

5095

Abbot Handerson Thayer, *My Children*
Frederick William MacMonnies, *Bacchante*

Dominic Carter: Artist Abbot Handerson Thayer, whose children modeled for this painting, attended the École des Beaux-Arts, an academy in Paris. This school rigorously trained its students to draw the human figure in the classical tradition of beauty that originated with the ancient Greeks. As the title tells us, in one sense this is a family portrait. But, in keeping with his training, Thayer also aimed for grander associations with European art. The elaborately carved frame recalls church altarpieces from the Renaissance, and the arrangement of the children echoes Renaissance paintings of the Virgin Mary flanked by saints or angels.

Mary, it so happens, was the name of Thayer's daughter in the middle of the picture; so here we have a contemporary American girl who might be seen as a symbol of spiritual and physical perfection.

One thing you might have noticed: The bottom of the painting doesn't look finished. As curator Barbara Gallati says, Thayer had a hard time completing his pictures and releasing them to buyers.

Barbara Gallati: He would finally very grudgingly give up the painting, in most cases. But then there are letters from Thayer to owners of his paintings saying, "Could I please have it back? I need to work on it a little bit longer."

Dominic Carter: The white marble sculpture to your left is by Frederick William MacMonnies, who also incorporated classical and Renaissance traditions into his work. This depiction of a Bacchante, a worshipper of Bacchus, the god of wine, caused something of a scandal when it went on display here at the Brooklyn Museum in 1914.

Barbara Gallati: There was something within American audiences that really rejected and resisted the idea of the public display of a nude figure, especially one that was having so much fun.