvas

Overall: 92.7 x 76.8 cm (36 1/2 x 30 1/4 in.) framed:

110.8 x 94.3 x 6.4 cm (43 5/8 x 37 1/8 x 2 1/2 in.)

Gift of Ethelyn McKinney in memory of her brother,

Glenn Ford McKinney

1943.9.1

[On View](#)

A patriotic whirlwind overtook mid-town Manhattan as America entered the First World War in the spring of 1917. On Fifth Avenue, the British Union Jack, the French Tricolor, and Stars and Stripes were displayed prominently during parades honoring America's allies. The colorful pageantry inspired Childe Hassam, who dedicated this picture "to the coming together of [our] three peoples in the fight for democracy." Hassam's flag paintings were first shown as a group in New York's Durand-Ruel Gallery in November 1918, just four days after the armistice was declared. Thus, the works, originally created to herald America's entry into the war, also served to commemorate its victorious resolution.

Hassam had studied in Paris from 1886-1889 and was strongly influenced by the impressionists. In many respects, *Allies Day* resembles the vibrant boulevard paintings of Monet and Pissarro. Like these contemporary French artists, Hassam selected a high vantage point overlooking a crowded urban thoroughfare to achieve an illusion of dramatic spatial recession. But, rather than using daubs of shimmering pigment to dissolve form, he applied fluid parallel paint strokes to create an architectonic patterning. Although he shared the impressionists' interest in bright colors, broken brushwork, and modern themes, Hassam's overall approach was less theoretical and his pictorial forms remained far more substantial than those of his European contemporaries.

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### From the Tour: American Impressionists of the Late 1800s and Early 1900s

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*Allies Day, May 1917* is one of about thirty oil paintings that Childe Hassam made of New York City's flag-decked streets during World War I. On 9 and 11 May 1917 the British and French war commissioners paraded down Fifth Avenue, temporarily proclaimed "the Avenue of the Allies," to celebrate the United States' entry into the war. The slogan "Show your colors" brought forth a patriotic flurry of Union Jacks, Tricolors, and Stars and Stripes.

With his easel on a balcony at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-second Street, Hassam looked northward past Saint Thomas Episcopal Church, the University Club, and the Gotham Hotel toward the yellow-green spring foliage in Central Park. The bold designs of the flags and the strong lines of the architecture well complement each other. So that the sky could compete with these vigorous shapes and assertive colors, Hassam applied vivid aqua blue in upright streaks that march across the air, much like the pedestrians who stroll in the street below.

On his second trip to Europe in 1886/1887, Hassam had been among the first Americans to embrace French impressionism. With his New Englander's worship of order, however, he consistently subjected his compositions and brushstrokes to a geometric rigor. Hassam even claimed, somewhat dubiously, "I have to de-bunk the idea that I use dots of color, so called, or what is known as Impressionism."

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### Childe Hassam

American, 1859 - 1935

Frederick Childe Hassam (he later discontinued the use of his first name) was born on October 17, 1859 in Dorchester, Massachusetts. His ancestors had come from England to America, with the original family name Horsham, in the seventeenth century. In 1876 he was apprenticed to a local wood-engraver and soon thereafter became a free-lance illustrator. In the evenings he attended the life class at the Boston Art Club, then briefly studied anatomy with William Rimmer (1816-1879) at the Lowell Institute, and took private lessons from the German-born painter Ignaz Gaugengigl (1855-1932).

In 1883 Hassam and his friend, the painter Edmund H. Garrett (1853-1929), traveled to Great Britain, Holland, Spain, and Italy, where Hassam produced a large number of watercolors that were exhibited at Williams & Everett Gallery in Boston later that year. Once home, in 1884, Hassam married Kathleen Maude Doane and lived in Boston until the spring of 1886 when the couple left for Europe. In Paris, Hassam studied figure painting with Gustave Boulanger (1824-1890) and Jules Lefebvre (1836-1911) at the Academie Julian, and exhibited his work at the Salons of 1887 and 1888. When they returned to the United States in 1889 the artist and his wife settled in New York. Hassam subsequently assisted in founding the New York Watercolor Club and joined the Pastel Society of New York. He also began to exhibit with the Society of American Artists, with whom he remained until withdrawing in 1897 as a founder of the group that would become known as The Ten.

During the 1890s and the following two decades Hassam spent his summers painting in locations throughout New England, such as Gloucester, Massachusetts; Cos Cob, Connecticut; and Newport, Rhode Island. His favorite settings, however, were Old Lyme, Connecticut, and Appledore, on the Isles of Shoals, off the coast of New Hampshire, where he produced some of his best known images. After 1920 the Hassams' permanent summer home became East Hampton, Long Island. A prolific and industrious artist, Hassam produced numerous scenes of both the city and the countryside. Many of his early street scenes of Boston, Paris, and New York, with their reflections of wet pavement or of gaslight on the snow, evidenced a wonderful talent for capturing the effects of light and atmosphere. While he recorded nearly all aspects of busy city life, he seldom focused on the seamier subjects that often attracted painters of the Ash Can School.

Throughout his career Hassam won numerous awards and prizes and earned the serious attention of the American collectors George A. Hearn, John Gellatly, and Charles Freer. His work was widely exhibited at established museums throughout the country. In the 1913 Armory Show Hassam was represented by six paintings, five pastels, and a drawing. About 1915 he began to turn in his efforts to printmaking, producing etchings and drypoints at first, and lithographs about two years later. By 1933 a catalogue raisonné of his intaglio prints identified 376 different plates. Toward the end of his life Hassam most often exhibited graphic works. The quality of his paintings, in the meantime, became increasingly uneven.

Of the American artists called impressionists, Childe Hassam was among those whose work most closely followed that of their French colleagues. Although Hassam was not a novice, but already a practicing artist when he began to study in Paris, it is apparent that he soon absorbed aspects of the avant-garde styles of that time and place. (Hassam himself chose to minimize his connection to the art of

France, indicating that he was influenced, if at all, by the plein-air prototypes of nineteenth century English painters such as Constable, Turner, and Bonington, perhaps in recognition of his own national origins.) By the time Hassam turned wholly to impressionism, the style had been introduced into the United States for several years and the bright colors and broken brushwork of his images found a ready audience.

Despite his bewilderment concerning some of the changes in contemporary art toward the end of his life, Hassam continued to express faith in the future of American art. Shortly before his death, in East Hampton in August 1935, he arranged to bequeath all the paintings remaining in his studio to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. According to his wish these were sold to establish a fund for the purchase of American works which were then presented to museums. [This is an edited version of the artist's biography published, or to be published, in the NGA Systematic Catalogue]

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# Avenue of the Allies

Start your eyes at the closest flag and slowly look down the avenue to the flags hanging furthest away from you.

**How many flags do you see?**

**What time of day and season is it?**

**Is there a breeze blowing?**

During World War I the blocks along Fifth Avenue from 42nd Street to 59th Street displayed the flags of all the Allied countries. These colorful flags were meant to encourage patriotic spirit and raise money to pay for wartime expenses.

Looking north from 53rd Street, Hassam transformed three city blocks of flags into a colorful pattern of rectangles, stripes, triangles, circles, and diamond shapes. Flags became one of his most popular subjects and Hassam created more than thirty paintings of streets decorated with flags.

## Activity

Draw the flag at your school. Think about the weather and how it will affect your flag, will it be windy, rainy, or a sunny day.