Fahlman aptly compares the tone of Pène du Bois’ paintings and commentary—“ironically humorous rather than bitingly sarcastic”—to the tone of *The New Yorker* magazine. That *The New Yorker* caters to the economic elite can be discerned just from perusing the gift suggestions and ads for $20,000 bracelets. It also caters to the well-educated, as indexed by literary references, and even cartoons that are occasionally impossible to decipher without insider knowledge. Yet the magazine is directed to general audiences and seems to make well-targeted fun of the very culture in which it travels. It is a well-intentioned, self-denigrating fun, and it is the kind of fun general audiences like to see being made of the cultural elite. Tending to the left of the political spectrum it is a “people’s magazine,” but it is also an artifact of privilege to which most of its readership could not possibly aspire. Occasionally it publishes articles explaining previously indecipherable cartoons, but it does so in a high cultured way that does not appear to denigrate any reader’s intelligence.

Against this backdrop, *Connoisseurs* comes into renewed focus. It is a painting of the very world that gives rise to paintings. It might be criticism, it might be endorsement; probably it is neither, or both. In any case, it is about art, and it is about men who view art in luxurious settings and talk about it, or analyze it, or critique it, or show off their knowledge about it, or analyze it, or just...appreciate it. Then again, we cannot see distinctly the inner painting that the men are talking about...if we can see it at all is this a sailboat, something else entirely, or do we see light reflecting off of the glass, concealing any possible knowledge at all of the inner painting? And whatever it is, is this a quality piece? Or could it be a knockoff collector’s item such as a Thomas Kinkaid painting, or the kind of thing one finds hanging in motel rooms? Do the “connoisseurs” even know or care about the quality of the painting they are examining? And either way, do these men like the painting or might they be faulting it or laughing at it? Arguably no amount of background information or extrinsic material can disambiguate this painting to absolute clarity, and that includes whatever commentary the artist himself might have provided.
viewing the painting—is part of the objectively available painting on hand for inspection even as the objective painting as described informs us as to what the viewer could possibly be talking about.

Yet energy has been expended by social scientists to develop reflectivity, to overcome common-sense practices and to replace them with professional practices, all to no avail. To treat the sloppiness of everyday accountability as troublesome or as something to be repaired or eliminated, Garfinkel wrote, is like trying to tear the walls of a room down to see what holds the ceiling up. Social scientists implicitly realize this but often find it disturbing. When conducting research, they continually recognize a familiar gap between what they are writing about and what they actually have on hand. When they occasionally acknowledge this gap professionally, it’s considered a methodological problem to be fixed in future research, or it’s attributed to the youth of their disciplines or to human error, or it’s handled in footnotes or methodological appendices. Inevitably, though, whenever they discuss this familiar gap, it chronically reasserts itself in familiar ways that escape description even in the very texts in which they write about it.

An important difference between describing events in a painting such as Pène du Bois’ watercolor, as opposed to describing actual social events, is that nobody inside a painting is actively producing the depicted routines in real time even as they, perhaps, can be seen to be actively producing them. For example, although the men in Connoisseurs appear to be talking about topical relevances, our inability to access transcribed tapes of the discussion is not simply a technical limitation but an essential one: nothing is, in fact, being said. This turns the entire focus on “what’s really happening in the painting” over to us, the viewers. It can also turn the focus to the intended sense of the artist insofar as we the viewers have access to relevant knowledge of Pène du Bois that can mobilize strategically in the production of here-and-now practical, that is, accountable, viewing.

It will surprise no one that an artist would inhabit the art world, but, as with Pène du Bois, there is often tension in the artist’s relation with that world: is he in and of it, a true native to it, or does he stand outside it viewing it with a kind of anthropological detachment? It seems that we have both here, a kind of ambivalence—Pène du Bois enjoyed associating with the artistic elite, but he often worked in solitude and relative anonymity. His ingratiation to the art community can hardly be doubted—he began his career as an art critic, became a full-time artist, and then later returned to writing about art when changing fashions limited his sales of his paintings. He was a regular at artistic gatherings and later returned to writing about art when changing fashions limited his sales of his paintings. He was a regular at artistic gatherings and major literary and artistic events, and he had routine access to artists, galleries, dealers, museums, and, especially, patrons. At the same time, however, one can hardly doubt his simultaneously detached view of the art community.

An important difference between describing events in a painting such as Pène du Bois’ watercolor, as opposed to describing actual social events, is that nobody inside a painting is actively producing the depicted routines in real time even as they, perhaps, can be seen to be actively producing them. For example, although the men in Connoisseurs appear to be talking about topical relevances, our inability to access transcribed tapes of the discussion is not simply a technical limitation but an essential one: nothing is, in fact, being said. This turns the entire focus on “what’s really happening in the painting” over to us, the viewers. It can also turn the focus to the intended sense of the artist insofar as we the viewers have access to relevant knowledge of Pène du Bois that can mobilize strategically in the production of here-and-now practical, that is, accountable, viewing.
INTRODUCTION

naive observation that at times bordered on sacrilege characterized the work of Pêne du Bois (1884-1958) in both areas of his career—as a painter who often depicted the art world and the upper crust of society, and as a prominent art critic who, though initially sympathetic to modernist impulses in art, was an enduring champion of realism. The Hillstrom Museum of Art’s fine 1938 watercolor Communion, which was donated to the Museum in 2004 by Reverend Richard L. Hillstrom (’38), reflects the artist’s tendencies, and examination of it allows consideration of his career and the social circles in which he operated. The painting was made in one of his most fertile, important periods, long before the renown of Pêne du Bois and other top painters of the time was eclipsed by the abstract expressionism emerging after World War II.

Pêne du Bois was born in Brooklyn to Laura and Henri Pêne du Bois, the latter a writer, literary critic, and journalist whose friendship with French author Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) was the source of his son’s name. Raised in a sophisticated environment deeply engaged in the French culture of his father, the artist spoke only French for the first years of his life. This background had an impact on his art, which was heavily influenced by two extended periods abroad in France, the first as a young art student, the second as an established artist when he lived there with his wife Florence Sherman Duncan and their children Yvonne and William from 1924 to 1930.

ARTISTIC TRAINING AND EARLY CAREER

As a youth, Pêne du Bois’ natural intelligence and abilities allowed him easy success in school while also having time for independent interests. He not only imitated his father by pursuing writing, but also developed a passion for art. In one of his earliest attempts, the artist made a series of drawings of his father’s appearance at the Chase School caused an “uproar,” and the painting was made in one of his most fertile, important periods, long before the renown of Pêne du Bois and other top painters of the time was eclipsed by the abstract expressionism emerging after World War II. Pêne du Bois was born in Brooklyn to Laura and Henri Pêne du Bois, the latter a writer, literary critic, and journalist whose friendship with French author Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) was the source of his son’s name. Raised in a sophisticated environment deeply engaged in the French culture of his father, the artist spoke only French for the first years of his life. This background had an impact on his art, which was heavily influenced by two extended periods abroad in France, the first as a young art student, the second as an established artist when he lived there with his wife Florence Sherman Duncan and their children Yvonne and William from 1924 to 1930.

Afternoon Meeting
The Captains
The Captains
Fun Times Discussing Art

HOW THE SOCIAL SCIENCES VIEW SOCIAL SCIENCES

Throughout their 200-year history, the social sciences have been endlessly preoccupied with trying to describe human behavior objectively, without bias, hidden assumptions, or practical or political agendas. Famed sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1917- 2011) called this vast array of collective efforts “the worldwide social science movement,” and he summarized their commonalties under the rubric “Formal Analysis.” While claiming no critique of the social sciences, and declaring nothing less than enthusiasm about their discoveries and accomplishments, he nevertheless maintained that their commonality resides in their unwillingness to see standard social order, the real and actual society, in the canonical manner on hand, what he called “the concreteness of things.” Rather, they find order as outcomes of methodological procedures by which they transform “the concreteness of things” into categorical phenomena legitimated by the terms and protocols of their respective disciplines, including their theoretical concepts, methodological categories, and limitless seen-but- unnoticed background expectancies. Without irony, these are the same social practices everyday members of society count on to find themselves in familiar scenes and common-sense situations of choice. Everyday members of society are not only skilled in these practices but are the very definition of virtue without- alternative. Indeed, in these practices takes an inevitable priority over their more refined applications, known to practitioners in special competence, including all manner of professional competence and competence in the discovering sciences. Garfinkel named these practices “members’ methods,” or “ethnomethods,” and proposed investigations into these practices as a topic in their own right, investigations he termed “ethnomethodology.”

That social order self-organizes in this way returns us to the sui generis quality of society anticipated by French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) in the late 1800s, what Garfinkel has called the “incarnate” character of accountability. Members’ methods are practiced inside social settings while at the same time are accountable to those very settings, likewise the settings to which members’ practices are accountable are exactly what they are as an ongoing accomplishment of those very practices. More simply stated, an act of mastery is part of the setting it describes and vice versa, a phenomenon elucidated by Garfinkel’s use of the term “reflexivity.”

Efforts to teach reflexivity to new cohorts of graduate students during the 1970s often included two identical drawings of a three dimensional opening on a two dimensional chalk board accompanied by the terms “in” and “out” written in them. The pedagogical point of these drawings was not to show the possibilities of optical illusion, but rather the terms “in” and “out” could serve as instructions for seeing the intended sense of the illusion in alternative ways, neither of which would be possible with the drawings alone. Moreover, the placement of the terms in juxtaposition with the drawings helped the drawings to reveal the intended sense of the terms that would not be available from the terms written on the board alone. Finally, the placement of the terms inside the drawings shows a sense in which the two make up a self-organizing whole which cannot be analytically separated into the description versus the thing described, popularly known as “subjectivity” versus “objectivity.” Thus whatever a student during the 1970s often included two identical drawings of a three dimensional opening on a two dimensional chalk board accompanied by the terms “in” and “out” written in them. The pedagogical point of these drawings was not to show the possibilities of optical illusion, but rather the terms “in” and “out” could serve as instructions for seeing the intended sense of the illusion in alternative ways, neither of which would be possible with the drawings alone. Moreover, the placement of the terms in juxtaposition with the drawings helped the drawings to reveal the intended sense of the terms that would not be available from the terms written on the board alone. Finally, the placement of the terms inside the drawings shows a sense in which the two make up a self-organizing whole which cannot be analytically separated into the description versus the thing described, popularly known as “subjectivity” versus “objectivity.” Thus whatever a student
with works in the Hillstrom Collection), spoke highly of him and published the same year as part of a series that included works by Mahonri Young (1877-1957) and William Glackens (1870-1938), 1949), Leon Kroll (1884-1974), Ernest Lawson (1873-1939), among others. Two of these works are examples of the social pretensions that, like the works of art, are on display. A second group of students was asked to write about the "love economy." Under Anticipation, a student saw an "early morning meeting," another saw strategic positioning, possibly plotting. In this manner, the title of a painting does not simply describe the painting but serves as instruction for viewing, telling how to see what is depicted.

Yet even without instruction, viewers necessarily see more in a painting than is literally on display. A second group of students was asked to write about the Pène du Bois painting without benefit of any title whatsoever. Notably, these students could still see a typed scene that connects to other typed scenes throughout wider society. Themes indexed by these views include such as all of whom who are represented in the Hillstrom Collection). Connoisseurs depicts a group of unidentified gentlemen in what appears to be an exclusive club. In the foreground, uninvolved with the main action, a man stretches out in a comfortable chair, reading a newspaper that has the words "NEW TIMES" legible across its top. Two other men, also elegantly dressed, stand by the fireplace and appear to discuss the framed artwork above the mantle, perhaps a depiction of a sailboat. The man on the right seems to lead the discussion. His face is knit in profile; his aquiline nose, raised eyebrow, and general expression suggest superiority, of intelligence and perhaps also of social standing, to the man next to him—whose facial features are coarser and whose dress and bearing are less refined. The title Connoisseurs suggests, perhaps, that the two men are aficionados of art, although it's possible that they are not even discussing art and that they are connoisseurs of something altogether different.

HOW IS A VIEW OF THE PAINTING POSSIBLE IN THE FIRST PLACE?

In fact, the title Connoisseurs suggests to viewers far more basic matters than one might suspect. What would viewing the painting be without the title? Can a painting speak for itself?

A group of Gustavus Adolphus College students enrolled in various recent social science courses were invited to write about the painting under several fictitious titles—War Declared, Anticipation, Back from the Ski Slopes, Working Class Trouble. In every case, students had no trouble seeing more happening in the painting than is depicted under War Declared, antimilitarism was driven home to the newspaper and to possible topics under discussion, one student saw that the men are "professional, possibly some branch of the military." Under Back from the Ski Slopes, some students saw a fire in the fireplace, one noting that one of the men is "looking at" it, one student saw a "party," yet another a "smoking room." Under Working Class Trouble, a student noticed a woman "going back to the kitchen," another saw a "maid," yet another saw a discussion about "the feudal economy." Under Anticipation, a student saw an "early morning meeting," another saw strategizing, possibly plotting. In this manner, the title of a painting does not simply describe the painting but serves as instruction for viewing, telling how to see what is depicted.

Yet even without instruction, viewers necessarily see more in a painting than is literally on display. A second group of students was asked to write about the Pène du Bois painting without benefit of any title whatsoever. Notably, these students could still see a prescribed scene that connects to other prescribed scenes throughout wider society. Themes indexed by these views include such as all of whom who are represented in the Hillstrom Collection). Connoisseurs depicts a group of unidentified gentlemen in what appears to be an exclusive club. In the foreground, uninvolved with the main action, a man stretches out in a comfortable chair, reading a newspaper that has the words "NEW TIMES" legible across its top. Two other men, also elegantly dressed, stand by the fireplace and appear to discuss the framed artwork above the mantle, perhaps a depiction of a sailboat. The man on the right seems to lead the discussion. His face is knit in profile; his aquiline nose, raised eyebrow, and general expression suggest superiority, of intelligence and perhaps also of social standing, to the man next to him—whose facial features are coarser and whose dress and bearing are less refined. The title Connoisseurs suggests, perhaps, that the two men are aficionados of art, although it's possible that they are not even discussing art and that they are connoisseurs of something altogether different.

HOW IS A VIEW OF THE PAINTING POSSIBLE IN THE FIRST PLACE?

In fact, the title Connoisseurs suggests to viewers far more basic matters than one might suspect. What would viewing the painting be without the title? Can a painting speak for itself?

A group of Gustavus Adolphus College students enrolled in various recent social science courses were invited to write about the painting under several fictitious titles—War Declared, Anticipation, Back from the Ski Slopes, Working Class Trouble. In every case, students had no trouble seeing more happening in the painting than is depicted under War Declared, antimilitarism was driven home to the newspaper and to possible topics under discussion, one student saw that the men are "professional, possibly some branch of the military." Under Back from the Ski Slopes, some students saw a fire in the fireplace, one noting that one of the men is "looking at" it, one student saw a "party," yet another a "smoking room." Under Working Class Trouble, a student noticed a woman "going back to the kitchen," another saw a "maid," yet another saw a discussion about "the feudal economy." Under Anticipation, a student saw an "early morning meeting," another saw strategizing, possibly plotting. In this manner, the title of a painting does not simply describe the painting but serves as instruction for viewing, telling how to see what is depicted.

Yet even without instruction, viewers necessarily see more in a painting than is literally on display. A second group of students was asked to write about the Pène du Bois painting without benefit of any title whatsoever. Notably, these students could still see a typed scene that connects to other typed scenes throughout wider society. Themes indexed by these views include such as all of whom who are represented in the Hillstrom Collection). Connoisseurs depicts a group of unidentified gentlemen in what appears to be an exclusive club. In the foreground, uninvolved with the main action, a man stretches out in a comfortable chair, reading a newspaper that has the words "NEW TIMES" legible across its top. Two other men, also elegantly dressed, stand by the fireplace and appear to discuss the framed artwork above the mantle, perhaps a depiction of a sailboat. The man on the right seems to lead the discussion. His face is knit in profile; his aquiline nose, raised eyebrow, and general expression suggest superiority, of intelligence and perhaps also of social standing, to the man next to him—whose facial features are coarser and whose dress and bearing are less refined. The title Connoisseurs suggests, perhaps, that the two men are aficionados of art, although it's possible that they are not even discussing art and that they are connoisseurs of something altogether different.

HOW IS A VIEW OF THE PAINTING POSSIBLE IN THE FIRST PLACE?

In fact, the title Connoisseurs suggests to viewers far more basic matters than one might suspect. What would viewing the painting be without the title? Can a painting speak for itself?

A group of Gustavus Adolphus College students enrolled in various recent social science courses were invited to write about the painting under several fictitious titles—War Declared, Anticipation, Back from the Ski Slopes, Working Class Trouble. In every case, students had no trouble seeing more happening in the painting than is depicted under War Declared, antimilitarism was driven home to the newspaper and to possible topics under discussion, one student saw that the men are "professional, possibly some branch of the military." Under Back from the Ski Slopes, some students saw a fire in the fireplace, one noting that one of the men is "looking at" it, one student saw a "party," yet another a "smoking room." Under Working Class Trouble, a student noticed a woman "going back to the kitchen," another saw a "maid," yet another saw a discussion about "the feudal economy." Under Anticipation, a student saw an "early morning meeting," another saw strategizing, possibly plotting. In this manner, the title of a painting does not simply describe the painting but serves as instruction for viewing, telling how to see what is depicted.

Yet even without instruction, viewers necessarily see more in a painting than is literally on display. A second group of students was asked to write about the Pène du Bois painting without benefit of any title whatsoever. Notably, these students could still see a typed scene that connects to other typed scenes throughout wider society. Themes indexed by these views include such as all of whom who are represented in the Hillstrom Collection). Connoisseurs depicts a group of unidentified gentlemen in what appears to be an exclusive club. In the foreground, uninvolved with the main action, a man stretches out in a comfortable chair, reading a newspaper that has the words "NEW TIMES" legible across its top. Two other men, also elegantly dressed, stand by the fireplace and appear to discuss the framed artwork above the mantle, perhaps a depiction of a sailboat. The man on the right seems to lead the discussion. His face is knit in profile; his aquiline nose, raised eyebrow, and general expression suggest superiority, of intelligence and perhaps also of social standing, to the man next to him—whose facial features are coarser and whose dress and bearing are less refined. The title Connoisseurs suggests, perhaps, that the two men are aficionados of art, although it's possible that they are not even discussing art and that they are connoisseurs of something altogether different.
returning to the U.S., Pène du Bois began showing his work in Paris. Besides this literary effort for the Armory Show, he also contributed by exhibiting six of his own works.

In the summer of 1913, Pène du Bois' daughter Yvonne following his death, noted that his father's "brilliant mind" and "affectionate nature" both "drew to Pène du Bois' presence in France was the result of his association with his family and established a studio in Garnes, some twenty-five miles to the south of Paris. When he arrived in Paris, he undertook painting as a form of relaxation, and spent the following winter sketching and painting in the city. He moved there permanently in 1919, and remained in France until his death in 1923.

Pène du Bois' association with the Armory Show and his subsequent participation in the 1913 Armory Show were crucial in the development of his career, and those of many other American artists. The show was a major event in the history of modern art, and it had a significant impact on the American art world. Pène du Bois' participation in the show helped to bring modern art to the American public. His work was well-received, and he was able to gain recognition and exposure for his art. He also made many friends among the artists and dealers who participated in the show.

The years in France were very productive ones. The artist continued his observation and sketching of people and their social interactions and postures, particularly emphasizing their gestures, which he felt signalled much about their subjects and their aspirations. Pène du Bois, in fact, had tendency to generalize the human form to the point where it sometimes seemed like a mannequin upon which to hang a socialized identity, something that was noted frequently in the critical literature on him. The stay in France was largely supported by Pène du Bois' dealer, Kraushaar Galleries of New York, which began handling his work in 1917. The head of the firm, John Kraushaar, offered him a stipend based on the strength of his sales. Pène du Bois continued to be represented by the firm until 1947, not long after Kraushaar's death. The Hillstrom Museum of Art watercolor Connoisseurs had been in the personal collection of John Kraushaar, and it was acquired, in 1959, by Reverend Richard L. Hillstrom.

In late 1938, the year Connoisseurs was painted, Kraushaar had a solo retrospective exhibition of Pène du Bois' oil paintings (the Hillstrom show, a watercolor, was naturally not included). Prominent New York Times art critic Edward Alden Jewell, who two years earlier had placed the artist among “our most beguiling savants of the brush,” reviewed the exhibit, describing him as “distinguished” and citing the particular strength of works from that year. The following year, Connoisseurs was shown in a group exhibition at Kraushaar, the only watercolor included by the artist. An annotated copy of that exhibit checklist (in the Archives of American Art) records the painting's price as $100. It apparently did not sell, and John Kraushaar perhaps decided that he'd like it for his personal collection.

Kraushaar also owned a painting titled The Little Redon, which depicts a wry art dealer (certainly not be meant identified as Kraushaar, whom Pène du Bois fondly portrayed in a gently-caricaturing watercolor of 1927). It and Connoisseurs are examples of the many times the artist aspired the art world. Sometimes he depicted artworks as merely a part of a setting, but frequently he functioned as important foils to the main scene, as in the 1922 oil painting Chanticleer (San Diego Museum of Art) featuring a dandy in top hat and tails strutting past framed paintings that serve as status markers, or The Art Lovers, another oil from that year (private collection) in which two formally-dressed gentlemen stand near a group of paintings but, ironically, do not look at them. In all these depictions, the artist is in the social pretensions that, like the works of art, are on display.

A second group of students considering the art world are related to the Hillstrom painting. Like it, they are watercolors from 1938. At an exhibition (private collection) features two men closely examining a portrait on the wall before them, one leaning in to get a closer view of some interesting detail, the other drawing back to consider the whole. A Group of Artist Friends (New Britain Museum of American Art) is especially closely related to the Hillstrom Connoisseurs in its size and the handling of the broadly-brushed forms. It shows a group of men at an exhibition, and five of the six present have been identified as prominent artists contemporary with Pène du Bois (including his friend Jerome Myers (1867-1949), Leon Kroll (1884-1974), Ernest Lawson (1873-1939), Mahonri Young (1877-1957) and William Glackens (1870-1938), all of whom are represented in the Hillstrom Collection).

Connoisseurs depicts a group of unidentified gentlemen in what appears to be an exclusive club. In the foreground, uninvolved with the main action, a man stretches out in a comfortable chair, reading a newspaper that has the words "NEW TIMES" legible across its top. Two other men, also elegantly dressed, stand by the fireplace and appear to discuss the framed artwork above the mantle, perhaps a depiction of a saloon. The man on the right seems to lead the discussion. His facial expression is one of acute scrutiny, as if he were peering into the soul of the portrait. The woman in the background, whose profile is visible, has a slightly knowing smile, as if she were aware of the conversation taking place. The title "Connoisseurs" suggests, perhaps, that the two men are aficionados of art, although it's possible that they are not even discussing art and that they are connoisseurs of something altogether different.
futures beyond the scene shown. One student wrote that events depicted apparently took place after another event elsewhere in the house. In such a manner, the painting depicts stories or stands for background patterns and partially-formulated views for viewing not just this scene but any scene—as what we presumably knew all along are the kinds of things that can go on in a society.

A third set of students was asked to assign a title to the painting in light of what it is about. Offerings included: Discussion, Just a Couple of Bros, Universal Communication, The Captains, White Privilege, Fun Times Discussing Art, Cigars, Afternoon Meeting, Connoisseurs, Old Boy Club, The Dreamer, The Sailboat, How Privilege Looks, and Men of Importance. While titles and other instructions for viewing a painting cannot reduce ambiguity to crystal clarity, so likewise is it impossible for a painting to designate its own title or inform us as to how instructions for viewing it should be specified or named. That students were able to know what time of day it is or see expressions on the face of a painting is a remarkable accomplishment.

So what can we say about a painting independent of such interpretive practice? Yet a fourth group of students was asked to describe the Pène du Bois scene cold, so to speak, without interpreting it, without mobilizing background assumptions or consulting common sense to guide them in their course (which for purposes of the exercise were characterized as bias, prejudice, and unacknowledged subjectivity). Assume nothing, they were told. Some of the students behaved in this way. Yet even when it was shown to them that their mere recognitions of behavioral routines—setting, standing, reading, talking—were themselves accomplished via background recipes for viewing, students were stunned, perplexed concerning itself in them in “Description of the painting”—the task was “impossible,” or nothing was really being concerning what was being asked of them in “Describe the purposes of the exercise were characterized as bias, prejudice, and interpreting it, without mobilizing background assumptions or

OUTSIDE THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

I
n January, an observation that at times bordered on sarcasm characterized the work of Guy Pène du Bois (1884-1958) in both areas of his career—as a painter who often depicted the art world and the upper crust of society, and as a prominent art critic who, though initially sympathetic to modernist impulses in art, was an enduring champion of realism. The Hillstrom Museum of Art’s fine 1938 watercolor Connoisseurs, which was donated to the Museum in 2004 by Reverend Richard L. Hillstrom, (1838), reflects the artist’s tendencies, and examination of it allows consideration of his career and the social circles in which he operated. The painting was made in one of his most fertile, important periods, not long before the retirement of Pène du Bois and other top painters of the time was eclipsed by the abstract expressionism emerging after World War II.

Pène du Bois was born in Brooklyn to Laura and Henri Pène du Bois, the latter a writer, literary critic, and journalist whose friendship with French author Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) was the source of his son’s name. Raised in a sophisticated environment deeply engaged in the French culture of his father, the artist spoke only French for the first years of his life. This background had an impact on his art, which was heavily influenced by two extended periods abroad in France, the first as a young artist student, the second as an established artist when he lived there with his wife Florence Sherman Duncan and their children Yvonne and William from 1924 to 1930.

INTRODUCTION

As a youth, Pène du Bois’ natural intelligence and abilities allowed him easy success in school while also having time for independent interests. He not only imitated his father by pursuing writing, but also discovered a talent for drawing. In 1894, he was fifteen, his father suddenly announced that he was to be enrolled at the New York School of Art, originally named the Chase School of Art after its founder, painter William Merritt Chase (1849-1916). Chase was a colorful personality who impressed his students with his virtuoso, unabashed technique of painting, and instilled in them his philosophy of “art for art’s sake,” which meant that they were to follow art to be art, and to fully disguise the way in which images were created by smearing over their brush strokes in the academic manner.

Pène du Bois admired Henri deeply, and served for several years as the monitor for his class. Yet given his family background and the cultured attitudes of his father, it seems likely that he could never completely follow Henri in respecting the more refined ideas of Chase, which were in congruence with his father’s opinion that the artist must be an “aristocrat.” And though he wrote that “Dearness was seldom mentioned by these painters [i.e., Henri and his followers],” his own painting was frequently filled with elegant beauty.

Perhaps this duality can be a key for understanding Pène du Bois, who as an artist often relied on the social world he frequently depicted and who, as a person, seemed to be a mix between a snobbish aesthete and a salt-of-the-earth, regular guy, valued as a deep, devoted friend. Comments by acquaintances and friends illustrate this dichotomy:

On the one hand, painter Raphael Soyer (1899-1987), who admired Pène du Bois and studied with him at the Art Students League in New York (where he taught during several different periods in the 1920s and 30s), described him as “sardonic” and “cynical” (in an interview recorded for the Archives of American Art). Similarly, Swedish American artist Carl Sprinchorn (1887-1971) noted that the difficult hearing period he underwent in Henri’s class as a foreign artist with poor English was especially due to cruelty shown by class monitor Pène du Bois, whose “attacks were accompanied by his perennial smile…almost a leer…” Another student (recorded in an unpublished manuscript by Sprinchorn at the University of Maine, Orono).

On the other hand, painters Jerome Myers (1867-1940) and Edward Hopper (1882-1967), both close and devoted friends of Pène du Bois (and, like Soyer and Sprinchorn, both represented
viewing the painting—is part of the objectively available painting on hand for inspection even as the subjective painting as described informs us as to what the viewer could possibly be talking about. Yet energy has been expended by social scientists to deconstruct reflectivity, to overcome common-sense practices and to replace them with professional practices, all to no avail. To treat the sloppiness of everyday accountability as troublesome or as something to be repaired or eliminated, Garfinkel wrote, is like trying to tear the walls of a room down to see what holds the ceiling up. Social scientists implicitly realize this but often find it disturbing. When conducting research, they continually recognize a familiar gap between what they are writing about and what they actually have on hand. When they occasionally acknowledge this gap professionally, it’s considered a methodological problem to be fixed as future research, or it’s attributed to the youth of their disciplines or to human error, or it’s handled in footnotes or methodological appendices. Inevitably, though, whenever they discuss this familiar gap, it chronically reasserts itself in familiar ways that escape description even in the very texts in which they write about it.

An important difference between describing events in a painting such as Pène du Bois’ watercolor, as opposed to describing actual social events, is that nobody inside a painting is actively producing the depicted routines in real time even as they, perhaps, can be seen to be actively producing them. For example, although the men in Connoisseurs appear to be talking about topical relevances, our inability to access transcribed tapes of the discussion is not simply a technical limitation but an essential one: nothing is, in fact, being said. This turns the entire focus on “what’s really happening in the painting” over to us, the viewers. It can also turn the focus to the intended sense of the artist insofar as we the viewers have access to relevant knowledge of Pène du Bois that we can mobilize strategically in the production of here-and-now practical, that is, accountable, viewing.

Historically, the humanities have been more tolerant of natural ambiguity than have the sciences or the strictly rational professions. Hence art critics and historians will not despair of an inability to access transcribed tapes of the discussion is not simply a technical limitation but an essential one: nothing is, in fact, being said. This turns the entire focus on “what’s really happening in the painting” over to us, the viewers. It can also turn the focus to the intended sense of the artist insofar as we the viewers have access to relevant knowledge of Pène du Bois that we can mobilize strategically in the production of here-and-now practical, that is, accountable, viewing.

HOW THE HUMANITIES VIEW PAINTINGS

 Historically, the humanities have been more tolerant of natural ambiguity than have the sciences or the strictly rational professions. Hence art critics and historians will not despair of an inability to describe a painting objectively or in a once-and-for-all manner. And yet there remain professionally presumed standards for negotiating, case by case, a for-all-practical-purposes rational clarity when evaluating the quality of an interpreted gloss—that is, not just any view of a work of art is judged equal to any other view. Special resources are mobilized for informed viewing, including knowledge of art, art history, what artists in general try to convey in their works, what this particular artist generally tries to convey and might be conveying here in light of his or her other works, the artist’s biography and personal detail, the artist’s place in history—the list is essentially without limit and without pre-determination concerning what kinds of matters might become relevant in the course of an informed discussion about an artist’s work.

In various ways, Connoisseurs can be seen as typical of Pène du Bois’ paintings. He was particularly fond of painting people together in public places, places he had visited, and he painted mostly from memory without live models. According to art historian Betz Feldman, whose many publications on the artist rank her as the authority, the artist showed little interest in painting still lifes or nature scenes, and his interest in social settings seems focused on dramaturgical aspects of settings available for immediate viewing, as opposed to documenting more global themes, for example political categories such as social justice. But he does appear to have a wit about him that perceived people locked into social roles out of which they can scarcely find their way. As Feldman has noted, Pène du Bois “occasionally depicted his figures as mannequins, deliberately emphasizing the inflexibility of the possible courses of action open to them.” Indeed, one of the students asked about the Hillstrom Museum saw it as a painting of a wax museum display, while another saw the men who were standing as trying to figure out what to do with the dead body in the chair. Featured urban settings for finding such rigid displays include restaurants, theaters, and other public places, but particularly conspicuous among Pène du Bois’ work are his many paintings depicting the art world.

It will surprise no one that an artist would inhabit the art world, but, as with Pène du Bois, there is often tension in the artist’s relation with that world: is he in and of it, a true native to it, or does he stand outside it viewing it with a kind of anthropological detachment? It seems that we have both here, a kind of ambivalence.—Pène du Bois enjoyed associating with the artistic elite, but he often worked in solitude and relative anonymity. His inclination to the art community can hardly be doubted—he began his career as an art critic, became a full-time artist, and then later returned to writing about art when changing fashions limited sales of his paintings. He was a regular at artistic gatherings and major literary and artistic events, and he had routine access to artists, galleries, dealers, museums, and, especially, patrons. At the same time, however, one can hardly doubt his simultaneously detached view of the art community. After all, the name of his autobiography was Artists Say the Silliest Things, where, as Feldman points out, his commentary about art galleries borders on social criticism: the luxuriousness of these environments “were designed expressly for the capitulation of tycoons,” who sought to be as successful as collectors as they were in business.”
Fahlman aptly compares the tone of Pène du Bois’ paintings and commentary—“ironically humorous rather than bitingly sarcastic”—to the tone of *The New Yorker* magazine. That *The New Yorker* caters to the economic elite can be discerned just from perusing the gift suggestions and ads for $20,000 bracelets. It also caters to the well-educated, as indicated by literary references, and even cartoons that are occasionally impossible to decipher without insider knowledge. Yet the magazine is directed to general audiences and seems to make well-targeted fun of the very culture in which it travels. It is a well-intentioned, self-denigrating fun, and it is the kind of fun general audiences like to see being made of the cultural elite. Tending to the left of the political spectrum it is a “people’s magazine,” but it is also an artfackt of privilege to which most of its readership could not possibly aspire. Occasionally it publishes articles explaining previously indecipherable cartoons, but it does so in a high-cultured way that does not appear to denigrate any reader’s intelligence.

Against this backdrop, *Connoisseurs* comes into renewed focus. It is a painting of the very world that gives rise to paintings. It might be criticism, it might be endorsement; probably it is neither, or both. In any case, it is about art, and it is about men who view art in luxurious settings and talk about it, or analyze it, or critique it, or show off their knowledge about it to one another, or pretend to esoteric knowledge, or just appreciate it. Then again, we cannot see distinctly the inner painting that the men are talking about... if we can see it at all is this a sailboat, something else entirely, or do we see light reflecting off of the glass, concealing any possible knowledge at all of the inner painting? And whatever it is, is this a quality piece? Or could it be a knockoff collectors’ item such as a Thomas Kinkaid painting, or the kind of thing one finds hanging in motel rooms? Do the “connoisseurs” even know or care about the quality of the painting they are examining? And either way, do these men like the painting or might they be faulting it or laughing at it? Arguably no amount of background information or extrinsic material can disambiguate this painting to absolute clarity, and that includes whatever commentary the artist himself might have provided.

---

Richard Hilbert, Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Donald Myers, Director, Hillstrom Museum of Art, and Instructor, Department of Art and Art History

---

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**


