



STAGESTRUCK:  
EVERETT SHINN,  
THE THEATER AND VAUDEVILLE,  
AND *MAGICIAN WITH SHEARS*

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Hillstrom Museum of Art

dressed man holding a top hat. He is seen here from the front, and it seems likely that he is the same man as in the earlier drawing. He has dark hair and an impressive mustache, and his facial features are similar enough to those of the magician in the Hillstrom painting as to suggest that it is the same person, hence the assignment of *Magician with Shears* to around 1907.

Although in his vaudeville images Shinn rarely identified the specific players depicted, it seems likely that the magician in all three of these works is “The Great Albini” (1859–1913), born Abraham A. Laski, a strong presence in the vaudeville theater of the era. Magicians were a regular and popular part of the lineup of vaudeville acts, and Albini is known to have played at Tony Pastor’s Fourteenth Street Theatre, well known to Shinn. Several photos of Albini exist and in some his right eye appears to be more widely opened than the left, a characteristic emphasized by Shinn in the Hillstrom painting, and one undated photo of Albini, from before his hair was white, seems particularly similar to the *Magician with Shears*. The effect of the magician’s eyes in the Hillstrom work is important and serves to engage the imagination of the viewer.

## PLAYS AND PLAY

Nurturing the virtues of imagination and play were important aspects of Shinn’s life and work. The plays staged at 112 Waverly Place in Manhattan are a case in point. These were exaggerated and flamboyant, including in their subtitles *The Prune-Hater’s Daughter*, *More Sinned Against than Usual*, and *Wronged from the Start*. Photographs from performances show Shinn and friends looking more like figures from silent films of these years than from the theater being produced a few blocks north on Broadway. These photos show archetypal set designs of intriguing or mysterious spaces. The costumes and makeup look overstated to the point where one could understand the expression in the villain’s exaggerated caterpillar eyebrows from over in Brooklyn. The photographs also show Shinn’s complete involvement in his acting, his stances often very energetic and playful, recalling his boyhood involvement in acrobatics. In contrast, nearby Broadway productions were more and more often finding realism, or even naturalism, as the dominant forms of performance. The overstated style Shinn and his friends used to tell their stories was more typical of the vaudevillian performances of the time, which were attended by less affluent audiences and were thought of as less distinguished.

Unlike with his work as a visual artist, Shinn’s productions with the Waverly Place Players do not look as though they were meant to contribute to the advancement of American theater as an art form. Rebuking the show’s lack of professionalism, the *New York Times* review of *The Prune Hater’s Daughter* is

subtitled “Everett Shinn Players Out-Burlesque Burlesque at ‘Lucy Moore’ Rehearsal.” However, overall the article is positive, as the critic is able to find the real reason that Shinn and his friends have turned his back yard into a performance venue: “This is the second production of the Waverly Place Players, and they do it just for the fun of the thing. A regular performance is to be given to-morrow night, and perhaps there will be another on Saturday, and then, when they get around to it, they will produce another play.” Since the Waverly Place Players’ cast and crew was made up entirely of family, friends, and fellow artists, it can be imagined that the rehearsals for these productions were as much about socializing as they were about creating art with peers; and not overly important or well-financed art, but playing that was satisfying for their social group while keeping their artistic sensibilities limber. This performance troupe was a secondary artistic outlet for many of those involved, one that was perhaps pursued less vigorously and with less attention paid to current practices and more paid to what was fun, impulsive, and creatively engaging.

Attendance at a 112 Waverly Place production was by invitation only. Audiences were made up of friends, family, and peers—patrons who knew the artists outside of their canvases and stage productions. One can imagine that there were inside jokes written into the action of the plays, and things their social group found particularly interesting or amusing. If performing is defined as an exploration of social listening, playing, and exploring interaction, then Shinn took this exploration a step further by formalizing his friends into a troupe to share their exaggerated stories, discoveries, and playfulness. The photographs indicate that watching these plays would have been a boisterous and exuberant event, only heightened by familiarity with the artists involved.

Shinn fosters a playful and imaginative creative process through his exploration of performance with his friends. These theatrical efforts show Shinn placing virtue on playing, imagination, and fun. Shinn probably found the *Times* comparison to burlesque complimentary, as the burlesque of this period originated in parody and frivolity (only later was the scantily clad female incorporated, leading to our modern connotation of the performance style). The values of the vaudeville and burlesque stages placed a high premium on spectacle, laughter, surprise, and applause. In his investigation of performance with his friends and within his investigation of performance on canvas it is clear Shinn connects his work to similar ideals.

In his numerous paintings of performances and tableaux of New York vaudevillians, Shinn painted intriguing performers, dancers, acrobats, clowns, and musicians in the gaslight of the stage as the audience stares. The audience members, frequently

## INTRODUCTION

Interest and involvement in theatrical activities permeated the life of American artist Everett Shinn (1876–1953) from his youth, intertwined with evidence of his artistic abilities. As a boy, he loved the spectacle of the circus when it came to his hometown of Woodstown, New Jersey, and he became adept at acrobatics following that example. His earliest job was making posters for shows at the Woodstown Opera House, managed by his older brother Warren. Creating these posters would have put Shinn in contact with the world of performance, perhaps including George M. Cohan (1878–1942), later one of the great vaudeville stars, when he appeared there in about 1889.

In his maturity, Shinn's dual involvement in visual art and in theater continued, and not only was his fame as an artist closely tied to his imagery of the stage, but also he gained a name for himself as a writer and producer of plays. Described as “stage-struck” by Ira Glackens, son and biographer of Shinn's close friend and fellow Ashcan School painter William Glackens (1870–1938), the artist became known for his depictions of theater subjects, particularly those from vaudeville, the new form of popular entertainment that developed in the same years as Shinn. The Hillstrom Museum of Art's oil painting from around 1907 titled *Magician with Shears*, a donation in 2003 from the Reverend Richard L. Hillstrom, is one such work. This arresting image of a vaudeville performer engaging his audience in the drama of his magic act is the subject of this extended study, which will trace both Shinn's interest in the theater and his successful career as an acclaimed artist.

## EARLY LIFE AND TRAINING

The artist was recognized early for his drawing ability. Some of Shinn's preserved childhood school books are doodled with figures, and he drew pictures in notes to his teachers. When about ten years old, he decorated a room in the family home, drawing a ship on a stormy sea and then painting it on one of the walls. This was a precursor to his later work as a decorator for acquaintances from the theater world such as playwright Clyde Fitch (1865–1909), actress and later interior decorator Elsie de Wolfe (1859?–1950), and famed Broadway producer David Belasco (1853–1931).

When Shinn was fourteen, he left Woodstown to enroll in the Spring Garden Institute, a technical school in nearby Philadelphia where he studied mechanical drawing for two years. This led to employment by the Thackeray Gas Fixture Works in Philadelphia, designing light fixtures. Shinn claimed that he had not intended to become an artist, noting that his interest in

mechanics had dated to his earlier youth when he was inspired by an article in *The Scientific American* to make a model of a submarine. But his continued activity in artistic drawing was his undoing at Thackeray when he was fired for making unrelated drawings, in the margins of his work designs, of such things as pedestrians or horse-drawn cabs. His supervisor suggested that, given his evident ability, Shinn should seek employment drawing for a newspaper or magazine.

Soon after, in 1893, the young Shinn was hired as an illustrator for the *Philadelphia Press* newspaper, the first of numerous positions as a newspaper artist. It was at this time that he met four of the others who with him made up “The Eight,” the group of artists who rebelled against the hegemony of the National Academy of Design and staged their famous 1908 breakaway exhibition at Macbeth Gallery in New York. Three of these artists, George Luks (1867–1933), William Glackens (1870–1938), and John Sloan (1871–1951), like Shinn, worked at different times as illustrators for the *Press* as well as rival Philadelphia papers the *Inquirer* and the *Ledger*. The group, sometimes known as the “Philadelphia Four,” became friends with each other and also with Robert Henri (1865–1929), who became the leader of The Eight and the offshoot Ashcan School, and who influenced Shinn and his cohorts significantly.

Henri had studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and he attracted numerous artists through his Charcoal Club, a short-lived, casual organization of newspaper artists and Academy students who met spring through autumn of 1893 for sessions of sketching and painting and for critiques by Henri and Sloan. After the Club's dissolution, Shinn began his short and, to his mind, unsatisfying period of study at the Academy. An alternative to the Charcoal Club arose soon after, when Henri began hosting meetings in his studio, which solidified friendships and brought young artists together for instruction and comradery. Shinn, like others, fondly admired Henri, and later said that the older artist “kept an open house in his heart.”

## A TASTE FOR ACTING

It was in this period that Shinn had his debut as an actor. The group around Henri put on several annual amateur stage productions in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan. One of these was *Twilbe*, a farcical spoof of the highly popular novel *Trilby* by George du Maurier (1834–1896) about three bohemian artists in love with the title character, an artist's model and singer under the sway of Svengali. *Trilby* had been published serially in *Harper's Monthly* magazine in 1894, and in December that year Henri and others staged their play. By this time, their entertaining productions had gained popularity and the group was invited to present at the Pennsylvania Academy instead of in

one of the most popular Broadway playwrights of the time, hired Shinn to help decorate his newly built home, resulting in paintings for ceilings, sideboards, and two pianos.

Fitch was a close friend of Elsie de Wolfe, who was an accomplished actress before gaining fame as the first interior decorator. Shinn portrayed her several times, and she called upon him for decorative artistic work on numerous occasions. And it was through Fitch and de Wolfe that the artist became acquainted with producer and playwright David Belasco. Known as the “Bishop of Broadway” for his elevated and authoritative status as well as for his penchant for wearing clerical style collars under black coats, Belasco was a particularly important patron for Shinn in his role as a decorator when he hired the artist to paint murals for the impressively grand new theater he was building. When it opened in 1907, the Stuyvesant Theatre (later renamed the Belasco Theatre) and its many murals by Shinn of allegorical figures were widely admired, including by the press.

Elsie de Wolfe was also responsible for introducing Shinn to famed architect Stanford White (1853–1906) of the firm McKim, Mead and White, the person responsible for bringing about Shinn’s first solo exhibit. Shinn records that White was impressed with his pastels, calling them “splendid,” and told him that he ought to have an exhibit at Boussod, Valadon and Company. Shinn explained that he had been trying with no luck, to which White responded that the artist should return to the gallery the following day and tell them White had sent him. White’s prestige and influence with the gallery opened the door to a series of important, well-received solo exhibitions.

The gallery continued supporting Shinn for a number of years, not only with their exhibitions of his work but also by their sponsorship of a 1900 trip abroad he and Flossie made to Paris and London. There the artist solidified his admiration for the work of French master Edgar Degas (1834–1917), and the obvious kinship of Degas’ theatrical images to Shinn’s work has been rightly noted, including the way that both artists frequently used interesting angles that highlight the importance and participation of the audience in theatrical spectacle.

## PRIMACY OF THEATER

After his return from Europe, Shinn increasingly embraced theater subjects, deemphasizing the gritty city scenes that had been prominent for him and that define the Ashcan ideal. It has frequently been assumed that Shinn’s theater scenes were anomalous and that works like his *New York by Night* drawings—begun in 1899 as an extensive series intended to be published in book form and featuring renderings of both beautiful and sordid aspects of city life—were typical. However, by the time of the legendary 1908 exhibition at Macbeth Gallery that established

The Eight as a radically modern group of artists, Shinn was so devoted to the theater that all eight works he showed were theatrical images rather than street scenes.

The Eight never exhibited together again as a group, and Shinn grew apart from some of them, though he remained close with William Glackens for the rest of his life. The Shinn family had become friends with Glackens and his wife, Edith, and they played an important role in the next major chapter of Shinn’s association with the theater. A few years after their marriage, the Shinn family purchased a town house in Greenwich Village just off Washington Square, at 112 Waverly Place. An article from the December 1902 issue of *House Beautiful* described the lavish home, and had photographs of the many paintings and drawings displayed on the walls as well as luxurious furniture that had come to Shinn from Clyde Fitch. The Shinn family lived in this house until their breakup, and the studio in the back yard was fitted out as a theater—complete with stage, proscenium, red velvet curtains, lights, and so forth—in which a series of plays written, staged, designed, and directed by Shinn were acted out by “The Waverly Place Players.” This group consisted of the Shinn family and several of their friends, mostly non-theater people including artists such as Glackens and Edith, and Jimmy Preston (1873–1962), whom they knew from their time in Philadelphia. Others in the Players included Wilfred Buckland, an assistant of impresario David Belasco who was to be associated with Shinn in his brief stint as an art director for the movie industry in the late 1910s and 20s, a natural offshoot of his involvement in theater.

Shinn had had earlier experiences in acting including not only the play *Twillbe* back in Philadelphia but also, more recently, in a 1905 pageant play in Cornish, New Hampshire. One of the founders of the art colony there was American neo-Renaissance sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907) and during one of several summers spent in Cornish by Shinn and Flossie, the colonists staged an elaborate musical pageant play titled *Masque of “Ours”*: *The Gods and the Golden Bowl*, in which classical gods elect Saint-Gaudens to succeed Jupiter as their leader. This enterprise was commemorated in a relief plaque the ailing sculptor made to present in gratitude to participants, which has a lengthy inscription naming Shinn and the many others involved in the festival.

The plays presented at the Waverly Place Theater included important roles for Flossie and also for Shinn himself. Three of Shinn’s farces are known to have been staged there: *Ethel Clayton, or Wronged from the Start*; *Hazel Weston, or More Sinned Against than Usual*; and *Lucy Moore, or The Prune Hater’s Daughter*. The last two both were actually the subjects of reviews in the *New York Times*, and *The Prune Hater’s Daughter* was also covered in the *New York Sun*, which referenced Winthrop Ames, the originator of the “Little Theatre”