

Allies Day, May 1917, 1917

One month after the United States officially entered the First World War, the city of New York festooned Fifth Avenue with flags. As a welcoming gesture to the British and French war commissioners, the Stars and Stripes hung alongside the Union Jack and the French Tricolor to create a patriotic pattern of red, white, and blue. Childe Hassam, an American of British descent who had studied and worked in Paris, took personal pride in the new military alliance.

Allies Day, May 1917 is not Hassam's only flag painting, but it quickly became (and has remained) the most famous of the ensemble. Hassam began the series in 1916, when thousands of Americans demonstrated support for the Allied cause by marching up Fifth Avenue in the Preparedness Parade. Moved by this and other war-related ceremonies, he eventually produced some thirty views of New York streets bedecked in banners. Because Hassam was influenced by French Impressionism, he was naturally drawn to the sun-struck spectacle of those colorful, celebratory occasions. But the flag paintings transcend the pageantry to express Hassam's conviction about the moral and financial supremacy of the United States.



I2-B Childe Hassam (1859–1935), *Allies Day, May 1917*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 36½ x 30¼ in. (92.7 x 76.8 cm.). Gift of Ethelyn McKinney in memory of her brother, Glenn Ford McKinney. Image © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Although it may appear as casual as a snapshot, *Allies Day* is meticulously composed. To paint it, Hassam set up his easel on the balcony of a building at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-second Street, which allowed a view of springtime foliage north toward Central Park. Flags are everywhere, but they cluster on the right and bottom edges of the canvas, making a colorful frame for the buildings lining the west side of the avenue. In the immediate foreground the emblems of the Allied nations hang neatly in a row (the Union Jack appears on the Red Ensign, the unofficial flag of Canada) to establish the theme that Hassam varies and repeats. With different patterns but matching colors, the flags represent the harmony of three nations joined in a single cause — “the Fight for democracy,” as Hassam himself defined his painting's significance. But in this flurry of symbolic meaning, only one banner hangs entirely clear of other flags and flagpoles. Hassam's contemporaries would have instantly recognized his purpose in placing the Stars and Stripes at the pinnacle of the composition, set against a cloudless sky.

If *Allies Day* portrays a historic occasion and symbolizes the nationalistic temper of the times, it also offers a telling description of landmarks on Fifth Avenue, known at the time as Millionaire's Row. The façades are all bathed in morning sunlight, but the brightest façade in the row, Saint Thomas Church, is also the newest, constructed in the Gothic-revival style and consecrated only the year before this work was painted. Beyond it stands the University Club, recalling a Renaissance palazzo, beside an expensive hotel called the Gotham (now the Peninsula). Next to it, just barely visible, is the sloping façade of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. Many of the flags point toward these buildings as if to identify them as the subject of the picture; all served the richest, most prominent members of New York society, linking them to the nation's prosperity. Hassam may have featured the two ecclesiastic structures — particularly Saint Thomas, which gleams in the sunlight — in order to suggest that the new alliance of the United States with the Old World nations of Britain and France had even won divine approval.

As Hassam's most patriotic picture, *Allies Day, May 1917* became instantly famous through the sale of color reproductions to benefit the war effort. The flag paintings were exhibited together for the first time four days after the armistice was declared in November 1918, to document the story of the American entry into the Great War and to commemorate its victorious conclusion.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to view this painting carefully, distinguishing all the separate elements.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E | M | S

Have the students describe the brushstrokes in this painting.

They can be distinguished separately, as if the artist has just made them. They are not blended together to make a smooth surface and are of different sizes.

E | M | S

Ask students to find the church tower. *It is on the left.*

Where are the trees in Central Park? *They are the green in the lower center of the painting.*

What is happening in the street? *The street is filled with people. Perhaps there is a parade.*

E | M | S

Have students locate several United States flags, two British Union Jacks, three French Tricolors, and a red flag with a small Union Jack on it that represents Canada.

E | M | S

Have students look at street and satellite maps of New York City to see where Hassam was when he painted this and how this view has changed. *He was on a balcony at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-second Street looking north toward Central Park.*

E | M | S

Where are the shadows and what color are they? *They are under projecting parts of the buildings and in the street, and they are blue.*

E | M | S

How is this painting like an impression rather than a finished artwork?

The bright colors, unblended brushstrokes, and lack of intricate detail make it seem like a quick glance at a scene.

Explain that Impressionism, which began in France in the late 1860s, was a popular painting style in America at this time.

INTERPRET

E | M | S

Which flag in the middle ground stands alone and is not overlapped by other flags? *The American flag is surrounded by light blue sky.*

What does this suggest about how Hassam felt about his country? *He thought America was unique and was proud of his country.*

M | S

What international event was happening when this was painted? *It was painted during World War I.*

Why were so many flags flying in New York City on this day? *A month before this was painted, the United States officially entered the war. On this day the British and French war commissioners were visiting New York.*

M | S

What do these flags flying together symbolize? *They symbolize the fact that these three nations were standing together to fight the war.*

What elements do the flags have in common? *They are all red, blue, and white.*

M | S

What does this painting show about America's spirit in 1917?

Americans were proud of their country and optimistic about the future and this alliance with France, Britain, and Canada.

M | S

Why did this painting become famous soon after it was completed?

Color reproductions of it were sold to benefit the war effort.

Why did Americans want copies of this painting?

For the beauty of the art and to show support for America and its allies as it joined them in the war.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: American isolationism; World War I; League of Nations

Historical Figures: Woodrow Wilson; Archduke Franz Ferdinand

Civics: history of the American flag

Geography: the Allied Powers (France, Russia, United Kingdom, Italy, United States); the Central Powers (Austria-Hungary, Germany, Ottoman Empire); the Western Front

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway

(secondary); *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot (secondary)

Music: "The Star Spangled Banner"

Arts: Impressionism; American Impressionism