The magnetic lure that Coney Island exerted, over a period of 150 years, on an extraordinary array of artists who viewed this iconic place as a microcosm of the American experience is explored in *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861-2008*. Artists’ eloquent and diverse voices depict Coney Island from its beginnings as a watering hole for the wealthy, through its transformation into an entertainment mecca for the masses, to the closing of its last great twentieth-century amusement park, Astroland, following decades of urban decline. A world-famous resort and a national cultural symbol, Coney Island has inspired not only artists, but also musicians, novelists, poets, and filmmakers. Their visions and words trace the rise, decline, and struggle of the resort to be reborn, revealing how and why this place became part of Americans’ collective memory.

Coney Island’s fascinating history was shaped by the times—and it helped to shape the times. By grouping together familiar and unfamiliar works made around the same time, this exhibition elucidates the
ABOVE: William Merritt Chase, Landscape, near Coney Island, c. 1886, o/panel, 81/8 x 125/8. The Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, New York, gift of Mary H. Beeman to the Pruyn Family Collection.


The wealthy and adventurous had been vacationing at Coney Island, one of America’s earliest seaside resorts, in hotels since


the Coney Island House, located at what would become Neptune Avenue and West Sixth Street, was built in 1829. Among the prominent early visitors was the poet Walt Whitman, who recalled: "While living in Brooklyn [1836-50], I went regularly to Coney Island, at that time a long, bare unfrequented shore, which I had all to myself, and where I loved, after bathing, to race up and down the hard sand, and declaim Homer or Shakspeare [sic] to the surf and
seagulls by the hour.” In July 1845, passengers could pay a 12½-cent fare for a steamboat to a pier near what might be considered Coney Island’s first amusement, the Pavilion, “a Spacious Tent of Sails” covering a circular dance platform.

As the United States headed toward the conflict that would almost destroy it, Coney Island’s popularity grew. A horse tram to the resort opened in 1862, and a steam rail link followed in 1864. By the beginning of the Civil War, Coney Island had become a destination for a wide spectrum of tourists from the nation’s most congested city. Illustrations of the resort were already common in popular magazines, but Coney Island had yet to constitute a subject for fine art. Among the first leading painters to represent it was Sanford Robinson Gifford, who was associated with the Hudson River School, a loosely affiliated group of painters who extolled the landscape in national terms by seeing it as the spiritual embodiment of shared values.

The 1870s in fact witnessed a boom in tourism at Coney Island. Late nineteenth-century America experienced an extraordinary growth of recreation. In the decades after the Civil War, rapid urbanization and industrialization, along with the availability of time off as many city dwellers began to enjoy shorter work weeks, led to the belief that all sectors of society—from entrepreneurs to factory employees—needed a release valve from the stresses of modern life. While members of the middle class especially the upper class, who could afford...
long vacations, frequented the most refined seaside resorts—Newport in Rhode Island, Saratoga Springs in New York, Long Branch in New Jersey, Mount Desert Island in Maine — Coney Island in Brooklyn offered something for everyone, from the working class to the affluent.

From 1861 onward, advances continued to make Coney Island more physically and economically accessible, bringing a growing number of tourists, as well as an explosion of commercial diversions to entertain them. In particular, the opening of the first train to the resort in 1869 brought a continuous flow of middle- and working-class “day-trippers” from New York City, so that by 1880 Sunday visitors numbered over 100,000. Published that year, Percy’s Pocket Dictionary of Coney Island declared, “The daily congestion of thousands of people of varying tastes has led to the establishment by speculators of any number of diversions not ordinarily attainable at the seashore.” As Coney Island became a site for mixed forms of amusement, those who believed that contemplating nature was morally uplifting criticized its panoply of pleasurable pursuits.

Some of these pursuits are captured in a series of canvases by the English-born Samuel S. Carr, who lived in Brooklyn and was one of the many immigrant painters who chose Coney Island as the setting for an exploration of the changing landscape of leisure in America. From around 1879 to 1881, Carr painted boldly colored beach scenes, in which sculpted, fashionable figures appear to have been repositioned in stage-like tableaux vivants lit by a bright sunlight. Carr’s Beach Scene celebrates the rise of commercial entertainment—tin-type photography, beach toys, donkey rides, and puppet shows in competition with the natural drama of the surf for the crowd’s at-
tention. Only one couple, in the background at right, faces the sea. In the center of the painting, a Victorian family poses stiffly for an itinerant tintype photographer. Tintypes became popular in the United States during the Civil War, especially for outdoor commercial photography, because they were both faster to produce and more resilient than earlier photographic methods. Carr presents an early example of what will become a recurring motif in leisure imagery: an artist recording tourists recording themselves.

Carr’s scene subtly links childhood play to consumerism. In the foreground, three finely dressed little girls play in the sand with a toy shovel and pail that, according to Percy’s, could be bought for “from ten to twenty cents.” On the left, a dense crowd of adults and children gather before a portable puppet theater, probably featuring the characters of Mr. Punch and his wife, Judy. Another characteristic of Coney Island imagery throughout much of the resort’s history is introduced in his beach scene: a surprisingly heterogeneous crowd—a mix of families, couples, and singles that encouraged public opportunities for friendship and flirtation.

William Merritt Chase created varied
views of Coney Island that owe a stylistic
debt to his sojourns abroad and especially
his recent studies in Munich, then an inter-
national center for artistic innovation. 
While Chase's later travels to Paris would
make him among America's leading
Impressionists, the young artist already as-
pired to a cosmopolitan style, but increas-
ingly used it to express an American
identity. Working in New York, Chase
chose Coney Island as a subject. The liveli-
ness of the site suited his dashing brush-
work, which communicated the energy and
architecture of the resort.

Chace's Landscape, near Coney Island at
first glance appears to depict two people—
a graceful figure dressed in white and a
nearly hidden companion in brown—in a
remote, grassy refuge, far from any urban
area. They are absorbed in a private world
of natural beauty. But the unexpected sil-
houettes of the famous tower and, to the
left of it, a shockingly huge elephant on the
horizon reveal that they are in fact near
America's Playground. The whimsical 122-
foot-high Elephant Hotel opened at West
Twelfth Street and Surf Avenue in August
1884. Constructed of wood covered in
sheet tin, it went up in flames in 1896, a
disaster spectacle that attracted onlookers
and press coverage.

Painters, mindful of their clients' gen-
teel sensibilities, omitted the seedy side of
Coney Island—political corruption, prostit-
tution, gambling, and horse racing—that
led moralizers and revelers alike to christen
it "Sodom by the Sea." At the Coney Island
Jockey Club, visitors could gamble on
horses every day in the summer, making
the resort the center of American Thor-
oughbred racing until the New York state
legislature criminalized bookmaking in 1908. Later amusement rides would perpetuate the excitement of horse racing, from George C. Tilyou's Steeplechase Park, with its eponymous mechanical steeplechase race, to the carousel horses so memorably captured by Reginald Marsh.

Coney Island was a magnet for diverse holiday revelers. Yet the swelling crowds were miniscule compared with those still to come. New trolley lines to Coney Island in 1895 would make day trips quicker and cheaper. The innovative, gated amusement parks born in the mid-1890s would transform Coney Island and forever change America's ideas about the enormous commercial potential of mass leisure. Already tourists from every class and culture came to Coney Island, and social commentators from abroad recognized it as a touchstone of broader issues of American life.

—For annotation see Robin Jaffe Frank's essay "Down at Coney Isle,' 1861-1894" in the accompanying exhibition catalogue from which this article has been adapted.