

# FELLOWSHIP DINNERS AND THE ARMORY SHOW: TWO UNRECORDED ROBERT HENRI LETTERS TO HORACE TRAUBEL REGARDING WALT WHITMAN

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“IN SEEING ISADORA DUNCAN DANCE,” wrote the artist Robert Henri, “I am always reminded of the great voice of Walt Whitman.” His short tribute to Duncan in a pamphlet on “Dionysian art” highlighted the parallels between them. As Duncan danced, she forwarded “the possibility of a life where full natural growth and full natural expression will be the aim of all people,” echoing the poet’s own program. Whitman heavily influenced Henri’s understanding of art. Henri’s identification of Whitman-like traits in fellow artists was not unprecedented. As Ruth Bohan has noted, Henri used Whitman regularly in his teaching, and he imparted Whitman’s work to generations of students and peers. Henri was recognized, argued Bohan, “as a forceful and dynamic interpreter of the creative potential of Whitman’s verse for members of the American arts community.” Two previously unrecorded Henri letters, recently acquired by the University of Nebraska at Kearney’s Archives and Special Collections, underscore and enhance Bohan’s claim.

Addressed to Horace Traubel and dated to 1909 and 1913, these letters broaden what is known about Henri’s relationship with both Whitman and Traubel’s Whitman Fellowship, as well as about Traubel’s response to modern art. Henri was devoted to Whitman. Aware of this, Horace Traubel hoped to bring Henri further into the Whitman fold through the Fellowship Dinners. Later, Traubel wanted a Whitman-infused speech on modern art from a leading artist who exhibited at The Armory Show. Henri had discussed the dynamics of the exhibition’s organizers with Traubel; so, Traubel surely assumed the artist would share his insights with other Whitman disciples. Yet, Henri repeatedly declined to attend and speak, as recorded in these letters as well as in surviving correspondence in Traubel’s papers. Henri welcomed Traubel’s friendship, but his Fellowship was too much.

Given Traubel’s voluminous correspondence, unrecorded letters are not uncommon, but these letters offer further insights into the incorporation

of Whitman into Henri's teaching and his involvement with the Walt Whitman Fellowship. Regarding the former, as Bohan found, "For nearly three decades Henri channeled Whitman's emphasis on the self, personality, and bond between into a pedagogical practice that attracted many of the country's leading younger artists." In the first letter, he declined Traubel's invitation to the 1909 Walt Whitman Fellowship dinner. Traubel and Henri had not yet met, as indicated in the letter, but Henri does share that Traubel's letter had inspired him to give a "Walt Whitman speech" to his composition class. He hoped Traubel would agree that the speech was conducted "in the right place." In January 1909, Henri opened his own art school after a financial falling out with the New York School of Art. At his school, recorded former student Helen Appleton Read, Henri "taught us to paint from the inside out so to speak, to try and find that inner thing that made one particular man or woman different from any other man or woman." Achieving this outlook meant going beyond art and engaging with poetry, literature, and politics. After Henri's death she recalled, that "[i]n the Henri class I heard Walt Whitman for the first time unblushingly discussed in a mixed gathering." This newly found letter thus connects Henri's admiration for Whitman and his pedagogical use of his poetry directly to Whitman's leading disciple.

The second letter dates to 1913. Here Henri informs Traubel he did not attend the Whitman dinner because he and his wife, Marjorie, were preparing for a trip to Ireland. It had been a difficult year for Henri. His work at the International Exhibition of Modern Art, better known as the Armory Show, that spring was overshadowed by the presence of modern European artists, and their impact reverberated across the American art community. Traubel implored Henri to speak "for ten minutes or thirty or forty minutes" at the Whitman dinner on the relationship between the Futurists and Whitman. His belated response to Traubel obviously precluded such a talk. For Henri, the subject matter was sensitive. Such a talk would have required, in essence, a reading of the Armory Show through Whitman.

The Armory Show was organized by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors. News of the group's formation reached Traubel, and he asked Henri for his thoughts on the matter. The artist responded: "Your question about the new society of painters and sculptors was almost answered by yourself in the query. I was not one of the founders and did accept membership with a question and hope we will be a good thing any way as it puts a new party in the field." Henri expressed his hopes for and disappointments with the group to Traubel, particularly their reticence to hold a self-organized and award-less exhibition. Henri had laid out this approach at the MacDowell Club and sent

the prospectus to Traubel along with the letter. Given this exchange, Traubel knew Henri would be the ideal dinner guest to speak to Whitman's influence on the show and its relationship to the poet.

Whether Henri's late response was due to his busy schedule or was a deliberate delay to avoid giving the talk is unknown, but the latter is more likely. According to Henri's biographer, the artist either stopped maintaining (or destroyed) his diary for 1913. Traubel's request was not the only abortive engagement on the matter. The Fellowship of the Pennsylvania Academy canceled a talk by Henri on the show. Moreover, Henri made his objection to speaking at the dinner clearer when Traubel once again asked him to talk in 1915:

"I'd like to please you but I wont speak at the meeting or the dinner – When I want to speak it is easy for me, would be hard perhaps to restrain me, but when I dont want to its impossible. I have never wanted to speak at a dinner, have always refused. Whitman himself argues strongest against formal celebrations – at least so it is to me."

For Henri, this was a personal preference and a Whitman-supported position. Traubel's reply, if he wrote one, does not survive in Henri's papers at Yale.

Given Henri's refusal to comment on the Armory Show at the Whitman dinner, Traubel offered his own thoughts in a *Conservator* review of *Camera Work's* special issue devoted to modern art. Traubel admitted his own confusion over the new forms of literary and artistic modernism but recognized their transformative power: "That's what these brave new people are. Beyond people. Not willing to stop where paint stops. Not willing to be executed on a stretcher . . . All of them in glorious pursuit of the impossible."

As the Armory Show moved on to Chicago and Boston, Henri retreated to Ireland. Trip preparations, as indicated in his letter, had kept him from the Fellowship Dinner. He and Marjorie settled on Achill Island, where they later bought a home. There Henri applied his Whitman-oriented eye to the local community, producing some of his best regarded portraits of Irish farmers, domestic workers, fishermen, and children. Henri's method, Ruth Bohan noted, echoed Whitman's own celebratory approach to American difference and recognition of portraiture's impact. His American portraiture celebrates what Bohan calls "the dignity, humanity, and respect" of individuals on society's margins, a sentiment found in Henri's Achill Island works. Henri's correspondence and artwork demonstrate his commitment to living Whitman's words rather than reveling in them through the Whitman Fellowship.

135240 N. Y. City  
June 7, 1909  
Dear Mr. Traubel  
It was much to  
my regret that I had to leave  
town on the 31<sup>st</sup> and could  
not come to the Whitman cel-  
bration as I had expected, and  
lost the chance of meeting  
you - I hope I may have  
the opportunity again. The day  
after I sent you my letter  
I met a large body of my  
pupils in the school - the  
composition class - and before  
I was aware of it I was deep  
in my Walt Whitman speech.  
Thank you for the inspiration  
and perhaps you will agree with  
me that, after all, it occurred in  
the right place.  
Very Truly Yours  
Robert Henri

Fig 1. Robert Henri to Horace Traubel, 7 June 1909, Robert Henri Correspondence Collection, University of Nebraska at Kearney Archives & Special Collections, Calvin T. Ryan Library.

Transcription of letter from Robert Henri to Horace Traubel, 1909:

135 E 40 N.Y. City

June 7 1909

Dear Mr Traubel

It was much to my regret that I had to leave town on the 31<sup>st</sup> and could not come to the Whitman celebration as I had expected, and lost the chance of meeting you. I hope I may have the opportunity again. The day after I sent you my letter I met a large body of my pupils I the school – the composition class – and before I was aware of it I was deep in my Walt Whitman speech. Thank you for the inspiration and perhaps you will agree with me that, after all, it occurred in the right place.

Very Truly Yours  
Robert Henri

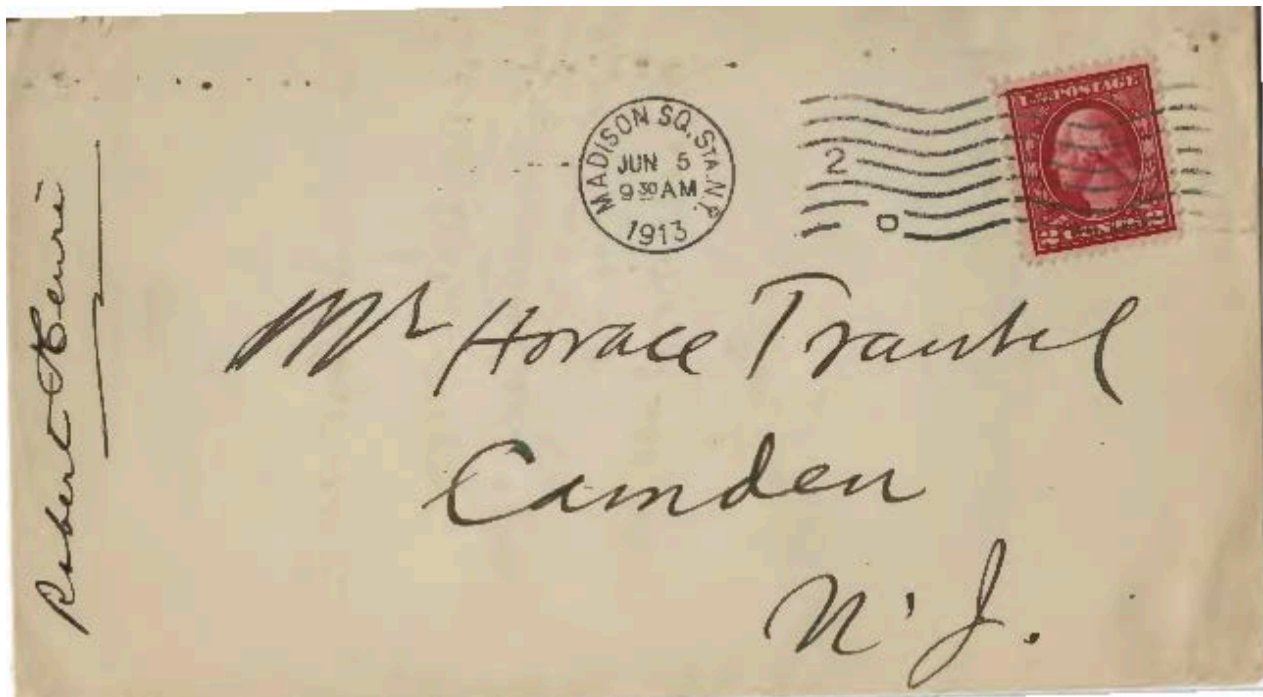


Fig 2. Envelope for letter from Robert Henri to Horace Traubel, 4 June 1913, Robert Henri Correspondence Collection, University of Nebraska at Kearney Archives & Special Collections, Calvin T. Ryan Library.

10 Srameny Park  
June 4, 1913

Dear Horace Traubel

We are off  
tomorrow for Ireland, I  
regret not getting to the  
Hennes - This period is  
always a hard one for  
me, and one thing and  
another prevented me, I  
have been thru all the  
struggles of breaking up  
our establishment, strange,  
business, and this and  
that - but this letter  
is just to say that I

Fig 3. Page 1 of letter from Robert Henri to Horace Traubel, 4 June 1913, Robert Henri Correspondence Collection, University of Nebraska at Kearney Archives & Special Collections, Calvin T. Ryan Library.

regret not being with you  
at the dinner?  
Sincerely yours  
Robert Henri  
Dear Horace

We are all  
so glad to hear from  
you and to hear that  
you are still in  
the city. I hope you  
will stay here for  
some time. I would  
like to see you  
very much. I hope  
you will write to  
me soon. I am  
always yours  
Robert Henri

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Fig 4. Page 2 of letter from Robert Henri to Horace Traubel, 4 June 1913, Robert Henri Correspondence Collection, University of Nebraska at Kearney Archives & Special Collections, Calvin T. Ryan Library.

Transcription of letter from Robert Henri to Horace Traubel, 1913:

10 Gramercy Park  
June 4, 1913

Dear Horace Traubel

We are in tomorrow for Ireland, I regret not getting to the Dinner. This period is always a bad one for me, and one thing and another prevented me. I have been thru all the struggles in breaking up our establishment, stage business, and this and that – but this letter is just to say that I regret not being with you at the dinner

Sincerely yours  
Robert Henri

### Notes

- 1 Robert Henri, “Isadora Duncan and Walt Whitman,” *Dionysion* 1 (1915).
- 2 Joseph J. Kwait, “Robert Henri and the Emerson-Whitman Tradition,” *PMLA* 71 (September 1956), 617-636.
- 3 Ruth L. Bohan, “Robert Henri, Walt Whitman, and the American Artist,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 29 (2012), 131-151.
- 4 Bohan, 131.
- 5 Bohan, 135-136.
- 6 William Innes Homer, *Robert Henri and His Circle* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1988), 149-150; Bennard B. Perlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1991), 89-90.
- 7 Helen Appleton Read, “‘I Paint My People’ is Henri’s Art Key,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (February 12, 1918).
- 8 Helen Appleton Read, *Robert Henri* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1931), 10.
- 9 Perlman, 108-110; Homer, 166-170.
- 10 Horace Traubel to Robert Henri, May 16, 1913; Robert Henri Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, CT.



11 Henri's reticence to speak on the subject and connect modern art to Whitman is contrasted by his former student and fellow Armory Show exhibitor, Joseph Stella. The Italian-born painter identified Whitman as the forerunner of futurism and carried the poet into his own modernist work. See Ruth L. Bohan, *Looking into Walt Whitman: American Art, 1850-1920* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 189-211.

12 Robert Henri to Horace Traubel, March 28, 1912; Folder: Henri, Robert; March 1912-December 1915, Box 76, Horace and Anne Traubel Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

13 "Prospectus For Exhibitions of Contemporary American Oil Paintings, November 1, 1911-June 1, 1912"; Folder: Henri, Robert; March 1912-December 1915, Box 76, Horace and Anne Traubel Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

14 Perlman, 109.

15 Perlman, 110.

16 Robert Henri to Horace Traubel, May 23, 1915; Folder: Henri, Robert, Mar. 1912-Dec. 1915, Box 76, Horace and Anne Traubel Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Curiously, Henri's best friend and fellow Whitman enthusiast, John Sloan, responded similarly to Traubel the next year: "The idea of speaking at the Whitman Birthday dinner fills me with fright – I would love to feel that I could measure up with the occasion, but I can not." John Sloan to Horace Traubel, May 20, 1916; Folder: Sloan, John, July 1911-Dec. 1918, Box 101, Horace and Anne Traubel Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

17 *Camera Work*, Special Number (June 1913). The issue featured work by Gertrude Stein, Mabel Luhan Dodge, Gabrièle Buffet-Picabia, Benjamin De Casseres, Oscar Bluemner, Maurice Aisen, John Weichsel, Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, and Francis Picabia.

18 Horace Traubel, "Futurism big and little," *The Conservator* (October 1913), 120-121. Henri subscribed to *The Conservator* at the time and likely read this article with a critical eye. Robert Henri to Horace Traubel, May 28, 1912; Folder: Henri, Robert, Mar. 1912-Dec. 1915, Box 76, Horace and Anne Traubel Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

19 The Henris hoped for a restorative and artistically productive trip. Marjorie Henri informed John and Dolly Sloane, the former another Whitman disciple, that "Bob expects to do great things" in a postcard sent shortly after their arrival. Majorie Henri to the Sloans, July 5, 1913, in *Revolutionaries of Realism: The Letters of John Sloan and Robert Henri*, ed. Bennard B. Perlman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 216-217.

20 Valerie Ann Leeds, "Road to Corrymore: Robert Henri, His Art, and Ireland," in Jonathan Stuhlman and Valerie Ann Leeds, *From New York to Corrymore: Robert Henri and Ireland* (Charlotte: The Mint Museum, 2011), 49-92.

21 Bohan, "Robert Henri, Walt Whitman, and the American Artist," 144.

22 Robert Henri to Horace Traubel, June 7, 1909; Robert Henri Papers, Small Collections, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Kearney, Kearney, NE.

23 Robert Henri to Horace Traubel, June 4, 1913; Robert Henri Papers.