

FOREWORD

Tonalism is a welcome addition to the terminology of art history. It adds a new dimension to our understanding of an unusually important era. The art which flourished throughout the Western world between the 1880's and the early 1900's is not only of extraordinary quality and remarkable diversity, but also of profound significance in the formation of contemporary consciousness. This convoluted period of time served as both the deathbed for a reluctantly departing nineteenth century and the cradle for the precocious arrival of our own.

The fact that the distinctive character of tonalism has been left unexplored for so long underlines the narrowness of the focus with which this complicated era has been perceived. The usual approach to this Post-Impressionist period concentrates primarily on the work of a half-dozen internationally known artists. The results of that approach have left us with a sincere appreciation for the spectacular achievements of those few individuals, but without a clear concept of this period as a totality. A comprehensive idea of the whole can be reached only by means of an open approach which recognizes the height, depth, breadth and contour of all that took place.

The existence of tonalism, with qualities so different from such simultaneous movements as Cloisonnism, Symbolism, Synthetism, Pointillism, and so on, underlines the difficulty inherent in developing a synthetic conception of this feverishly creative epoch. The fabric of such a conception must have the flexibility to stretch over the most obvious bulging muscles of Bergson, Cézanne, Gaudi, Sullivan and Van Gogh, as well as contract to touch the most subtle, sensitive membranes of Debussy, Dewing, Inness, Steichen and White.

The world of the tonalists was unique. In their special corner of subjective reality, scientific fact was overshadowed by poetic truth. Withdrawing from the hard edges of industrialization and the visual pollution of an urbanizing city-scape, they worked within the quietude of silent days and moonlit nights. Their subjects dwell in a distant border-state of consciousness, where motion has been suspended and energetic activity has evaporated into ethereal meditation. With perception as vaporous as a fog of colored feeling, they rendered images as tremulous as the murmuring vibrations of a mood.

Such a movement was too delicate to survive for very long. But while its gentle spirit was strong enough to withstand the inevitability of a less tranquil future, the tonalists composed some of the loveliest lyrics in the history of American art. Our humanity is indebted to their vision. Our capacity for responding to the infinite nuances in nature and in each other has been expanded by their sensibility.

F. LANIER GRAHAM
Chief Curator