

# H-Diplo

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**Robert E. May.** "Culture Wars: The U.S. Art Lobby and Congressional Tariff Legislation during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era." *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 9: 1 (January 2010).

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During the late nineteenth century, American artists complained about the difficulties they had in creating a market for their work. They, and other art-world luminaries, often blamed the large number of foreign paintings entering the country after the Civil War for hurting their economic prospects. However, as Robert May explores in his article on the tariff imposed by the United States government on the importation of foreign art, the majority of American artists opposed any protectionist policy. May provides the most detailed account of debates over the tariff to date, and illuminates the seeming paradox in American artists' thinking about their foreign competition, an attitude summed up by landscape painter Jervis McEntee in 1872: "foreign pictures are pouring in in a perfect deluge. There seems no place for us [American artists] but I hope it will be good for us in some way."<sup>1</sup>

As May notes, the United States had a tariff on works of art for much of its history (41). The rise and fall of tariff rates on art roughly correlated to that for other goods, although the percentage was often much less for art, for example the ad valorem duty on artwork from 1861 to 1863 was 10 percent, while the average for all other dutiable goods stood at 42.8%.<sup>2</sup> Artists became vocal in their opposition to the tariff in 1882 when, hoping for a reduction of the current rate of 10%, the duty on art went up to 30% in 1883 where it

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<sup>1</sup> Jervis McEntee Diary, 11 November 1872. Jervis McEntee Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>2</sup> William J. Barber, "Commerce in Fine Arts and American Political Economy, 1789-1913" in Neil de Marchi and Craufurd D.W. Goodwin, eds. *Economic Engagements with Art*, Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 1999: 213.

stayed until 1890 (44).<sup>3</sup> The rhetoric of protectionists and artists during the debates of the early 1880s set the discourse for all arguments over the art tariff until its dissolution in 1913. Proponents of the tariff, such as Philadelphia-based collector and lobbyist Thomas Corwin Donaldson, maintained that American artists needed more protection from foreign competition than other kinds of manufacturers because of American art collectors' decided preference for European art (45). During the many economic crises of the late nineteenth century, the art tariff became a flash point of debates about income inequality in American society (55). Congressman Poindexter Dunn of Arkansas wondered why a tariff that only affected the wealthiest Americans—including J.P. Morgan, Henry Clay Frick, and Henry E. Huntington who all built massive art collections in the Gilded Age—should be eliminated while those for necessities remained: “Tax the salt of the humblest laborers of the land and take off the tax from the one-hundred-thousand-dollar painting and other works of art of the millionaire! Is that justice?”<sup>4</sup>

Artists and their lobbyists composed four major arguments against the tariff. They argued that Americans wanted the chance to compete with foreign artists on an open playing field; it insulted American artists' professional achievements that the government implied through the tariff that their work was not as good as that of their European peers (44). Artists emphasized the opportunities foreign governments—particularly France—had provided Americans by allowing them to train, often at no cost, in state-run art schools, and to exhibit their work alongside their European peers in official salons. They feared that these significant advantages would be taken away if the tariff stood (48-49). Artists, in concert with collectors and museums, claimed that great examples of Western art, ancient to modern, had the power to educate and edify the masses, producing better citizens (57, 64). More to the point professionally, American artists argued that without examples of great European art for them to study, domestic art education would never meet the standards of academies in Germany and France (54).

However, May's summary of artists' and their lobbyists' arguments against the tariff is not his main contribution to the literature of the United States art tariff. Three previous scholars, two art historians and an economic historian, have written about the cultural politics of the tax in similar terms. Of these three May mentions only Kimberly Orcutt's brief 2002 article in *American Art* where she demonstrated that artists', critics', and collectors' rationale for opposing the tariff was part of an increasing desire to elide the status of art as a commodity, to consider it instead “a sacred object and an instrument of public education with the power to impart culture.”<sup>5</sup> This shift does much to explain artist Jervis McEntee's ambivalence to foreign paintings pouring into the domestic

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<sup>3</sup> Barber: 224.

<sup>4</sup> *Congressional Record*, 48th Congress, 1st session, quoted in Barber: 220.

<sup>5</sup> Kimberly Orcutt, “Buy American? The Debate over the Art Tariff,” *American Art* 16: 3 (Autumn 2002): 90.

market; when art became removed from the realm of commerce it became difficult to oppose the importation of foreign paintings on crass economic terms, even for producers. While May mentions that France offered to repeal its 1881 prohibition on imports of American pork if the United States reduced its tariff on foreign art (50-51), art historian Albert Boime had discussed this issue more thoroughly in context of the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris. Boime analyzed France's opposition to the art tariff as symptomatic of its contentious relationship to America's imperial and commercial aspirations, citing circumstantial evidence that organizers of the exposition indeed discriminated against American artists when it came to the awarding of medals, which Boime attributed to retaliation for the tariff.<sup>6</sup> Economic historian William J. Barber wrote a concise history of the tariff from 1789 to 1913, including useful econometric data lacking in May's article.<sup>7</sup> The major players, both pro and con, on the issue—journalists Richard Watson Gilder and Charles de Kay; artist William Merritt Chase; Congressmen Dunn and Perry Belmont; and collectors Donaldson and John Quinn—appear in Orcutt, Boime, Barber, and now May, often in the same context.

May does, however, make substantive contributions to the literature on the art tariff by looking to sources under-utilized by previous scholars, as well as in his analysis of how the tariff became a wedge issue in social and cultural politics. Although it would have behooved him to have studied all previous literature on the tariff, art historians have neither mined the Congressional records as thoroughly nor as fruitfully as he has done here, nor have they focused on people who artists hired to lobby for their anti-tariff cause. His section on journalist, actress, socialite, and activist Kate Field's involvement in lobbying for artists helps delineate the paternalistic relationship of some cultural elites to the mass of American society, whom they needed to help elevate through exposure to fine art, but also to artists, whom they felt were not capable enough to look after their own best interests (64-66).

May's most exciting addition to scholarship on the tariff is his demonstration that the reduction of the duty provided a unifying force within the American art profession during the late nineteenth century. Discussions of American art, following the lead of earlier developments in Europe, tend to focus on dissent in this period, as secessionist groups of European-trained artists broke away from the hidebound National Academy of Design beginning in 1877 with the foundation of the Society of American Artists. Critics of the day, and many contemporary scholars, view the profession as divided on ideological and stylistic grounds, with artists such as William Merritt Chase who painted in Impressionist or other Modernist styles working to bring American taste forward, while painters

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<sup>6</sup> Albert Boime, "The Chocolate Venus, 'Tainted' Pork, the Wine Blight, and the Tariff: Franco-American Stew at the Fair," in Annette Blaugrund et. al. *Paris 1889: American Artists at the Universal Exposition* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1989): 67-92.

<sup>7</sup> Barber: 209-234.

including Albert Bierstadt, who produced landscapes in a highly detailed and academic manner, represented the provincial past.<sup>8</sup> May describes Chase and Bierstadt signing petitions against the tariff together and serving on the board of Kate Field's Art Congress, along with colleagues who represented the gamut of stylistic possibilities in late nineteenth-century America (66). May's assertion that artists banded together to look after their political interests, regardless of individual doctrinal differences, suggests that American artists had much in common with doctors, lawyers, and educators who also worked collectively to ensure civil and economic privileges for their professions.

However, May's article also indicates the end of artists' claim of authority over their profession. Early efforts against the tariff in the 1880s were led by artists--Chase, Bierstadt, Kenyon Cox, and J. Carroll Beckwith among many (45, 59-60). After the turn of the century, organizers of prominent anti-tariff organizations such as the Free Art League were likely to be art collectors and representatives of cultural institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (73-74). Collector and lawyer John Quinn is credited with a pivotal role in persuading Congress to abolish the tariff in 1913 (85). This shift of political advocacy from artist to those outside the profession brings up interesting questions of cultural hegemony in the Gilded Age, and should be addressed as part of ongoing research into the struggle between elite groups to attain stewardship over aspects of American society.<sup>9</sup>

Robert May provides a starting point from which to address American artists' involvement in politics during the Gilded Age, a subject which deserves far greater attention in the scholarship on American art of the period. However, the tariff issue is just one of many examples of artists acting as political operatives. Albert Bierstadt, who was a fervent opponent of the tariff, approached Senator George Franklin Edmonds with the offer of a "retainer" from the New York Central Railroad at the behest of Cornelius Vanderbilt and Chauncey Depew, in return for a certain consideration to the New York Central in his activities in Congress.<sup>10</sup> Further research into the complicated, at times contradictory, relationships of art, economics, and politics in late nineteenth century America, along the lines that May has laid out here, will reveal much about the history of American art and the motivations of artists, but also of their politically connected collectors and patrons.

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<sup>8</sup> For concise summaries of this putative dichotomy between progressive and provincial American artists see: Saul Zalesch, "Competition and Conflict in the New York Art World, 1874-1879" *Winterthur Portfolio* 29: 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 1994): 103-120 and Trudie Grace, "The National Academy of Design and the Society of American Artists: Rivals Viewed by Critics, 1878-1906" in David Dearing et al., *Rave Reviews: American Art and Its Critics, 1826-1925* (New York: National Academy of Design, 2000)

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) and Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Albert Bierstadt to Bruce [?] 17 January 1887, Albert Bierstadt Letters, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., Reel D8.

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