

Biography on Reynolds Beal

Reynolds Beal was one of those lucky individuals who was financially independent, and was therefore able to pursue his two greatest loves - sailing and painting. He studied directly under William Merritt Chase and Childe Hassam, two of the most talented and influential artists of the American Impressionist group called the "New York Ten" that was formed at the turn of the twentieth century. The socially and politically adept Chase had developed a light, airy and brilliant response to the visual world; and Hassam's style was very close to the essence of French Impressionism, with its high-keyed pure colour and dissolution of form. Beal absorbed these influences and others, and in a lifetime of traveling, learning, and painting, he produced a large body of work which falls fully into the tradition of the best American Impressionist painting. As one scholar has put it, his art "captures a sense of joy - of leisure-time pursuits enjoyed in the brilliant sunlight."

Beal produced drawings, watercolours, oils, etchings, and woodblock prints covering a wide range of subjects and scenes. The great majority of these works depict port activities, coastlines, and sea-going vessels, but he also did circus scenes, some city views, and landscapes. Beal's distinctive contribution was to balance the brilliant palettes and bravura techniques of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism with the geographical specificity of particular places, often integrating the nautical accuracy of particular ships and boats and a profound knowledge of the sea.

Reynolds Beal was born just after the Civil War in 1866 to a comfortable family in the Bronx, New York. By the age of ten, he was not only swimming and sailing, but also sketching his water environment. He first attempted to combine his nautical and artistic interests by studying Marine Engineering at Cornell, and then by building ship engines on Manhattan's East River. But neither of these pursuits was successful. By this time his father had developed a successful gas and electrical utilities business; it became clear that Reynolds would never need to worry about supporting himself financially.

With this knowledge at least partly in mind, in 1891 the young Beal succumbed to his love of art. He studied briefly at the Art Students League of New York, and then spent several years under the tutelage of William Merritt Chase, both at Chase's Shinnecock School of Art on Long Island and also at his Tenth Street Studio in New York. From Chase he acquired techniques of painting directly from nature, and also learned a modified impressionism, characterized by strong colour, dramatic light and dark contrasts, and painterly brushwork. By 1895 Chase sent Beal on his way, saying, "Watch yourself or you'll become an artist."

As if determined to fulfill that prediction, Beal did two things. He entered his first painting, a landscape, into an exhibition - the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design, the chief seat of artistic authority in the United States at the time. And, in the tradition most American painters of the time who took themselves seriously, he headed for Europe.

He devoted 1895 and part of 1896 to France and Spain, copying from both old and modern masters in Paris and Madrid. He also took time out to study three-masted sailing vessels in Paris' Musee du Marine and sketch sailing subjects in the seaport of Seville. Before leaving Europe, he submitted a landscape painting to the Champ de Mars annual international exhibition in Paris, which also included well-known American painters such as Cecilia Beaux, Robert Henri and Gari Melchers.

Upon his return to New York, Beal purchased a thirty-foot yacht, which he used to explore coastlines and remote islands in search of subject matter. He also rented his first New York studio and started submitting works to the National Academy of Design, the Society of American Artists and several other art organizations. His work at this time reflected the French, Dutch and British traditions he had just seen in Europe.

From about 1902 to 1907, Beal spent his summers in Noank, a tiny Connecticut shipbuilding village on Long Island Sound. Near Noank was the colony of Old Lyme, and there Beal met the tonalist Henry Ward Ranger. From Ranger, Beal learned some basic techniques of landscape painting and picked up the warm, glowing colour of the tonalists. But he did not succumb completely to their subdued, moody palette; instead, he managed to blend successfully Impressionism and Tonalism. His works from this time also reveal what were to become Beal's trademark characteristics - a considerable skill in drawing, and interest in depicting accurately the details of a landscape or a ship and, in particular, an ability to capture the feeling of being on the sea.

The year 1907 was marked by Beal's first major art show, a two-man exhibition which he shared with his younger and more successful brother Gifford at the Clausen Gallery in New York which received favourable reviews.

The second decade of the twentieth century saw Beal continuing to expand his skills, techniques and subject matter. It started with another trip abroad in 1911. This time he visited Belgium, Holland, England and France, taking particular note of the French Impressionist paintings that he saw in Paris. It is probable that he saw the work of Vincent Van Gogh during this trip to Europe, since certain of Van Gogh's techniques began to appear in his work shortly thereafter.

It was also during this time that Beal acquired yet another mentor, Childe Hassam, one of the American Impressionists who had gravitated to Old Lyme. Beginning about 1913 and continuing into the 1920s, Beal and Hassam went on sketching trips together in the Noank area. Beal began to move further away from Chase's bravura brushwork and Ranger's muted tonalism, and closer to the broken brushwork and brighter, high-keyed palette of Hassam. His paintings from this time show brilliant colour and a sunlit atmosphere, but always balanced by the specific features of individual landscapes and seascapes, particularly villages, ships and harbours.

There were still other influences. In 1913 Beal saw the pivotal Armory Show in New York, and continued to be attracted to the bold colours, richly applied paint and sinuous line of Van Gogh. Then, in 1915, Beal worked with an etcher in Provincetown,

Massachusetts, and also discovered Japanese woodblock prints. Soon he was blending the techniques he had learned in order to arrive at his own style. A series of works done in Atlantic City in 1918, the best-known of which is “Beach Ponies”, features undulating lines, strong outlining of forms and thick impasto, thus blending the characteristics of woodblock prints with those of Van Gogh’s post-Impressionist paintings.

Beal also added some new subject matter to his repertoire during this period. The Hudson Valley near his parents’ home was frequented by traveling circuses, and he began to capture their bright colours and billowing tents which - as one Beal scholar points out - resembled the sails of ships. Beal continued to depict circus themes for the rest of his life.

Along with being Beal’s most creative period, the teens and twenties represented the peak of his involvement in the professional art world. He appeared in the annual shows of the Society of Independent Artists in New York, in a major exhibition of forward-looking American painters at the Musee de Luxembourg in Paris, and in a show of American watercolourists, including Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield and John Marin at the Phillips Memorial Gallery in Washington, D.C. He also had one-man exhibitions at the Phillips Memorial Gallery and at the John Kraushaar Gallery in New York; and Kraushaar, who carried the works of artists like Maurice Prendergast, George Luks and Guy Pene du Bois, added Beal to his list. Last but not least, in 1927, Frank Jewett Mather described him in his book “The American Spirit in Art” as “...a powerful marine painter...Perhaps only a sailor of small boats can appreciate the truthfulness of such a record as Beal’s.”

In 1924, at the age of 58, Beal married a 33 year-old decorative artist named Helen Higgins. The couple used Rockport, Massachusetts as their home base, and from there used Beal’s boat, which he began to call his “floating studio”, to explore and paint numerous sites in the northeast, and to venture further south to Florida, Bermuda, the Caribbean, Central America and Mexico. Between 1924 and 1938, the Beals also made more extensive trips, journeying to Africa, Asia, Australia, Samoa, Europe and the Middle East. Because he was on the water so much, Beal began to do fewer oil paintings and worked instead in watercolour, crayon and other media on paper, enjoying the greater convenience, spontaneity and portability of this approach.

As late as the 1930s, Beal was still charting new artistic territory. He returned to the etching that he had first learned in 1915, and ended up producing over 140 prints, depicting everything from water views and ships to city landmarks such as the Brooklyn Bridge. He continued to paint and to travel to nearby destinations such as Bermuda and Key West from 1939, and died in Rockport in 1951, having lived a very full life.

Although he mingled with some of the most well-known artists of his day and his work appeared in a number of important exhibitions, Beal had made little attempt to promote himself, and for a number of years following his death his work faded from view. Now he is slowly taking his rightful place among his American Impressionist contemporaries,

for as Ann Berman says, “His bold colours vibrate and his powerful brushwork holds the eye, but his boats heel to the wind in a way that any sailor would recognise.”

Major Exhibitions during Reynolds Beal’s lifetime

1895 - First submission of a painting to an exhibition - National Academy of Design, New York

1896 - Exhibited at the Champs de Mars Exposition, Paris

1907 - Clausen Gallery, New York - two-man exhibition with brother Gifford

1916 - Vose Galleries, Boston - one-man exhibition

1917 - First exhibited with the Society of Independent Artists, New York

1919 - Included in a major exhibition of American painters at the Luxembourg Museum, Paris

1922 - Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D.C. - one-man exhibition of drawings, watercolours and etchings

1925 - Kraushaar Galleries, New York - one-man exhibition

1928 - Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D.C. - included in exhibition of American watercolours

1934 - Kraushaar Galleries, New York - one-man exhibition

1944 - Fitchburg Art Center, Fitchburg, Massachusetts - two-man exhibition with brother Gifford

Exhibited regularly with the following organizations

Society of Independent Artists, 1917-42

National Academy of Design, 1895-1944

Provincetown Art Association, 1916

Boston Arts Club, 1899-1909

Salmagundi Club, 1899-1916

Society of American Artists, 1897-1906

American Society of Etchers, 1923-37

Exhibitions since Reynolds Beal's death

1969 - Royal Galleries with cooperation of John Nicholson Galleries, Englewood, New Jersey: Reynolds Beal, 1867 (sic) to 1951

1971 and 1972 - The Philips Collection, Washington and the Museum of Art, Montclair, New Jersey: Reynolds Beal: Oils, Watercolors, Drawings, Etchings

1973 - Vose Galleries of Boston in cooperation with Mr. Robert B. Campbell: Reynolds Beal, 1867 (sic) - 1951, Paintings, Watercolors and Drawings

1975 - Vose Galleries of Boston

1976 - de Ville Galleries, Los Angeles: Reynolds Beal

1976 - Hammer Galleries - New York, NY

1976 - El Paso Museum of Art - Texas

1984 - The Tashjian Collection: Reynolds Beal, Impressions of an American Artist: Paintings, Watercolors and Drawings

1983 - Vose Galleries of Boston

1991 - Hammer Galleries, New York: Reynolds Beal, American Impressionist

1998 - Beacon Hill Fine Art, New York: The Saltwater World of Reynolds Beal

Works by Reynolds Beal In Museum Collections

Metropolitan Museum of Art - New York, NY

Phillips Collection - Washington, D.C.

The Yale Museum - New Haven, CT

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art - Cornell University - Ithaca, NY

United States Naval Academy Museum - Annapolis, MD

Columbus Museum of Fine Art - Columbus, OH

Mystic Seaport - Mystic, CT

Southstreet Seaport Museum - New York, NY

Muscarella Museum - Williamsburg, VA

Rockport Art Association - Rockport, MA

Newark Museum - Newark, NY

Montgomery Museum of Fine Art - Montgomery, AL

Montclair Museum of Fine Art - NJ

Morris Museum - Morristown, NJ

A Note on Reynolds Beal's Bermuda Works

There are known to be many crayon sketches of Bermuda, only a small number of water colours of these islands, and probably no more than twelve major oils, most of which have survived to this day in private or public collections and which date from 1912, 1922 and 1939/40.
