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**FIRST EXHIBITION TO EXPLORE “PAINTING SOFTLY” OPENS AT THE CLARK
JUNE 22**

***Like Breath on Glass Examines Contemplative Approach to Painting by
Whistler, Inness, and Other Leading American Artists***

***“Paint should not be applied thick. It should be like breath on the surface of a
pane of glass.” — James McNeill Whistler***

For Immediate Release

WILLIAMSTOWN, MA- The first exhibition to explore “painting softly,” a distinctive and unexamined approach to painting exemplified in works by James McNeill Whistler and George Inness, will be presented at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute from June 22 through October 19, 2008. *Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly* brings together forty paintings by leading American artists working around 1900, including Whistler, Inness, William Merritt Chase, John Twachtman, Eduard Steichen, and others, to examine this style of painting through which artists obscured their brush strokes. Generally thought of as an era of virtuosic brushwork—where touch and surface were nearly as important as the subject being painted—the exhibition will trace a quieter approach to painting that evolved during this period.



Summer, Montclair (New Jersey Landscape), 1891,
by George Inness
Oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 45 in.
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Martucci

Like Breath on Glass is organized by the Clark and curated by Marc Simpson, curator of American art. The Clark will be the exclusive venue for this exhibition.

“The Clark is engaged in providing new ways to look at well-known artists,” said Michael Conforti, director of the Clark. “This exhibition invites a re-examination of the work of America’s leading artists at the turn of the twentieth century in which the artists challenged the very nature of making art and by removing themselves as intermediaries between the work and the viewer.”

The larger-than-life Whistler hardly seems to be someone who would wield a soft brush. Infamous for his cantankerous behavior and his libel suit against art critic John Ruskin, in Whistler’s art one sees his softer side. He once stated, “Paint should not be applied thick. It should be like breath on the surface of a pane of glass.” The result of this counsel is a body of contemplative and meditative paintings that, like the mist of breath’s condensation on a pane of glass, appear on the canvas without evidence of the artist’s hand. Whistler’s *Nocturne in Blue and Silver—The Lagoon, Venice*

(1879-1880, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) is a striking example of how painting softly capitalizes on the power of suggestion over description. Inspired by evening strolls along the Thames, damp with London fog, paintings like *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* (1872-1878, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut) seem to be made of mist themselves, the ghostlike river bank dissolving into the canvas.

Inness's paintings, too, seemed as if "breathed upon the canvas in waves of color," according to Elliot Daingerfield, a critic and fellow painter. For Inness painting was not a record of a physical vision, but the means to suggest a spiritual truth. He developed works of vaporous mood as depictions of a spiritual world parallel to the physical one. These evocative and metaphysical landscapes such as *The Home of the Heron* (1893, Art Institute of Chicago) were painted with a complex, often multi-layered technique that yields a richly suggestive softness. The spiritual power of this mood is articulated by Daingerfield's description of *Eventide, Tarpon Springs, Florida* (1893, Art Complex Museum, Duxbury, Massachusetts), who wrote of the painting, "he who would know its profundities must sit with it, dream with it, and so he shall come to know that true art bears a message to the Soul of man."

Whether responding to Whistler's technical challenge or Inness's spiritual aspirations, a generation of artists was inspired to experiment with "painting softly." Through soft lines and blurred edges these artists worked to create a seemingly unmediated experience between the viewer and the subject. For some, including John Singer Sargent, William Merritt Chase, and Dennis Miller Bunker, it was a brief exercise. Others, such as John White Alexander, Thomas Wilmer Dewing, Eduard Steichen, and John Twachtman, sustained this sensibility in their work for many of their most important paintings. Dewing, for example, produced a series of highly decorative landscapes, occupied by elegant women in evening dress. Transforming the landscapes of Cornish, New Hampshire, into a rarefied space of flickering nature-infused beauty, these paintings were reserved for the few patrons sensitive enough to appreciate them.

While the mysterious, evocative mood of soft painting most readily manifests itself in landscape paintings, it also appears in portraits and figure paintings from the era. *Like Breath on Glass* presents several such paintings including William Merritt Chase's *The Young Orphan (At Her Ease)* (1884, National Academy Museum, New York) and John White Alexander's *A Ray of Sunlight (The Cellist)* (1898, private collection). Further illustrating the versatility of painting softly, Whistler himself applied his technique of thin washes of paint to a few full-length portraits. Examples in the exhibition include *Arrangement in Yellow and Gray: Effie Deans* (c. 1876-78, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, on loan from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) and *Arrangement in Black: Portrait of Señor Pablo de Sarasate* (1884, Carnegie Museum of Art).

While working in San Francisco from 1983 to 1994, curator Marc Simpson first saw Dennis Miller Bunker's *Pines Beyond the Fence* (1886, private collection) and was impressed by the technical prowess of Bunker yet perplexed by how such strong definition could be achieved without apparent contour and obvious brushstrokes. Years later Simpson rediscovered the same sensibility in looking at some of Whistler's nocturnes and questioned how and why the painter would use two significantly different approaches—one virtuosic and the other "soft"—in producing

works done at the same time and showing virtually identical subject matter. Simpson's research led him to works by a variety of painters that have individually been called Impressionist, Tonalist, or Symbolist but that, through their quiet surfaces and soft-contoured subjects, invite a quiet, contemplative approach to looking.

Like Breath on Glass is accompanied by a catalogue with 100 color illustrations published by the Clark and distributed by Yale University Press. The exhibition was organized by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute and is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Terra Foundation for American Art, and by a contribution from Mr. and Mrs. Frank Martucci.

The Clark

Set amid 140 bucolic acres in the picturesque Berkshires, the Clark is one of the few major art museums in the United States that also serves as a leading international center for research and scholarship. In addition to its extraordinary collections, the Clark organizes groundbreaking special exhibitions that advance new scholarship and presents an array of public and educational programs. The Clark's research and academic programs include an international fellowship program and regular conferences, symposia, and colloquia. Its programs draw university and museum professionals from around the world. The Clark, together with Williams College, sponsors one of the nation's leading master's programs in art history and encompasses one of the most comprehensive art history libraries in the world.

In June 2008, the Clark will open Stone Hill Center, the first phase of its expansion and campus enhancement project. Designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Tadao Ando, the wood and glass 32,000-square-foot building will house new intimately scaled galleries, a meeting and studio art classroom, an outdoor café, and the Williamstown Art Conservation Center (WACC).

The Berkshires, a region of rolling hills in western Massachusetts, has been a haven for cultural activity since the first half of the nineteenth century. The Berkshires are home to a wealth of cultural institutions that in addition to the Clark include: Tanglewood, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, MASS MoCA, the Norman Rockwell Museum, Williams College Museum of Art, and the Williamstown Theatre Festival, among many others. For more information, visit www.clarkart.edu or call 413-458-2303.