



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

JAMES CHAPIN (1887–1975)

*Call Girl*

Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 30 1/2 in.

Signed, dated, and titled (at lower left): James Chapin; (at lower right): 1956–'60; (on the back):

Call Girl / by / James Chapin

EXHIBITED: New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, 1955, *James Chapin: A Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings, 1921–1955*, no. 52

EX COLL: estate of the artist; [James Cox Gallery, Woodstock, New York]; to private collection, circa 2005, until the present

A regionalist painter who rose to acclaim during the late 1920s, James Chapin spent the majority of his career in New York City and New Jersey, where he created a body of work that reveals his concern for translating the human experience into paint. As pointed out by a writer for *American Artist*, Chapin was the “discoverer of the American scene long before the spotlight was turned on Curry, Benton and Wood” (“An Evening in the Studio of James Chapin,” *American Artist* 5 [May

1941], p. 5).

Born in West Orange, New Jersey, Chapin became interested in art at an early age. Forced to quit school in order to help support his family, he worked as a bank runner in New York while attending evening drawing classes at Cooper Union and anatomy classes with George Bridgeman at the Art Students League. With funding provided by a relative, Chapin also spent two years honing his skills as a figure painter under Julian De Vriendt at the Royal Academy in Antwerp, where he was the recipient of a gold medal for drawing. During his time abroad, Chapin visited Paris, where he had the opportunity to enhance his familiarity with contemporary French art. Inspired by Paul Cézanne's concern for form and structure, as well as by the planar forms of Cubism, he began experimenting with Modernism.

Returning to New York in 1912, Chapin moved into the Greenwich Village neighborhood, where he supported himself by working as a commercial artist and illustrator. In conjunction with one of his assignments, he met the poet Robert Frost, with whom he established a friendship that endured for over three decades. During these years, Chapin created cubist and post-impressionist inspired paintings that he exhibited at the New Gallery in New York in 1923. However, a major turning point in his career occurred in 1924, when, looking for an inexpensive place to live, Chapin relocated to Stillwater, New Jersey, where, for four dollars a month, he rented a log cabin on the property of Emmett Marvin, a local farmer. What happened next has been called "one of the great stories of modern American art" (Grant Wood, *James Chapin: "Sixteen Years of Painting,"* exhib. cat. [New York: Associated American Artists Galleries, 1940], n.p.). Indeed, as he came to know his landlord

and his family—unpretentious people who led a sparse, frugal existence—Chapin changed his artistic direction, both stylistically and thematically. After producing a few modernist works, such as *Willows and Farm Buildings* (1924; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), he abandoned the “fashionable painting formulas” of the day and developed his own brand of representational realism, spending the next four-and-a-half years creating powerful images of the Marvin family, as well as depictions of friends, neighbors, and farm life in Sussex County (“An Evening in the Studio of James Chapin,” p. 5). It was on the basis of these paintings, which evoked the strength and “universality” of his subjects, that Chapin made his mark in the art world, garnering critical recognition as an early regionalist focusing on rural American types, as in his penetrating character portrait, *Emmett Marvin, Farmer* (1925; Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D.C.), which was purchased by Duncan Phillips in 1926. (Maureen C. O’Brien, *James Chapin: The Marvin Years*, exhib. cat. [Montclair, New Jersey: Montclair Art Museum, 1974], n.p. For a recent examination of this aspect of Chapin’s work, see Sherman Reed Anderson, “James Ormsbee Chapin and the Marvin Paintings: An Epic of the American Farm,” Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2008.) Admirers of Chapin’s Marvin paintings also included Walter Gutman, an artist, writer, and filmmaker who lauded the “rich, stirring beauty” of his color, as well as the “human qualities” in his work (Walter Gutman, “James Chapin,” *Art in America* 16 [October 1928], pp. 279–80). Chapin also received praise from his fellow regionalist Grant Wood, who deemed the Marvin series to be “among the best things in American art, strong and solid as boulders” with a “subtle, melancholy beauty of their own” (Wood, n.p.).

In 1929, Chapin returned to Manhattan. In the ensuing years, he broadened his iconography to

include the urban environment, populating his canvases with a cast of characters that included laborers, athletes, prize fighters, shop girls, and the streets of the East Side. During these years, he was affiliated with several of the leading commercial galleries in New York, including the Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries where, on the occasion of his one-man show in 1930, the critic Edward Alden Jewell identified him as an “American artist of the first rank” (Edward Alden Jewell, “James Chapin,” *New York Times*, January 26, 1930). His solo exhibitions in New York also included shows at the Macbeth Galleries (1932) and Associated American Artists (1940, 1945). Chapin likewise participated in many of the national annuals, including those of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Carnegie Institute.

From 1935 to 1945, Chapin spent one day a week teaching classes in advanced painting, portraiture, and composition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. A superb draftsman, he painted portraits of such luminaries as Frost, as well as Katherine Hepburn, Ethel Waters, Edward Hopper, and Dwight Eisenhower. During the late 1930s, Chapin also taught summer classes for the Fine Arts Department at Claremont College, in California. It was there that he met and later married his second wife, Mary Fischer, with whom he had two sons. (Chapin married Abigail Beal Forbes, a teacher and writer, in 1918, but the couple divorced shortly after the birth of their son, James, in 1919. James Forbes Chapin went on to become a noted jazz drummer and the father of singer-songwriter Harry Chapin.) Chapin and his family subsequently spent five years in New York before moving into a farmhouse in the hills of Hunterdon County, New Jersey. They remained there until 1969, when, in keeping with Chapin’s dissent against the Vietnam War, they settled in Toronto. Chapin continued his artistic career until his death in July 1975, shortly after he had been granted

Canadian citizenship.

*Call Girl* was executed over a period of five years, attesting to the fact that while some of Chapin's canvases "mature quickly," others took longer to paint as he formulated his ideas relative to line, form, color, pose, and gesture ("An Evening in the Studio of James Chapin," pp. 5–6. Actually, Chapin appears to have started the painting even earlier, as evidenced by its inclusion in his retrospective exhibition at the New Jersey State Museum in 1955. The work is dated 1954 in the accompanying catalogue. See *James Chapin: A Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings, 1921–1955*, exhib. cat. [Trenton, New Jersey: New Jersey State Museum, 1955], no. 52.) The lushly colored painting features an attractive blonde woman sitting at a bar, the sullen look on her face suggesting her contempt for the well-dressed older man who gropes her left arm with a hairy hand. Her jowly, bespectacled escort for the evening—his head and shoulders covered by a rooster costume—stares out at the viewer with heavy-lidded eyes, holding a drink in his hand as he claims his paramour for the evening.

The couple are shown close-up on the picture plane and rendered with a sense of volume and solidity that reflects Chapin's enduring admiration for Cézanne. Their sculptural forms are silhouetted against a chaotic, loosely-rendered backdrop: a dance hall or nightclub bedecked with frilly red ribbons and an array of caricatured faces and figures that include a clown leering at the viewer and a man kissing a woman's neck while she holds her head back in ecstasy. Certainly, Chapin's image stands as a frank yet poignant commentary on the roles of men and women from certain strata of modern society: despite the physical proximity of the figures, they are

psychologically isolated from one another, devoid of any sense of intimacy or romance. Accordingly, the painting serves as a reminder that, as Grant Wood pointed out, "Always, in [Chapin's] best work, whether it is a pretzel vendor, a famous actress, or a negro boxer, we find the same qualities that distinguish the Marvin paintings—the stern honesty, solid technical construction, and infinite human sympathy which are valid in any time or place" (Wood, n.p.).

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