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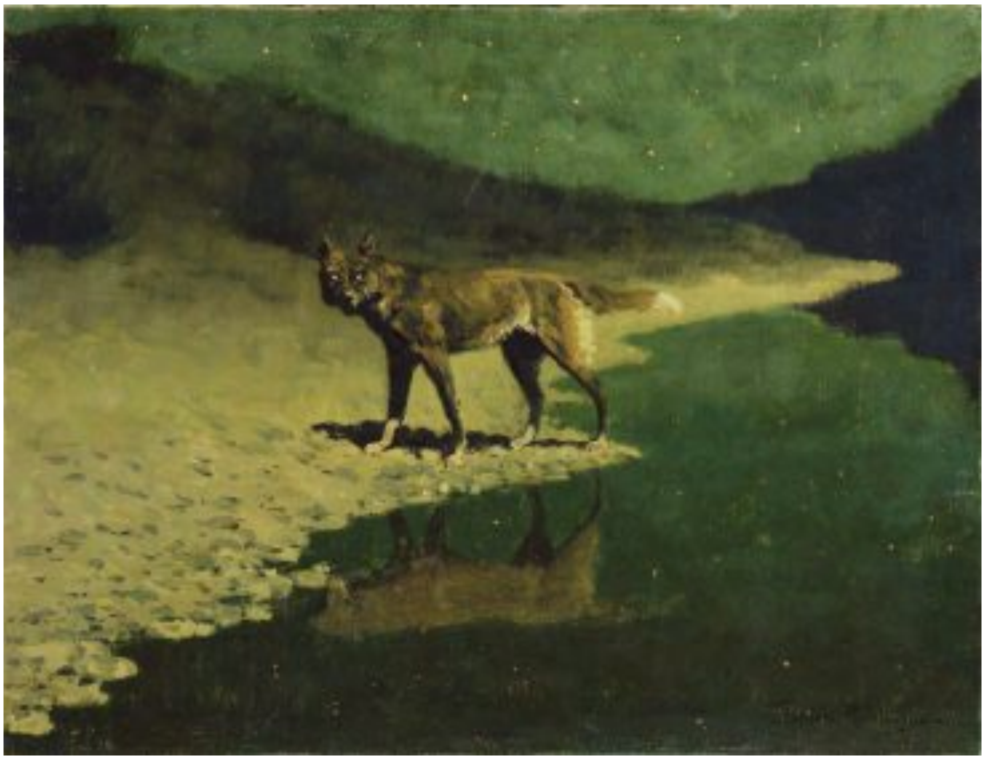
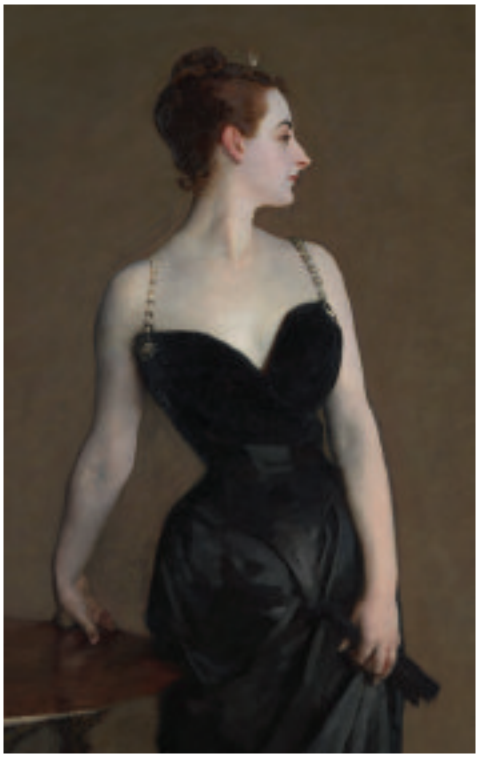

Frederic Remington: *Moonlight, Wolf*, ca. 1909.


John Singer Sargent: *Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*, 1883–84.

The exuberant and fractious era, which was given its moniker by Mark Twain's 1873 eponymous novel, is often characterized by the glittery facades of growing wealth and privilege. But facades they were, obscuring vast divides between the haves and have-nots, business and labor, urban and rural populations. Whizzy technological innovations and a rush of immigrants powered social and economic changes, even as Jim Crow laws codified racist segregation and violence.

Also during this time, more Americans saw more art—both imported from abroad and domestic-made—than at any time since the founding of the Republic. The reasons were many: Robber-baron collectors, like Henry Clay Frick and J.P. Morgan, had boundless fortunes to spend; large, comprehensive art museums opened their doors for the first time; a rising middle class, eager for leisure and art education, spurred an increase in travel, art schools, clubs, and galleries. To be cosmopolitan in a country rapidly rising in economic and political power required a fluency in fine art; and as Darwinism displaced old-time religion, beauty itself came to be a spiritual pursuit and balm.

"One good thing about 19th-century American painting," John Updike once remarked, "is that there is a lot of it." From Winslow Homer's seascapes to Thomas Eakins's portraits of neurasthenic figures undone by rapid change, to the domestic spaces of Mary Cassatt and the silky silks of John Singer Sargent's tour de force canvases, the years after the Civil War saw a rush of artmaking, with many artists steamboating to Paris, the world's cultural capital, for their education and to burnish their credentials.

Where some artists delved into the era's resplendence, others revealed how the Gilded Age was also the broken age. Robert Henri's Ashcan painters conveyed both the energy of rapid industrialization—towering buildings, busy streets, crowded restaurants—and its terrible costs. Jacob Riis's photographs of poor urban families were a visual rebuke to Carnegie's blast furnaces. Frederic Remington's *Moonlight, Wolf* (ca. 1909) pictures a predator standing in a barren landscape, alone, its eyes glistening with the light of the night stars, which seems to pose a question near the end of an era: What, then, has progress wrought?

—Natalie Dykstra

GILDED AGE

From left, Courtesy Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Mass.; Licensed by Art Resource, New York/©Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York