

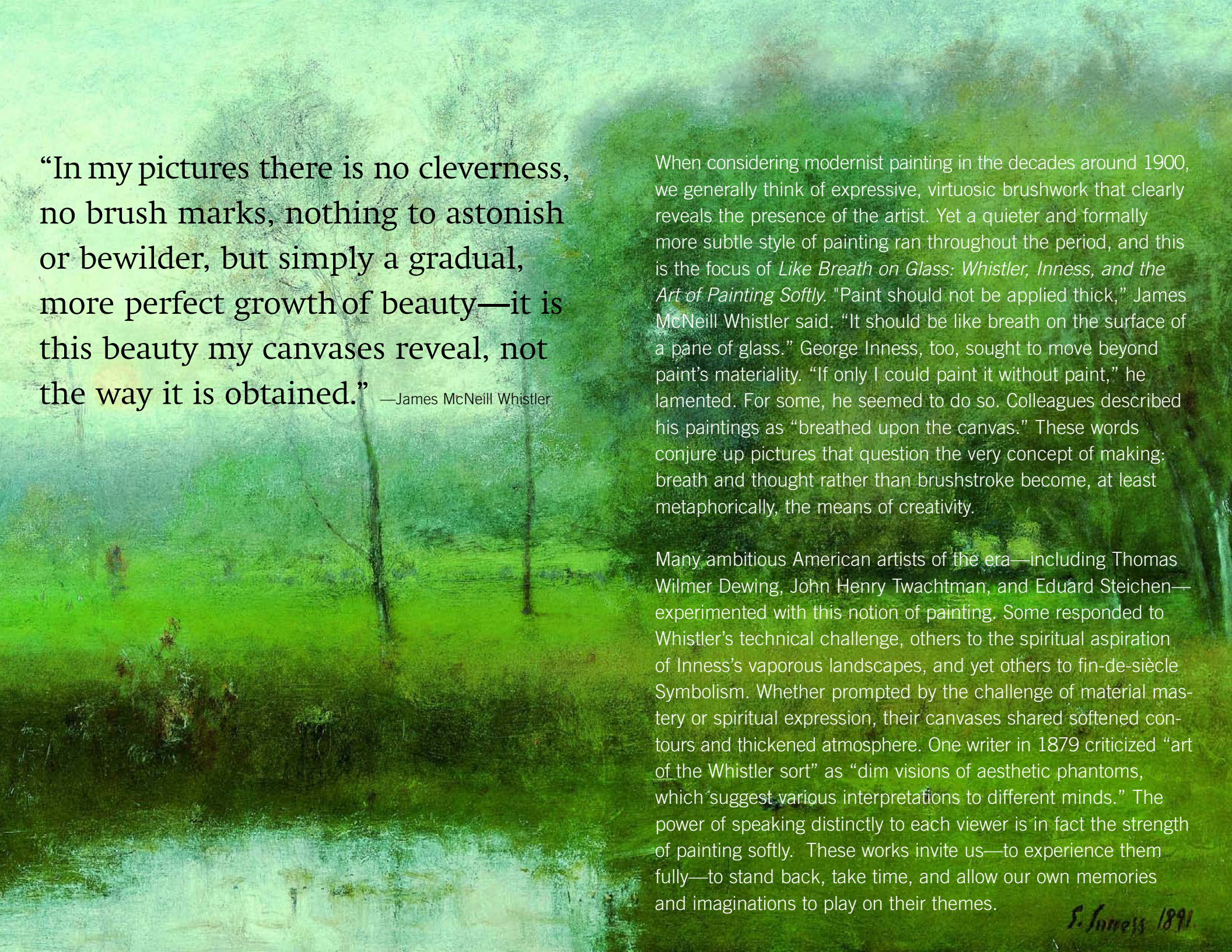
Cover: Detail of *Summer*, c. 1890,
by Thomas Wilmer Dewing (Smithsonian
American Art Museum, Washington D.C.
Gift of William T. Evans); Inside: Detail of
Summer, Montclair (New Jersey Landscape),
1891, by George Inness (Collection of
Mr. and Mrs. Frank Martucci)

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Like Breath on Glass

Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly

THE CLARK



“In my pictures there is no cleverness, no brush marks, nothing to astonish or bewilder, but simply a gradual, more perfect growth of beauty—it is this beauty my canvases reveal, not the way it is obtained.” —James McNeill Whistler

When considering modernist painting in the decades around 1900, we generally think of expressive, virtuosic brushwork that clearly reveals the presence of the artist. Yet a quieter and formally more subtle style of painting ran throughout the period, and this is the focus of *Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly*. “Paint should not be applied thick,” James McNeill Whistler said. “It should be like breath on the surface of a pane of glass.” George Inness, too, sought to move beyond paint’s materiality. “If only I could paint it without paint,” he lamented. For some, he seemed to do so. Colleagues described his paintings as “breathed upon the canvas.” These words conjure up pictures that question the very concept of making: breath and thought rather than brushstroke become, at least metaphorically, the means of creativity.

Many ambitious American artists of the era—including Thomas Wilmer Dewing, John Henry Twachtman, and Eduard Steichen—experimented with this notion of painting. Some responded to Whistler’s technical challenge, others to the spiritual aspiration of Inness’s vaporous landscapes, and yet others to fin-de-siècle Symbolism. Whether prompted by the challenge of material mastery or spiritual expression, their canvases shared softened contours and thickened atmosphere. One writer in 1879 criticized “art of the Whistler sort” as “dim visions of aesthetic phantoms, which suggest various interpretations to different minds.” The power of speaking distinctly to each viewer is in fact the strength of painting softly. These works invite us—to experience them fully—to stand back, take time, and allow our own memories and imaginations to play on their themes.

S. Inness 1891