



217 Films Releases “America Rising: The Arts of the Gilded Age” — Brilliantly Conceived

May 8, 2017 [Richard Friswell](#)

Caricature of Mark Twain, soon after the publication of ‘The Gilded Age- A Tale of Today’ (1873), co-authored with Charles Dudley Warner.

Mark Twain wasted little affection on the extravagances of Victorian America. Boisterous lifestyles and conspicuous consumption followed hard on the heels of a dreadfully protracted Civil War. In its aftermath, industrial innovation, commercial and urban expansion fueled both a new, burgeoning middle and astronomically-rich industrial class. Across the Atlantic during the same period (1870-90s), the French had their own term for these times: *La Belle Epoch*. Soured by its implications for our own societal values, Twain disparagingly referred to it as the “Gilded Age.” The good news, of course, was that American exceptionalism was coming into its own, as a nation and its inchoate culture began to emerge from under the dominant shadow of its mentor—Western Europe. But, that shift toward cultural autonomy and global dominance was a trend that only historical perspective now confirms. For cultural observers of the time, like Twain, the old world order was slipping away, life moving at breakneck and confusing speed toward an ill-defined future and an ebullient new century.

The much-anticipated sequel in a series of carefully-crafted “essays on film” documentaries was recently released by 217 Films: “*America Rising: The Arts of the Gilded Age*”, written,

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narrated, and directed by Michael Maglaras. Along with his wife, Terri Templeton, the Maglaras team spends many months researching original source material, discovering supporting documents, film, literature, music and paintings, to weave a complex, but clearly coherent film narrative. Paced by his resonant voice (he, a trained opera singer), Maglaras carefully conjures a tale of wonder surrounding their selection of images and sounds, bringing the chosen material to life. This newest 217 offering, maps out America's emerging late-19th-early 20th century role in capturing and defining a unique style on the international artistic stage. The central premise of the film gains further credibility with contributions by David Lubin, Charlotte C. Weber Professor of Art, at Wake Forest University, as he speaks to an interviewer off-camera.

Right: Promotional photo of Orson Welles in his title role as 'Citizen Kane.'

The story opens with a vintage film shot of a screeching factory whistle—the wake-up call to a generation of ambitious, greedy industrialists, exemplified by fictional protagonist, Charles Foster Kane—in Orson Welles' 1941 classic, *Citizen Kane*. These unlikely establishment shots aim at the main theme of the documentary: that Welles' all-too-authentic character secures his fortune and reputation for unbridled greed during those very years between the deaths of Abraham Lincoln (1865), and Mark Twain (1910)—the Gilded Age—just as America was rising to prominence on the world's cultural and economic stage.

The American story unfolds gradually in “The Gilded Age,” through a series of images painted during the Hudson River school period by John Kensett, Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Church and others. Their work coincides with a time of continental expansion and discovery in the early-to-mid 19th century. Maglaras notes that the evident boundless optimism of our national character nurtured the perception that risks taken would inevitably be reciprocated by a seemingly unlimited supply of natural riches and resources.

Below: Frederic Edwin Church, Niagara (1857), oil on canvas, 40 x 90 1/2". National Gallery, of Art Washington, D.C.

Much of our patriotic exuberance and optimism diminished with the events of 1861-65, when the Civil War laid bare the vast social and economic gulf between various regions of the country. Art historian, Robert Hughes' description of the famous 1857 Frederic Church



painting, *Niagara*, as a “cosmic baptism,” became instead a immersive bath of blood and treasure, fought on local fields and farms, and captured on film by photographers, Alexander Gardner and Matthew Brady for the world to witness. Though the film’s selective use of images from the mass slaughter in Lincoln’s “house divided” lasts for mere seconds, it can seem more like an eternity to the viewer.

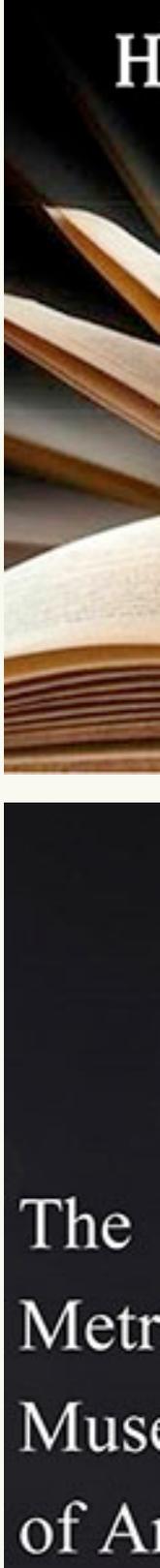
Alexander Gardner, Abraham Lincoln, February 5, 1865. Last formal portrait, on cracked glass plate. Collection National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

And none hangs in the memory more than Alexander Gardner’s spectral studio images of Abraham Lincoln, his face so profoundly, deeply etched with the cares and agonies of conflict—yet so unknowingly close to his own death just two months later. The narrator points out that another contemporary, Walt Whitman was, himself, a medical aide during the war. The film’s skillful co-mingling of text frames from period literature, as in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, *Blow, trumpeter, free and clear—I follow thee... (1872)*, as well as the choice of music overlays (interestingly, “Chairman’s Dance” from John Adams’ 1987 opera, *Nixon in China* runs as a throbbing tempo through much of the film) contributes to a brilliant, creative combination of sounds and images that propels the narrative in entertaining ways.

No one better exemplifies the unique spirit and essence of 19th century “Americanism” than that of Mark Twain. ‘America Rising’ shows images of a young Samuel Clemens, his life already inexorably linked to the Mississippi River and the American cultural ethos, emerging as the young writer—Mark Twain. Rare moving images of white-suited Twain, taken at his estate in Redding, CT, in 1909, reveal his charismatic presence—even in later life—projected in grainy footage across the decades. As a viewer, those Twain scenes left me longing for the days when intelligent humor and articulate, self-reflective commentary about our national psyche, could trump today’s cynical, irrational outbursts.

Frame shot from Thomas Edison’s film of Mark Twain, at his estate, “Stormfield,” Redding, CT (1909)

Not everyone was enamored of the American experiment. As the film points out, many artists and industrialists of the period spent at least some—if not all—of their time in Europe, particularly in France and Italy. William Merritt Chase, Mary Cassatt, James Whistler, Maurice Prendergast, John Sargent and author Henry James, to name a few, all lived as ex-patriates. They turned away from the excesses of the Gilded Age, according to



Maglaras, only to embrace the languorous lifestyle in the cafes of the City of Light, richly-appointed Venetian palazzo interiors and the streets and high-ceilinged apartments of Rome; those ancient places where many brash Americans on Grand Tour awkwardly attempted to feel at 'home.' But, through their efforts, these artists and writers nevertheless brought fresh eyes and a new perspective to European culture and modern living—points-of-view that helped redefine the worlds of art, music, architecture and literature on both sides of the Atlantic in the century to come.

Maurice Brazil Prendergast, page from watercolor series, Large Boston Public Garden Sketchbook (1895-97). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Robert Lehman Collection.

There are some particularly stunning highlights in the film. The first example is the explication of the watercolor notebooks of Maurice Prendergast, done in Boston's public gardens upon his return from Europe. Nearly destroyed by a studio fire after his death, but thrown to the street by his brother, these treasures of color and form were



rendered in the language of proto-modernism. The artist is, according to the narrator, “an observer of the ordinary...a painter of happiness.” And the small, hastily-completed studies are just that. Rainbow hues and hastily construed brush strokes tell the story of an artist who wouldn't linger on a subject, perhaps not to be detected—or maybe not to be distracted by detail. The result is a vibrant, fresh set of rarely seen images, even by those well-acquainted with the Prendergast *oeuvre*. The camera pauses on one particular image of a young woman in the park, her pale, piercing blue eyes floating disembodied behind a thin watercolor wash of a veil obscuring her face. The image is stark and revealing, despite the absence of detail. She gazes at us across the ages, and we stare back, fixated—the non-verbal language of human connection somehow complete.

Left: Winslow Homer, Undertow (1886). Collection Sterling and Francine Clark Museum, Williamstown, MA.

A second film highlight effectively uses the music of one of my favorite composers—Antonin Dvorák. Czech by nationality, he spent several months in the United States in the early 1890s. Arriving in New York City at the behest of a benefactor, he soon moved to



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Spillville, Iowa, the native home of his music assistant. While there, he composed two profoundly beautiful works, his 9th Symphony, *From the New World*, and the String Quartet in F Major, *The American*. Excerpts from each are paired (as Maglaras often does tracks from Holst, Debussy, Elgar, Ravel and Satie) with images, in this case, by Winslow Homer, who, the narrator says, “holds up a mirror to the face of America.” Dvorák is no less successful in capturing the essence of regional folk and spiritual tunes, weaving them into a soaringly poignant portrait of the American spirit (*see link, below*).

As if to insure that the patriotic arrow is sufficiently embedded in our collective hearts, the filmmakers cut to images of the 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing (*left*), a rigid flag ‘waving’ in the foreground as astronauts bound over the dusty gray landscape. They romp against a black, starless sky to the other-worldly symphonic strains of the “Ninth,” composed a mere seventy-five years earlier, at a time when these pairings of sight and sound would have seemed purely science fictional. Apollo’s return module is then pictured blasting off the moon’s surface into the void of space to the sounds of Paul Robeson’s somber spiritual, “Going Home.”

Drawing on fellow narrator, Professor David Lubin’s expertise, another principle focus of the documentary is the ‘flag series’ paintings of American artist, Childe Hassam. Born during the Gilded Age, Hassam lived long enough (d.1935) to witness the new century’s ‘Great War to End All Wars,’ as it marked “a new era of human treachery.” During what newspaperman, Henry Luce termed “The American Century,” advances in science and industry were largely responsible for the escalation of barbarity in war. And, for all intents and purposes, the war marked the end of the Gilded Age—a golden period in which the elevated nature of the human spirit could be counted on to live in accordance with some broadly-defined ‘highest and best purpose.’

Left: Abbott Thayer, Angel (1887) Collection Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Abbott Handerson Thayer’s *Angel*, completed in 1887 is the focus of another lingering close up in the film, panning back from the painting’s cherubic, tranquil countenance to reveal a pair of massive snow white wings. Less illustrative than contextual, Maglaras asks the viewer to consider this image as emblematic for the Gilded Age; that is, a context for understanding how, for a brief period in our history, innocence and beauty served as a proxy for all that is noble in human nature.

Along with these societal advances came a shift in taste to new forms of visual art—those



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that eschewed the long-held conventions of representationalism rooted in the natural world in favor of “new ways of seeing.” But, for decades well into the 20th century, Hassam clung doggedly to his impressionist roots and classical training. One outgrowth of his commitment to the past, and to his nationalistic spirit, was a series of paintings sited on the streets of New York City. Flags of many nations, but particularly those of America’s allies during the war, were draped in succession along the canyons of Fifth Avenue, as parades and revelers are portrayed in miniature far below. As much abstraction of color and form as jingoistic representation of Hassam’s concerns about the dilution of American ideals and identity, they represent the spirit of energy and commerce that characterized our national imperative in decades leading up to WW II.

Right: Childe Hassam, Avenue of the Allies (1918). Collection Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

“America Rising: *The Arts of the Gilded Age*” concludes with an overview of the era, citing three principle figures of the period as the embodiment of that time and place. Maglaras considers Mark Twain the, “mind of the American Renaissance,” for his skillful representation of the complex American conscience and character on the pages of his novels. Winslow Homer, he says, had “eyes into the *soul*” of the country’s landscape and people, with land and sea inextricably bound to the essence of the American experience. And sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens (for whom *Standing Lincoln* [1887] and the relief statue of the *Robert Shaw Memorial* and all-Black, Civil War 54th Regiment [1884-97] were quintessential works) he calls the “look of America rising,” for his ability to capture the value of gesture.

For the viewer, this film is a *tour de force*, offering a comprehensive, multi-layered glimpse into many moving parts of an historical period. In a world prone to oversimplification and sound bites, the real story often resides in the details. The 217 team’s challenge was to burrow into those details without getting lost in the weeds. In this, their seventh film as a series of “essays on film,” the facts emerge to speak clearly for themselves, nested as they inevitably must be within the complexities of a comprehensive historical narrative. The ‘Gilded Age’—and this film—manage to focus their camera and attention on those forces of nature, personality and events that helped shape an era, skillfully showing us what we as Americans were capable of becoming.

By Richard Friswell, Managing Editor

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