



30: Maurice Prendergast *The Ships* (ca. 1895) *Woodland Bathers* (1913–15)

Gwendolyn Owens

The Memorial Art Gallery has the distinction of being the first art museum in the world to welcome a work by Maurice Prendergast into its collection. *The Ships*, a monotype, was bought by Emily Sibley Watson for MAG from a summer 1919 exhibition. The artist may have never known of the acceptance of his first work into a public collection; over the years, he had exhibited at many art museums but never before had one of his works become part of a permanent holding.¹

The Ships was made in the mid-1890s when Prendergast was first painting what would become his preferred subject matter throughout his career: people strolling along the New England shore and in city parks, in this case on Telegraph Hill near Nantasket, south of Boston.² Described as having “wonderful flutter, luminosity, and kaleidoscopic color-movement,”³ Prendergast’s early works were well received by local Boston critics and collectors. But in 1919, at the time of the Rochester gift, Prendergast, still active as an artist, had moved beyond his early style. He had completely stopped making monotypes—single or occasionally double-edition prints—and turned his attention primarily to making complex oils like *Woodland Bathers*, the major painting that MAG acquired in 1963. These later modernist works used the same compositional schemes as the early works, but the similarity stopped there.

Prendergast came to his modernist style of painting after a long career of artistic experimentation and innovation. Born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, in 1858, he moved as a child to Boston, the home of his mother’s family. He began his career as a commercial artist painting signs and showcards for businesses. In 1891, however, he made the decision to change direction and went to Paris to study art. Returning to Boston in 1894 after having studied at the Académie Julian and Colarassi’s studio in Paris, he began painting oils, watercolors, and monotypes, which he exhibited in local, then regional, and finally national exhibitions. These works found favor with collectors who wanted “small bits of decorative color”⁴ for the home.

In 1900, Prendergast was invited to exhibit at the Macbeth Gallery in New York, a gallery that was aggressively trying to build a market for American art. He sold a respectable eight works from his solo show at Macbeth’s.⁵ But rather than stick with his successful formula, the artist kept experimenting, making the figures in his beach scenes more abstract or out of scale with their surroundings. Some of these figures even stared out of the picture, challenging the viewer’s gaze by seeming to stare back. In his oils, he made the colors more somber and the figures small and abstract. Unlike the earlier “small bits of decorative color,” these works were more sophisticated and demanding.

As his style was developing in new directions, he was also expanding his circle of friends. Prendergast got to know two important leaders in American art who also showed at Macbeth’s: Robert Henri and Arthur B. Davies. He was chosen by them to be among a group of eight artists to exhibit at the Macbeth Gallery in 1908 in a highly organized and publicized protest against the traditional art jury system. The group claimed the juries stifled innovation by making it harder for new art by younger artists to be seen in the major annual exhibitions. Prendergast’s inclusion in their protest show gave the event breadth of style; his works did not resemble that of any of his fellow-protesters, the majority of whom were painting street scenes of New York.

Maurice Prendergast,
1858–1924
The Ships, ca. 1895
Monotype, 15¼ x 10⁵/₁₆ in.
Gift of Emily Sibley Watson,
1929



As the century progressed, Prendergast continued to follow his own path, moving even further away from the realism of his early park and beach scenes. He traveled back to Europe in 1907, revisiting Paris where he saw the newer, brighter paintings of Henri Matisse and the fauve painters,⁶ and back to Venice, which he had first visited in 1898–99, in 1910–11. His palette lightened with the influence of the fauves but his commitment to his chosen subject matter never strayed.

Collectors still shunned his work and critics were confused by it. By 1911, Boston reviewers were to the point of waxing nostalgic for the luminous 1890s works.⁷ This all changed in 1913, after the famous Armory Show in New York, which brought together more than a thousand works of art by modern European and American artists. At and after the exhibition, Prendergast's work was discovered by a different breed of collectors: people who were interested in modern art. Among the notable individuals who bought the artist's works were lawyer John Quinn, and three individuals who would later found museums: Albert C. Barnes, of the Barnes Collection, Lillie Bliss, of the Museum of Modern Art, and Duncan Phillips, of The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. And subsequently, there was a rediscovery of his earlier work, like the 1890s monotype purchased by MAG benefactor Emily Sibley Watson.



Maurice Prendergast,
1858–1924
Park by the Sea, 1922
Watercolor with graphite
on paper, 17⁷/₈ × 22¹/₈ in.
Gift of Mrs. Charles
Prendergast, 63.28

In the later oils, the figures in Prendergast paintings had become even more schematic and out of scale with each other and the color more clearly based on theory rather than nature. The location of the specific scene, whether a park or a seashore, was no longer important. The titles reflect this change. Site-specific names like *Cohasset* or *Franklin Park* (both Boston-area locales) disappear, replaced by titles like *Picnic* or *Bathers* or *Promenade*—often interchangeable, having little to do with a place.

In essence, these works were experiments in balancing color, line, and shape. The canvas was usually layered with paint built up on the surface and the faceless figures under the trees were forms—lines and curves—that had at times only a passing resemblance to people and were never recognizable as individuals. The arrangement of the figures in the landscape and the use of both nude and clothed figures together recall the work of French artists whose work Prendergast saw in Paris, among them Puvis de Chavannes, Edouard Manet, Maurice Denis, and Paul Cézanne, all of whom experimented with the same type of composition.

In *Woodland Bathers*, the space in the work is flattened, as the sea appears not to recede. Only the outlines seem to stop the figures and trees from melding into the surface of the green lawn and the blue water. The arrangement of the scene seems deceptively simple, almost childlike; a closer look, however, reveals echoes across the canvas in color, line, and shape that can only have been deliberate. Ultimately, this painting, like all the successful paintings of this later era in the artist's life, is more about creating a sense of atmosphere on a flat canvas than trying to mirror reality.

Prendergast took a singular path to modernism; no one around him painted in a similar style. He was consistent in his own vision, taking what he saw and assimilating it into a painting style unmistakably his own. In contrast to the oils layered with paint, the late watercolors use the white of the paper and the fluidity of the medium to create his imagined world, as in *Park by the Sea* (1922), also owned by the Memorial Art Gallery.

(Facing page)

Maurice Prendergast,
1858–1924

Woodland Bathers, 1913–15

Oil on canvas, 19¹/₂ × 26¹/₂ in.

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 63.29

Prendergast never wrote about what he was striving to achieve in his art. It seems obvious that he wanted to make the surface pattern itself the subject: a very modern idea. At their best, the patterns of line and shape are strong enough to intrigue the viewer, hold our attention, and entice us to enter into the artist's mythic world.

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