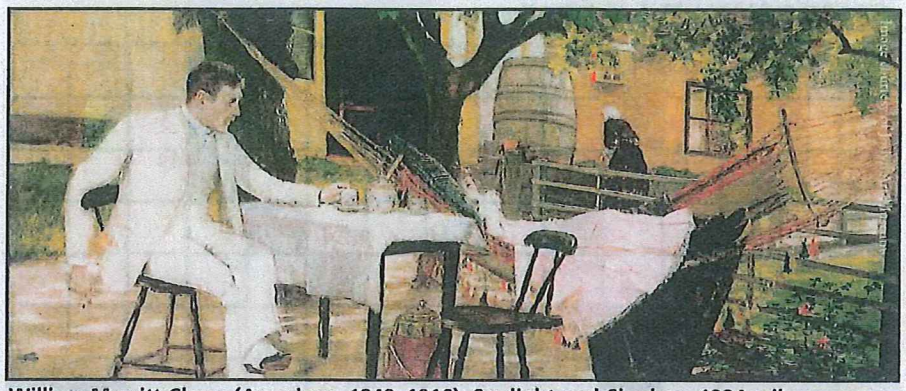


Des Moines, Iowa

ArtPimp

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Magritte's apples and Cezanne's oranges



William Merritt Chase (American, 1849–1916), Sunlight and Shadow, 1884, oil on canvas, Gift of the Friends of Art, 1932.4, Collection of Joslyn Art Museum (Omaha, Neb.).

Omaha is Des Moines' great rival. The two cities have long battled for low fare airlines, parimutuel gamblers and amateur hockey titles. They share much in common. Both towns have been kissed by extraordinary corporate success. That has translated into healthy cultural scenes. An examination of towns' artistic characters distinguishes them.

The main art museums both offer permanent free admission. That's rare, but growing, with museums of their size and quality. Free admission was demanded in perpetuity as a condition of the Des Moines Art Center's (DMAC) endowment by James Edmundson. The Joslyn only began offering it last year, though its original benefactor imbued the place with similar communal spirit. At its ribbon-cutting in 1931, Sarah Joslyn hid in the crowd of 25,000 rather than be recognized for her gift.

Probably the most famous paintings in the two museums solicit imaginative back stories. Edward Hopper's "Automat" at DMAC features a well-dressed woman (Hopper's wife Jo modeled) wearing makeup and a single glove sitting with empty plates on her table. She appears to be alone, and the outside streets are empty. So much has been read into her circumstances that Time magazine used the painting on its cover for a story about depression and stress in the 20th century.

Similarly William Merritt Chase's "Sunlight and Shadow" at the Joslyn depicts a well-dressed Victorian era couple on an idyllic patio, wine barrel in the background and a breakfast table set. The contemplative man has crumpled his newspaper and is smoking a cigarette, with a number of butts crushed on the ground around his spats. The lady reclines in a hammock, with her face turned away from him. Many surmise that she just revealed she is pregnant, but other scenarios are rife.

The differences between the museums suggest more about the two towns. The Joslyn's permanent collection is encyclopedic and traditional. Ancient Greek and American Western art are strong suits. It employs a curator dedicated to the latter. DMAC's permanent collection is more eclectic. Special shows at the Joslyn tend toward household names and blockbuster traveling collections. In the next two years, they will feature exhibitions of ancient Greek art, Thomas Moran, Andy Warhol, The American Frontier and Modern Art from O'Keefe to Rockwell.

DMAC special exhibitions lean more toward the cutting edge than the safe bet. African nomadic artist El Anatsui currently stars there with gargantuan walls built out of liquor bottle caps. He was preceded by English sculptor Phylida Barlow and will be followed by Danish artist Jasper Just, then a group show of seven artists from seven different countries. DMAC director Jeff Fleming explains.

"It's a niche where we can be significant. The Des Moines community is extraordinarily well traveled and well educated. It expects this, particularly on the international level — that we identify new artists who are worthy of exhibitions and the dialogue that generates; and that we not act like a regional town but one looking far beyond its borders."

Beyond the museum walls, the towns' artistic characters are most famously represented by very different things. Omaha's Bemis Center is one of the most cherished art residencies in the world, bringing 32 artists to the town each year to work and live under the same roof. Des Moines' Pappajohn Sculpture Park (PSP) has quickly become the town's most photogenic playground. If the Bemis Center is school, the PSP is recess. Similarly, if comparisons are like apples and oranges, then Omaha is a Cezanne orange and Des Moines is the apple of Magritte. **CV**

Jim Duncan is a freelance writer who has penned nine different columns for Cityview and its sister publications beginning in 1987.

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