

# Radiant Attention

Maurice Prendergast's Venetian watercolors brought renewed interest to the subject and secured his place as an innovator.

**A**mong Post-Impressionist and Modernist painters working at the turn of the 20th century, Maurice Prendergast distinguished himself with the unprecedented intensity of light, color and movement that he was able to achieve in watercolor, his preferred medium and lifelong muse.

The dynamism and luminosity of his paintings transformed what had become stale Impressionist themes into scenes of pleasure that were less atmospheric and more emotionally precise, without being prescriptive or directive. Broad, airy strokes and loose washes of color involved even the most disparate subjects of his urban compositions in a participation of light and energy that uniquely celebrated the Modernist blending of old world and new.

## Full, Airy Forms

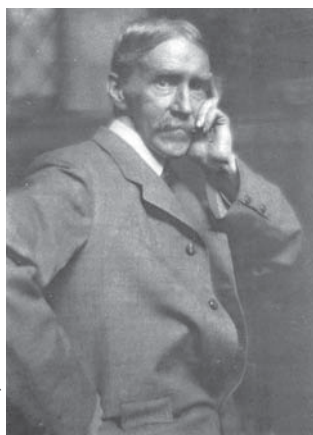
Born in Newfoundland in 1858, and raised in middle-class Boston, Prendergast began a career in commercial art at the age of 14, and for the next 10 years painted



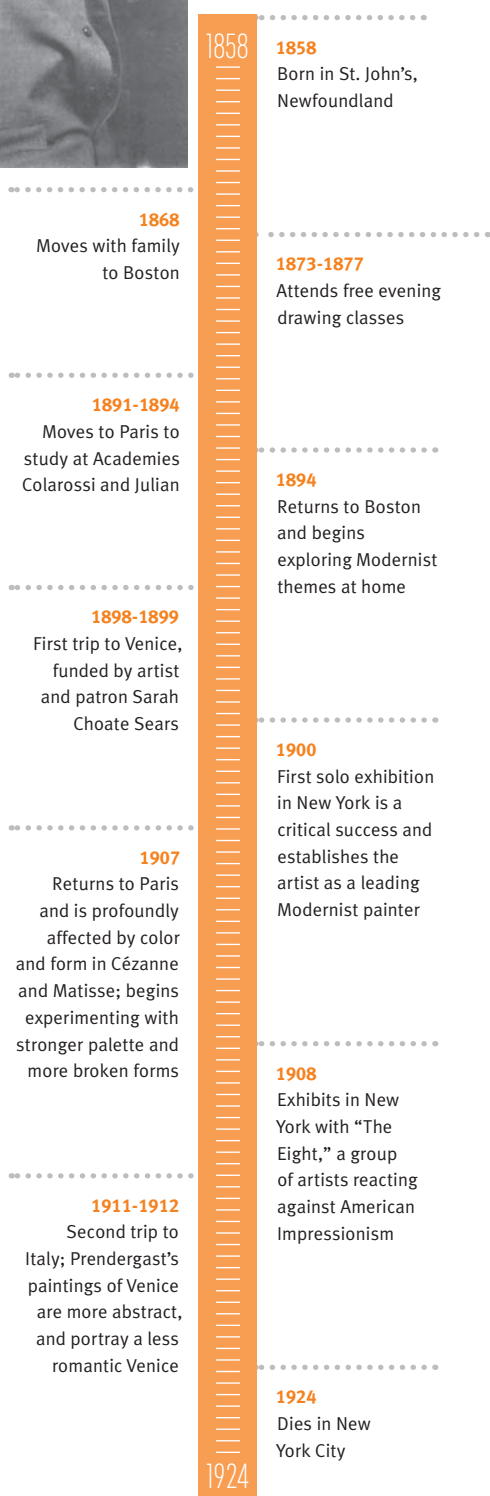
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**Marketplace** Painted in 1898-99, *Piazza di San Marco* (watercolor and graphite on paper, 16<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 15<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>) explores a familiar scene in Venice, Italy, from a unique perspective.

advertisement signs for display in shop windows. But his dream was to become a fine artist, and in 1890, at the age of 32, he used his savings to move to Paris, where he spent four years studying at the Academie Julian and the Academie Colarossi.



**Maurice Prendergast**  
(Canadian-born American,  
1858–1924)



In Paris, Prendergast expressed an early preference for urban themes and figures, especially the fashionable Parisian women whose robust, blowsy dresses and emphatic bustles embodied his love of full, airy forms. Public spaces and processions captivated Prendergast—and his return to Boston in 1894 coincided with the development there of an elaborate park system connecting existing public gardens to innovative new green spaces.

Boston was a changing city; Prendergast confronted these shifts—visual, cultural and industrial—by experimenting with looser, quicker brushstrokes that captured the energy of an accelerating society, and by introducing louder colors to correspond to its pace and pitch.

## Tradition and Innovation

The paintings of Boston and New England during this period are a celebration of movement and fullness—the most pedestrian scene takes on the aspect of parade. By the time Prendergast reached Italy, at the behest of a patron, in 1898, the clash of modernism was in full force. Nowhere else was the opposition between artistic tradition and innovation so keenly expressed.

While Prendergast had begun to explore the cultural frisson of Modernism in conservative Boston, the challenge to tradition had never felt so thoroughly tied to issues of national pride in Italy. Equally daunting was the fact that Venice had by then become a somewhat clichéd subject for the art world. Prendergast negotiated these tensions by preserving the figures and festivals of Italian history, but attending to them with an energy and expressiveness that were distinctly personal and new.

In his Venetian watercolors, Prendergast explored traditional scenes from unusual points of view. In the massive flags of *Piazza di San Marco* (opposite), for example, the emphasis in the painting subverts detail to sensation, revealing the artist's unique sensibilities, along with the luminosity of his subject.

When Prendergast returned to Boston and exhibited the Italian works in New York, the positive reception he received established him nationally as one of the most progressive artists of his day. From 1900 on, he began to exhibit with the artists who would later be known as "The Eight" and played a prominent role in other Modernist groups and exhibitions in New York until his death in 1924. ▣

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