

Sharp Looks, Pointed Jokes:
The Caricatured Art Audience of William Emlen Cresson

Serena Qiu

In 1887, the American caricaturist Frank Beard made a proclamation in the pages of *The Chautauquan*: “This is the age of caricature. Never before in the known history of the world has caricature exerted the influence which it wields at the present day; almost every periodical reserves a place for the pencil of the caricaturist” (“The Age of Caricature” 206). The assuredness of this statement, underscored by the comfortable way in which Beard identified with caricaturing as a profession, is in striking contrast with the more doubtful tone that Charles Baudelaire adopted in his iconic text on satire, “De L’Essence du Rire” or “On the Essence of Laughter,” which appeared in 1855. Writing just thirty years prior, Baudelaire wished to claim the fecundity of his subject against the prevailing condition that caricature was not seen as a proper genre worthy of serious study by most institutions (132). The social and political waves that carried the discursive shift between Baudelaire and Beard are well documented in the scholarship of Martha Banta and Heather Campbell Coyle; the increasingly permissive technological and institutional conditions of mass-distributing illustration are analyzed by my colleagues throughout this catalogue. For the purposes of this paper, this turning tide is marked by the near-simultaneous appearance of three scholarly and canonizing histories of caricature in the nineteenth century—in England, Thomas Wright’s *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*, 1865; in France, Champfleury’s influential five-part *Histoire de la Caricature*, released between 1867 and 1880; and lastly in the United States, James Parton’s *Caricature and Other Comic Art in All Times and Many Lands*, 1877. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) experienced its own cartoon heyday some time even later in the yearly caricature shows between 1894 and 1896, which featured Academy students’ parodies of artwork exhibited at its Annual Exhibitions.

What then constituted the nineteenth-century notion of caricature that Baudelaire sought to contour and Beard to celebrate? In an earlier article written in 1884, Beard stated that caricature was in essence, “exaggeration for the sake of emphasis” (“Caricature” 134). Furthermore, that exaggeration played out in rendering appearances, as the caricaturist “is a phrenologist, a physiognomist, a physiologist. He knows that the traits of character which have naturally made this man an exponent of an idea...are not hidden in the recesses of his bosom, but are set forth by parallel physical characteristics” (134). Put another way, the caricaturist’s operation was typification and reduction, or making an example of his subject. A second quality of caricature for nineteenth-century discourse was its timeliness, its barb whetted by relevance. The American novelist Henry James summarized this with great concision in 1890: “[caricature is] criticism of the moment, at the moment” (1). Lastly and perhaps above all, caricature had to be funny in its ridicule. The causes and effects of laughter in relation to Baudelaire’s formulation will be explored later in this paper. Taking these qualities together, the idea of caricature emerges as a vehicle of rehearsing reactions to conditions experienced outside the drawn frame.

Among the many subjects speared by caricature in the nineteenth century, the art viewing audience was a frequent target of scrutiny and laughter. Perhaps the best known of these were Honoré Daumier’s captioned cartoons of the Paris Salons from the late 1850s, in which both beleaguered and contemptible audiences are delivered for mocking amusement in humor magazines like *Le Charivari* (James 30). An art audience’s follies were also the subject of the cover of *Life* in April of 1887, though the searing joke about the upper crust’s blinding self-preoccupation arrives more in the caption dialogue than in the drawing itself (fig. 1). This illustration appeared in 1887, the year that Beard made his proclamation, and incidentally the year *Harper’s Weekly* published an image titled “A Free Sunday at the Philadelphia [sic] Academy

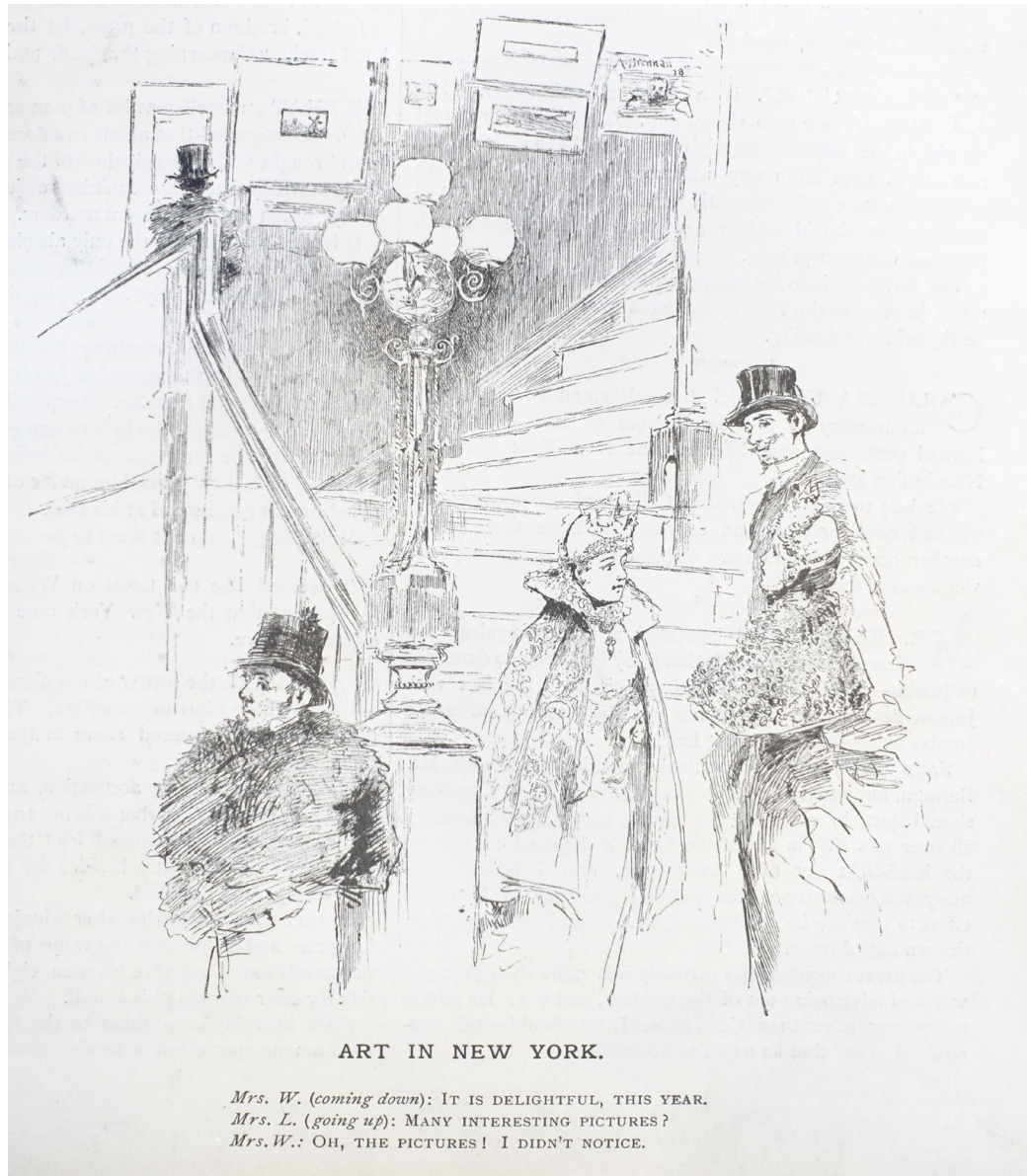


FIGURE 1
 "Art in New York," cover illustration,
Life, 21 Apr. 1887. Caption: "Art in
 New York. Mrs. W. (coming down): It is
 delightful, this year. Mrs. L. (going up):
 Many interesting pictures? Mrs. W.: Oh,
 the pictures! I didn't notice."

of Fine Arts" (page 8 in this catalogue). This lithograph showed a serenely gathered ambulatory crowd in the galleries of PAFA, with the visible exception of a stoop-backed man on the left who regards a painting in slack-jawed discomposure. While neglecting humor, "A Free Sunday" contained a trace of caricature's typifying effects in its depictions of crowd behavior and its invitation for scrutiny. Readers of *Le Charivari*, *Life* and *Harper's*, who might be future exhibition visitors, could readily pick up on these circulated tacit critiques about audience etiquette.

The same themes appeared in the caricature cartoons of William Emlen Cresson, particularly in the series *Visitors to an Exhibition* (before 1868), which gives a nod to Daumier's drawings but precedes their counterparts in *Life* and *Harper's* by decades. The suite includes eight pen and ink drawings, six of which feature dialogue. They orbit around interactions taking place between different visitor types in the galleries of PAFA, where Cresson was enrolled as a student of painting. Four drawings in the series depict mischievous mishaps when artists stand in the presence of their own work on exhibit. The four works selected for this exhibition instead skewer the behaviors and postures of more generalized audience members. Because Cresson's career ended abruptly with his early death in 1868—when the artist was just 25—there is a paucity of known facts regarding his work and his life. Other examples of his meager



The Gentleman from the Rural
District is reading aloud
all about "Death on the Pale
Horse in sonorous tones that
are heard in all the Rooms.

FIGURE 2
William Emlen Cresson, *Visitors to an Exhibition [The Gentleman from the Rural District]*, [before 1868], ink on paper, 7 x 4 1/4 in. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Pennsylvania Academy Purchase Fund, 2002.6.2.2. Caption: "The Gentleman from the Rural District is reading aloud all about "Death on the Pale Horse [sic] in sonorous tones that are heard in all the Rooms."

oeuvre in PAFA's collection demonstrate the artist's proclivity for painting portraits of character types—an inclination influenced by his Academy instructor, the portraitist Peter Frederick Rothermel ("A lover of art from his epitaph" 1). It is unfortunately not known whether his audience caricatures ever circulated outside of Cresson's immediate circle, or if he intended them for public display at all. However, the existence of these caricature cartoons suggests that Cresson found the subject of the art audience a pertinent one.

So while the drawings from *Visitors to an Exhibition* may not have reached a wide viewership during Cresson's lifetime, they were a response to the growing and changing nature of PAFA's audience in the nineteenth century. At the risk of defeating

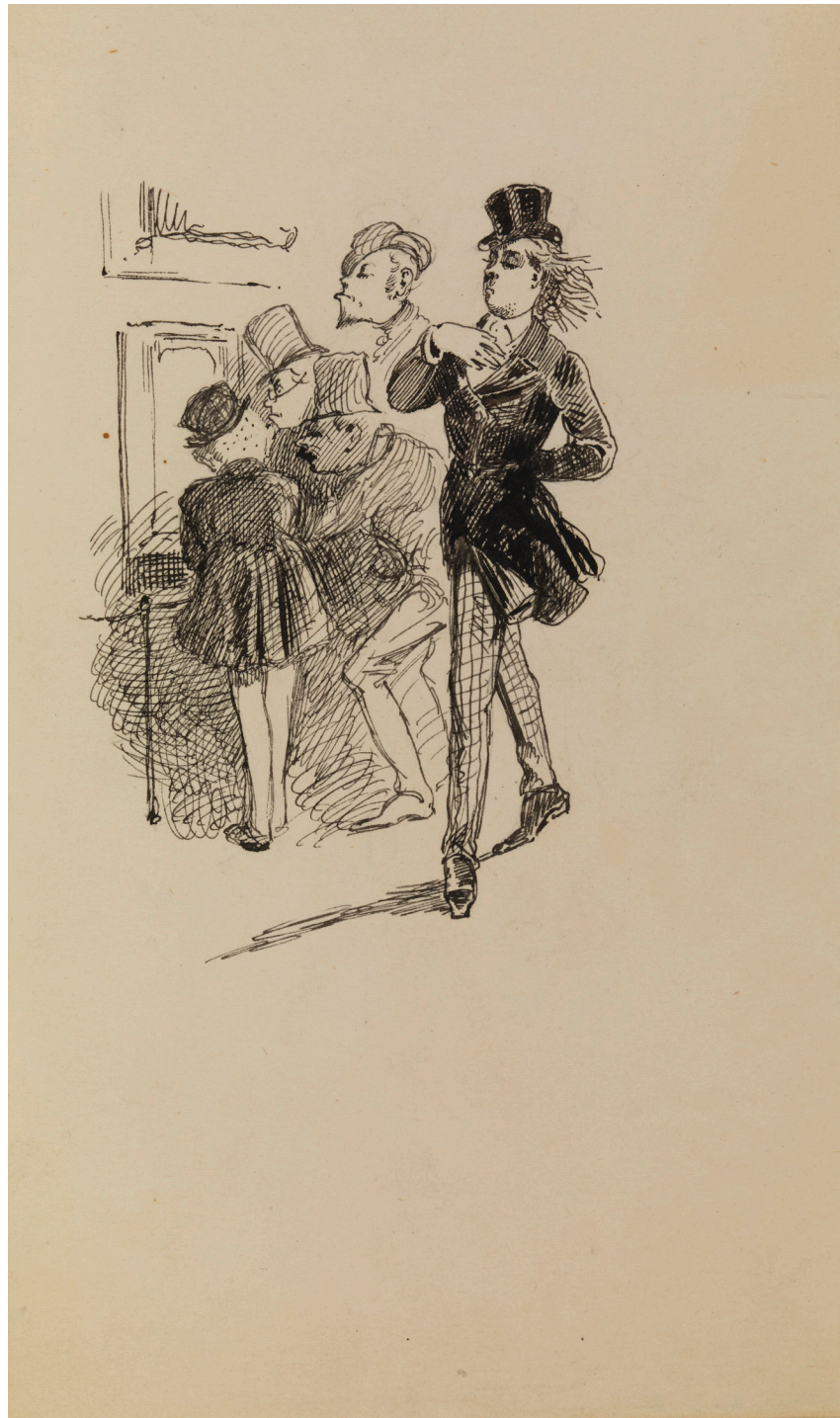


FIGURE 3

William Emlen Cresson, *Visitors to an Exhibition [Man walking by]*, [before 1868], ink on paper, 7 x 4 1/4 in. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Pennsylvania Academy Purchase Fund, 2002.6.2.8

the punch line by explaining Cresson's jokes, this paper seeks to explore how these four satirical cartoons function as catalysts for critical reflection about the behavioral dynamics of seeing art. I will also argue that in encouraging viewers to become more self-aware of their own and others' conduct as members of an art audience, these drawings had a secondary effect of normalizing behaviors.

In order to understand how the pointed humor of these drawings landed to such critical effect, it is worth thinking through first how the jokes were set up. Cresson sharpened his wit at a time when PAFA and like institutions were opening doors to growing audiences constituted by shifting demographics, as this exhibition and the other essays in this volume will suggest. A broadened audience carried with it anxiety

regarding how to behave around others and, even more so, how others might behave. Against this backdrop, Cresson's drawings could be seen as an attempt to make sense of codes of conduct among strangers at an art exhibition. They pinned down identity types by assigning bodily forms to perceivable behaviors and attitudes—such as the bewildered woman with a hair bow in disarray in *Gentleman from the Rural District*, and the haughty snob holding himself above his fellow audience members in the background of *Man walking by* (figs. 2-3). The drawings invited a viewer to search for recognition in these figures, to match the depicted typology with prior experience and knowledge of what is being represented. Because the very success of the joke depended on the legibility of these postures, Cresson needed to have selected feasibly recognizable subjects to target. On the flipside, in relating to the scenes depicted in Cresson's drawings, a viewer would feel affirmed that his or her own observations and experiences were shared by others.

Once the drawings established this foundation of common experience, they would prod viewers to scrutinize the pictures, comparing these scenes with their own memories. As a result, viewers would have detected exaggerations taken to absurd or comical ends—such as the ill-fitting coat of the gentleman from the rural district, clearly too small to enclose his paunch, and the disproportionately large bow tie that engulfs his neck. In *Man walking by*, the promenading dandy hangs his limp right hand upon his chest in a poised gesture of perpetual self-reference, meanwhile strutting so quickly that his hair and jacket flutter—all without turning a single head. Caricatures with both caption and image offer a way to confirm in text the scattered barbs of the visual comedy. The poorly clad country gentleman, for example, reads far too loudly from an exhibition catalogue, proving that he is unable to conjure moderation in either volume or dress. By sizing up these exaggerations of conduct and appearance, the viewer would have located the causes for ridicule, the avenues to a punch line. The sum of these represented what Cresson archly disapproved of in art audiences and simultaneously considered to be ludicrously funny. The drawings thus served as an invitation to join in on the judgment and laughter.

Considering the four works together, it becomes apparent that Cresson targeted two attitudes that exemplify the undesirable extremes of art audience behavior. The first takes the form of the philistine, whose attributes include cluelessness, flippancy, and narrow-mindedness. The country couple embodies confounded mystification and uncomprehending absorption in their expressions, dress, and activity. For the younger couple in *Lady*, comedy arises out of their opposing though equally narrow understandings of the same work of art (fig. 4). As the two stroll past a canvas, the woman remarks in a tone as airy as her feather hat and gauzy scarf that the painting looks like a "great big wretched daub" and surely must be the work of a novice. The caption reveals why her snub-nosed companion looks snubbed: she had insulted his favorite picture. Though the joke lands somewhat clumsily in two jerky steps, it recovers its elegance in its potential double critique of ignorance. On first read, a viewer might censure the woman for presuming that she knew better than the exhibition committee about what qualified as good painting and for her unreflective dismissal of a work. After a beat, a viewer might wonder if the woman is right after all, and the hapless man adores a truly awful painting.

The second attitude under attack is that of the pretentious elite, characterized by self-importance, vanity, and condescension. In addition to the figure of the self-parading coxcomb in *Man walking by*, several other figures are pictured in positions soliciting mockery. The pout-lipped man with upturned nose, like the man in the foreground, has eyes so lowered that a viewer would wonder if he is even able to see the artwork at all—or if perhaps he's there more to be seen than to see. The three figures closed in around a small rectangular painting stand in such intense postures of art appreciation that the activity seems to have deformed them. Their features bulge and haunches protrude. The scene of *Two men looking at paintings* appears to be a standoff



FIGURE 4

William Emlen Cresson, *Visitors to an Exhibition [Lady.]*, [before 1868], ink on paper, 7 x 4 1/4 in. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Pennsylvania Academy Purchase Fund, 2002.6.2.5. Caption: "Lady. Oh! do [sic] look here Augustus what a great big wretched daub! I wonder why they admitted such a beginner~ (N.B. It is Augustus' own pet picture.)"

between two small pictures and the two men huddled together conspiratorially (fig. 5). The intense gravity of the men's exchange feels disproportionately heavy compared to the diminutive canvases.

These little elbow-nudging jests carry larger implications regarding the etiquette of visiting museums. In pinpointing the laughable features in audience members, Cresson articulated a threshold between what he considered to be acceptable and unacceptable postures in art viewing. In other words, defining the wrong way to behave implied that there was a correct way to behave. And by inviting others to join the fun, Cresson assumed that these opinions would find other sympathizers. The punch lines of the drawings from *Visitors to an Exhibition* function because they play



FIGURE 5
William Emlen Cresson, *Visitors to an Exhibition [Two men looking at paintings]*, [before 1868], ink on paper, 7 x 4 1/4 in. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Pennsylvania Academy Purchase Fund, 2002.6.2.7

off newly forming, implicit codes of conduct for art viewing in public, and they take as their project the identification and mocking of possible transgressors. Furthermore, in asking its viewers to scrutinize and locate these misbehaviors so they can participate in the joke, Cresson's drawings create another threshold between the knowing and the unaware. The philistine and the pretentious elite lack the self-consciousness to recognize the manners appropriate to the situation. Part of the drawings' payoff resided in the viewer's satisfaction that he or she could recognize the social codes of decorum being blindly violated.

That humor and laughter were called upon as judgmental methods of patrolling behavior is not insignificant. As cultural historian Martha Banta rightly noted in her scholarship on caricature, "Humor is indelibly allied with callousness toward those who are not like ourselves" (11). In Cresson's drawings, humor was not only a response to a recognizable difference between those laughing and the butt of the joke—it also served to create and enforce that difference. Regarding the social dynamics of humor, Baudelaire in "De L'Essence du Rire" theorized laughter as a response to inappropriate behavior arising from feelings of superiority (137). Rather, it is the performance and assertion of superiority, predicated on that imbalance of knowledge between the initiated and the uninitiated. It thereby strengthened the divide between the poles of mannered and unmannered, correct and incorrect. But, Baudelaire made clear that this superiority is not absolute, for: "I said that laughter contained a symptom of failing; and, in fact, what more striking token of debility could you demand than

a nervous convulsion, an involuntary spasm comparable to a sneeze and prompted by the sight of someone else's misfortune?" (138) This point helps illuminate how Cresson's drawings allowed viewers not only to patrol the behaviors of others, but to monitor their own behavior. Each instance of laughing at another exhibition visitor's poor conduct in the caricature cartoons required the disavowal of that same conduct in oneself. By aligning with the well behaved through laughter—whether knowing or nervous—a viewer of *Visitors to an Exhibition* could create temporary distance between him- or herself and the offending postures. Through repeated exposure to these caricature cartoons of art audiences, one would have been able to internalize or habitualize certain judgments about how to act on future visits to exhibitions.

If anxiety could be detected in laughter, the same could be said of the jokes that prompted it. I would like to conclude with a reflection on the unresolved tensions motivating Cresson's drawings. Understanding the larger program of *Visitors to an Exhibition* to be that of reaffirming certain social and cultural dynamics by picturing their opposites for scrutiny and rejection, Cresson in fact gave permanence and attention to the very behaviors that his satire sought to stave off and marginalize. These caricature cartoons manifested their own dreads and anxieties. Perhaps, as the illustration of "A Free Sunday" in *Harper's Weekly* could also suggest, the art audience ultimately confounds homogenization.

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