

Gari Melchers: An American Impressionist At Home And Abroad



By Stephen May

Previous Page: This gallery showcases some of Melchers' Southern paintings, notably "A Native of Virginia," circa 1925 — on the far wall — presenting a weathered farm woman standing alone with her hoe and vegetables beside her. It is a realistic picture that recalls the artist's equally unsentimental depictions of working residents in Holland. This painting is not in the show.

FAIRFIELD, CONN. — During the course of a distinguished half-century career in Europe and America, Gari Melchers (1860–1932) created widely acclaimed paintings of Dutch peasant and religious life, Impressionist canvases of Europe, New York City and the American South,



Belmont's main house dates to 1790 and is perched on a bluff overlooking the Rappahannock River. Gari and Corinne Melchers lived in this peaceful site starting in 1916. The white frame house is furnished with its original eclectic selection of pieces acquired by the couple in Europe — French and Oriental carpets, old porcelain, china and crystal. There are notable paintings not only by Melchers, but by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, George Hitchcock, Berthe Morisot and Frans Snyders.

perceptive portraits and giant murals.

After enjoying extraordinary critical and public success in his lifetime, Melchers slipped into oblivion after his death. Critics and art historians

have tended to ignore art like Melchers' that ranges too broadly for neat categorization. Some view expatriate artists, with the exception of Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent



Melchers admired the hardworking, pious people of the Netherlands, especially the working women like the figure in "Homeward," an 1885 watercolor that measures 17¼ by 23¾ inches. She appears to be bearing a kriel on her back, a basket used to carry potatoes from the field or dry wood from the dunes. Works like this "established Melchers' reputation as a painter of Dutch scenes that celebrate the virtues of an unsophisticated life of hard work and pious reverence.... [They] brought Melchers' art to the attention of a widespread international audience," observed Diane Lesko.

and Henry O. Tanner, as unworthy of serious consideration as American painters. The onset of American Scene/regional art further eclipsed Melchers' more conventional work.

In recent years, there have been sporadic efforts to resurrect the reputation of this one-time international superstar and acquaint the public with his achievements. He was included in an expatriates exhibition in Los Angeles in 1976 and a retrospective in St Petersburg, Fla., in 1990, but no other significant shows.

Melchers found many attributes in common among Dutch peasants and black workers in the Western Hemisphere. "A Harbor Boy," circa 1928, is set in Barbados. Both represented to him the virtues of traditional values and hard work.





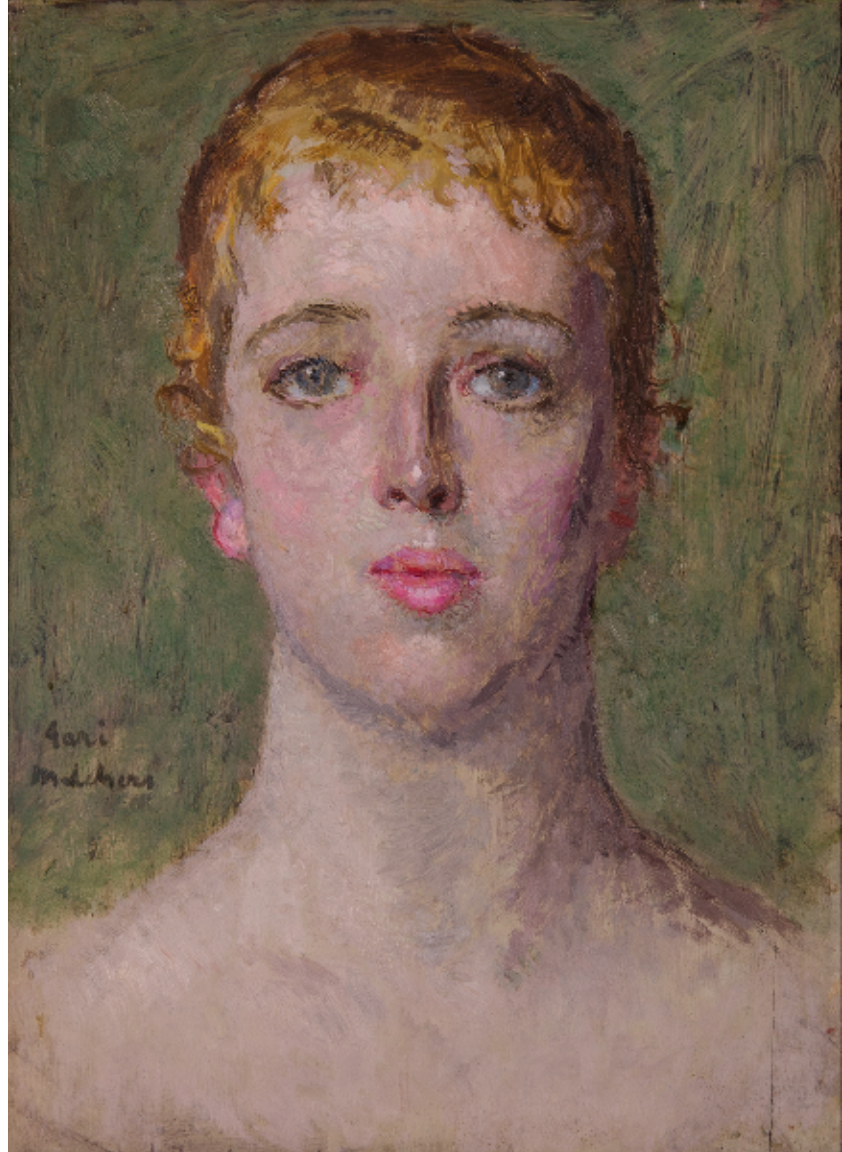
Melchers painted numerous nudes during his career, but few as sensual as "Nude Reclining."

The paucity of Melchers exhibitions makes particularly welcome "Gari Melchers: An American Impressionist at Home and Abroad," on view

through May 22 at Bellarmine Museum of Art at Fairfield University. Started by the museum's former director Jill Deupi, who grew up

Part of Melchers' high reputation was based on his portraits of such well-known figures as banker Andrew Mellon and President Theodore Roosevelt. In "Girl's Head (A Blond)," circa 1925, he presents a noncelebrity in a closeup, head-on image that seems to convey the sitter's somewhat uneasy feeling.

seeing Melchers works in Fredericksburg, Va., and completed by interim director Carrie Mack Weber, the show comprises 23 works on loan from Belmont, Melchers home and studio in



Among the highlight paintings in Belmont's elegant studio room is, on wall to left, "The Fencer," circa 1895, depicting a ramrod straight master of the sport in an academic style. This oil on canvas measures a sizable 80 7/8 by 39 1/4 inches and had a long exhibition record. The studio remains outfitted with Melchers' workbench, easels, brushes, palettes and other tools of his trade. A retrospective organized by Diane Lesko in 1990-91 for a tour beginning at the Museum of Fine Arts in St Petersburg, Fla., documented the high quality and international scope of the various styles in which Melchers worked. The painting is not in the show.





This portrait of Melchers is by James Jebusa Shannon, an American-born, leading British portraitist. He conveys his fellow artist's somewhat disheveled look, intense gaze and hints at Melchers' modesty, unaffected by his successes as a painter of international renown. This painting is not featured in the show.

Fredericksburg, in oil, watercolor, pastel, gouache and charcoal. Most are seldom seen in public.

Born Julius Garibaldi (in honor of Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi) in Detroit of German immigrant parents, Gari's father, Julius Melchers, was an art teacher and gifted woodcarver known for church furnishings and cigar store Indians. (A carved and

This undated photograph shows Melchers with his painting "The Smithy." It was acquired by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which sold it to an unidentified bidder at auction in 2008 for \$122,000.

Painted example of the latter fetched \$153,600 at a Sotheby's auction in 2004.)

Young Gari studied drawing under his father's tutelage before heading to Dusseldorf in 1877 to learn the fine points of academic art. Four years later, he moved to Paris, training first



at the Academie Julian and then the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Within a year he painted “The Letter,” 1882, a Vermeer-like canvas showing two Breton peasant women standing at a sunlit interior window reading a newly arrived letter. Accepted at the Paris Salon, this realistic work established the subject matter, style

and subdued palette that characterized Melchers’ paintings for years. At age 22, he was recognized as an important artist. A painting trip to Italy that year prompted “Kneeling in Church,” painted while he stayed in a Trappist monastery. ([Continued on page 1-C inside the E-edition](#))

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