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***Life's Pleasures: The Ashcan Artists' Brush with Leisure, 1895-1925***  
**The Ashcan Artists**

The Ashcan school refers to a group of artists who worked in the late 1800s and early 1900s, whose leader was artist/teacher Robert Henri [HEN-rye]. Henri believed artists should paint what they lived and advocated a “realism” derived through the inspiration found in the artists’ immediate world. He said, “After all, the goal is not making art. It is living a life. Those who live their lives will leave the stuff that is really art.”

Henri and the other Ashcan artists were men of their times, fully engaged with the urban environment. They went against the fashion of the time by painting unglamorous depictions of common people doing common things – working class people in bars, alleys, and in the streets. Although much of their subject matter dealt with the grittier side of city life, they also painted scenes of leisure activities, including bars and cafes where they hung out, and sporting events and performances they attended. Several were former newspaper illustrators used to sketching events while they were happening, to capture a vivid sense of the “real.”

**The Eight and the Infamous Exhibition**

The Ashcan circle of artists was “founded” by Henri, who was soon joined by newspaper illustrators George Luks, Everett Shinn, William Glackens, and John Sloan. This core group was joined by three other artists—Maurice Prendergast, Ernest Lawson and Arthur B. Davies—who all shared a strong dissatisfaction with the practices of the National Academy of Design (the Academy) in New York. The Academy was the governing body that set strict rules of what training artists had to complete before being considered “accomplished”; established aesthetic standards that included a hierarchy of subject matter (with historical and mythological themes at the top); and by a jury system, determined what art was worthy of exhibition. The Ashcan artists did not meet the Academy’s standards, nor did they care to; they truly believed in artistic independence.

Led by Henri, this group of eight artists organized their own exhibition, which was revolutionary at the time, not only because of its subject matter, but because it was in direct opposition to and seen as a rebellion against the Academy. The exhibition opened in February 1908 at New York's Macbeth Galleries. Most of the newspapers focused on the rebellious artists. They were right to point out that the exhibition did not mark the birth of a homogeneous artistic style. The New York Times said, "The showing made by their paintings is both varied and surprising. With the exception, perhaps of Prendergast, the pictures reveal little that is new in direction or treatment to that with which the knowing in art have become famil[i]ar with."

The Detroit Institute of Arts (then the Detroit Museum of Art) was a venue for the exhibition, in December 1908. One hundred years later, some of the same paintings will be on display in *Life's Pleasures*.

### How the Ashcan School Got its Name

*The Masses*, a socialist newspaper on the brink of collapse, hired several artists as illustrators in hopes of boosting their sales. Most of the drawings were quick sketches that portrayed the more tawdry aspects of the lower class – bums, drunks and prostitutes. James W. Tottis, DIA associate curator of American art and curator of the exhibition, says in the exhibition catalogue: "To the displeasure of the literary editors and some of the more political artists, Henri's followers appeared to show an obvious delight in depicting such subjects, demonstrating a less sympathetic, more aloof attitude, one not embracing the moral socialist position desired by those loyal to the cause." Art Young, a staff member of *The Masses*, was unhappy with the artists' attitude towards their subjects. Referring to a drawing by George Bellows that showed a bum scavenging through a garbage can titled "Disappointments of the Ash Can," Young wrote: "They want to run pictures of ash cans and girls hitching up their skirts in Horatio Street ... For my part, I do not care to be connected with a publication that does not try to point out the way out of a sordid materialistic world." The term "ash can" stuck, even though the artists' work is much broader than the label suggests.