



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

WILLIAM GLACKENS (1870–1938)

I Went Down to Coney for a Swim

Ink, charcoal, and gouache on paper, 13 1/2 x 17 in.

Signed and inscribed (at lower left): W. Glackens; (on the back): I Went Down to Coney for a Swim

Executed about 1907

RECORDED: Elliott Flower, "A Stranger in New York," *Putnam's Magazine* 5 (March 1909), p. 686 illus.

EX COLL.: the artist, until 1938; to his estate; to [Kraushaar Galleries, New York]; to Arthur G. Altschul, New York, 1975; to [Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York, 1978]; to [Steven Straw, Newburyport, Massachusetts, 1978]; to sale, Phillips, Boston, May 2, 1980, no. 110; to private collection, Texas

A talented and progressive-minded painter, William Glackens played a notable role in American art of the early twentieth century. (For Glackens's life and career, see William H. Gerds, *William Glackens* [Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, 1996], and Avis Berman, ed.,

William Glackens, exhib. cat. [Philadelphia: The Barnes Foundation, 2014].) Affiliated with New York's Ashcan School during the early 1900s, he initially focused his attention on portraying daily life in the urban metropolis, working in a realist manner characterized by painterly brushwork and a low-keyed monochromatic palette. However, by 1910, the independent-minded Glackens had abandoned that approach. While retaining his interest in everyday subjects, he applied his brush to joyous paintings that reflected his new concern for expressive color. Any discussion of Glackens must take into consideration his drawings too; indeed, his friend and fellow artist Everett Shinn was of the opinion that Glackens was "the greatest draughtsman this country has produced. I know of no other American artist who has equaled his extraordinary ability as an interpreter of contemporary life" (Everett Shinn, "William Glackens as an Illustrator," *American Artist* 9 [November 1945], p. 22).

The son of a railway employee, Glackens began his career as an illustrator in his native Philadelphia, joining the *Philadelphia Record* in 1891 and later working for the *Philadelphia Press*, where he met and became friendly with George Luks, John Sloan, and Shinn. As a result of his newspaper work—which required that he make factual, on-the-spot sketches of people and events—Glackens developed a perceptive sense of observation and a rapid technique that remained vital aspects of his aesthetic approach for the remainder of his career.

Through his connection with Sloan, Glackens was introduced to Robert Henri (then teaching at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women), whose "art for life's sake" philosophy and belief that artists should paint their immediate environment stimulated his desire to become a painter. So inspired, Glackens spent his evenings studying painting under Thomas Anshutz, Robert Vonnoh,

and others at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. This was followed, in June 1895, by an extended trip to Paris, during which time Glackens concentrated on painting and familiarized himself with the work of artists such as Edouard Manet, James McNeill Whistler, and Renoir. Along with Henri and Elmer Schofield, he also visited Belgium and Holland, where he studied the work of Dutch masters such as Frans Hals and Rembrandt. Working out of his Montparnasse studio, Glackens went on to paint images of Parisians in cafés, dance halls, and parks, gaining his earliest recognition in the art world when one such work, *Au jardin du Luxembourg* (probably *In the Luxembourg*, 1896; Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Florida), was shown at the annual exhibition of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Glackens returned to Philadelphia in the autumn of 1896. Two months later, he moved to New York, where he quickly made his mark as an artist-reporter for the *New York Herald* and the *Sunday World*. Glackens was also engaged as an illustrator for leading mass-market periodicals, such as *Scribner's*, *Putnam's Monthly*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, as well as *McClure's Magazine*, for which he drew a series of critically acclaimed images of the Spanish-American War. His skills were such that by 1899, he had acquired a reputation as a “draughtsman of force and original and unique methods of presenting ideas ... [who] is assuredly making a place for himself, and one that no other American illustrator has heretofore occupied” (Regina Armstrong, “Representative Young Illustrators: Third Paper,” *Art Interchange* 43 [November 1899], p. 109). To be sure, Glackens’s illustrations were brash and unpretentious, so much so that to conservative audiences they were “not sweet enough. They were too real, too original, too fresh and amusing to a public saturated with false illustration” (Forbes Watson, *William Glackens* [New York: Duffield & Co., 1923], p. 1919).

During his early years in New York, Glackens painted in his spare time. It was during this period that he created some of his earliest beach scenes, a subject, explored in oils such as *The Fruit Stand*, *Coney Island* (circa 1898; Nova Southeastern University Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Florida) that would occupy his attention for the remainder of his career. Following his marriage in 1904 to Edith Dimock (1876–1955), an artist and the daughter of an affluent silk manufacturer from West Hartford, Connecticut, Glackens achieved a level of financial security that allowed him to spend more of his time at his easel, where he created such noted works as *At Mouquin's* (1905; Art Institute of Chicago), a portrayal of stylish New Yorkers at a well-known restaurant.

In February of 1908, Glackens, along with Henri, Shinn, Sloan, Luks, Arthur B. Davies, Ernest Lawson, and Maurice Prendergast, participated in the legendary exhibition of The Eight, held at the Macbeth Gallery in New York. Shortly thereafter, Glackens moved away from Ashcan realism and adopted the high-keyed palette and feathery brushwork associated with the later work of Renoir. His impressionist canvases also reveal his awareness of the work of avant-garde French artists such as the Fauvist Henri Matisse and the Nabis painter Pierre Bonnard, both of whom embraced the use of decorative, non-naturalistic color. In the ensuing years, Glackens applied this precept to studio subjects such as nudes and floral still lifes, as well as the sunlit beach scenes he painted in littoral locales in Massachusetts, Nova Scotia, and Bellport, Long Island.

A staunch advocate for his fellow artists, Glackens helped organize and participated in the *Exhibition of Independent Artists* in 1910, the first non-juried, no-prize exhibition held in the United States. He also served on the Committee on Domestic Exhibits for the groundbreaking Armory Show (*International Exhibition of Modern Art*) in 1913. Glackens likewise helped introduce

vanguard European art to American audiences through his activity as an art advisor: on a trip to Paris in 1912, he acquired representative examples of paintings by artists such as Renoir, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Cézanne on behalf of the collector, Dr. Albert C. Barnes, a good friend and former schoolmate. An avid Francophile, Glackens continued to visit France throughout the 1920s and 1930s, spending time in Paris and in southern locales such as Le Suquet. He also made visits to Vermont, Québec, Maine, New Hampshire, and Florida. An artist who led a peripatetic lifestyle that revolved around work and family, Glackens remained as prolific as ever until his death on May 22, 1938, in Westport, Connecticut.

As Everett Shinn recalled, Glackens drew with “lightning speed.... [H]e made his drawings to work out problems in line and form; and it was this unconscious, unaffected striving for truth that endowed his work with such penetrating power and rugged beauty” (Shinn, p. 22). This comment brings to mind drawings such as *I Went Down to Coney for a Swim*, which also underscores the artist’s delight in portraying leisure activity along the shore. That Glackens chose to explore the pictorial offerings of Coney Island, the famous seaside resort in southwestern Brooklyn, is not surprising. Easily accessible from Manhattan via train or ferry, Coney Island emerged as the most popular beach in the greater New York area by the late 1870s, providing city dwellers with sun, sand, and salt-tinged air, as well an array of entertainments in the form of a lively boardwalk and iron piers extending into the sea, carousels, concert halls, and even freak shows. With the opening of Steeplechase Park in 1897, followed by Luna Park in 1903 and Dreamland in 1904, rides, mechanized games, and imaginative architecture became major drawing cards, too, attracting hordes of working and middle-class New Yorkers from May until early September. Recalling his experiences as a day-tripper during the summer of 1907, John Sloan declared: “The crowds near kill

you in the rushes for trains coming and going. One must strive for good nature.” (See Bruce St. John, ed., *John Sloan’s New York Scene, from the diaries, notes and correspondence 1906–1913* [New York: Harper & Row, 1965], p. 141. For additional information on Coney Island and its attractions, see Steven Weinstein, “Coney Island,” in Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York* [New York: New York Historical Society, 1995], p. 273, and John F. Casson, *Amusing the Millions: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1978].)

Consistent with the democratic ideals of the Ashcan School and their penchant for depicting ordinary types, artists such as Glackens and Sloan found a wealth of motifs in Coney Island (aptly dubbed the “people’s playground”), its vibrant, raucous atmosphere prompting one commentator to describe its identity as being inextricably “bound up with the crowd” ([William H. Bishop], “To Coney Island,” *Scribner’s Monthly* 20 [July 1880], p. 363). Glackens effectively conveys this notion in *I Went Down to Coney for a Swim*, which may have been inspired by the artist’s visit to Coney Island on July 3, 1907, when Glackens and his expectant wife made a day trip to the resort to escape the stifling heat of the city. (See Ira Glackens, *William Glackens and The Eight: The Artists Who Freed American Art* [New York: Horizon Press, 1907], p. 78.) According to their son, Ira (who was born the next day), the couple traveled to Coney Island by boat to enjoy the “sea breezes” (ibid, p. 78). However, as was his custom, Glackens would have had his sketchbook in hand, eager to capture any subject that caught his eye. Actually, the artist may have had a future magazine commission in mind when he went to Coney Island on that July day in 1907, as evidenced by the fact that the present work was among the drawings Glackens created as illustrations for Elliott Flower’s short story, “A Stranger in New York,” which graced the pages of the March 1909 issue of *Putnam’s Magazine*. (See Elliott Flower, “A Stranger in New York,” *Putnam’s Magazine* 5 [March 1909], p.

686. The author of novels such as *Policeman Flynn* [1902], Flower also write essays and humorous articles for leading American periodicals.)

Flower's amusing tale involved a lonely visitor from west of the Hudson who found himself in New York during the "good old summer time" with nothing to do (Flower, "A Stranger in New York," p. 683). When a sympathetic local suggested he make the trip to Coney Island, the out-of-towner—interpreted in Glackens's drawing as a disgruntled tourist who stands with his hands in his pockets as he takes in the droves of beach-goers packed together along the shoreline—replied that he had already made the trek "down to Coney for a swim, and came back to New York for a bath.... I spent a good part of my time down there waiting for somebody to come out of the ocean so that there would be room for me to get in" (Flower, pp. 686–87). Indeed, *I Went Down to Coney for a Swim* exemplifies the way in which Glackens used pose and gesture to animate his composition and communicate meaning, apparent not only in his insightful handling of the story's protagonist, but in his rendering of the people on the beach, among them a small girl in the lower right who holds her skirt as she tests the temperature of the water and an older woman who sits next to her, enjoying the waves lapping at her feet while several men and boys wade in the water or stand along the shore. The simple clothing of the bathers, as well as anecdotal details such as the presence of some litter in the form of a pail and bottle stuck in the sand, add a down-to-earth touch that is very much in keeping with the Ashcan School's gritty realism and the new era of mass culture. (Glackens's depictions of excursionists to Coney Island include drawings, among them *Morning at Coney Island* [about 1907–09; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York], *Afternoon at Coney Island* [about 1907–09; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York], and *Beach, Coney Island* [about 1907; Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas], as well as oils such as *Crowd at the Seashore* [about

1910; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York].)

In addition to alluding to the throngs of people who flocked to Coney Island on a typical summer's day, Glackens's drawing also calls attention to its wide array of man-made attractions. The view, which faces west from West Brighton (i.e., Coney Island) includes, from right to left, a large circus tent, and further on, the Ferris Wheel (erected by George C. Tilyou in 1894) and the Coney Island Athletic Club (opened in 1897 in the building that originally housed Bauer's Casino bathhouse). (Information courtesy of David Sullivan of HeartofConeyIsland.com, email to Hirschl & Adler Galleries, June 1, 2020, Hirschl & Adler Galleries archives. According to Sullivan, Glackens took some liberties with the placement of the architectural elements, as was typical with many Coney Island drawings and posters.) In the upper right, the skyline is dominated by a 300-foot structure known as the Iron Tower, originally built (as Sawyer's Observatory Tower) for the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876 and re-erected by Thomas Culver at Culver Plaza South in Coney Island in 1877. (Also known as the Iron Tower Observatory and the Steel Tower, the Iron Tower was destroyed in the Dreamland fire of 1911.) Other landmarks include the New Iron Pier (erected in 1879), identifiable on the far left by its two triangular-prism parapets.

In keeping with the improvisatory drawing style and direct realism that contributed to his success as an artist-reporter, Glackens interprets the figures with quick staccato strokes, a strategy that evokes a palpable sense of the fleeting moment. At the same time, the artist's knack for capturing individual characterization is also in evidence, especially in his emphatic handling of the perturbed out-of-towner, who, in contrast to those around him, remains detached from the activity at hand. A spirited interpretation of the cavalcade of humanity that Glackens would have encountered at Coney Island, *I*

Went Down to Coney for a Swim also brings to mind the words of Ira Glackens, who described his father's drawings as "full of life, keenly observed, and so beautifully composed" (Ira Glackens, "By Way of Background," in Janet A. Flint, *Drawings by William Glackens, 1870–1938*, exhib. cat. [Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, 1972], n.p.).

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