

# CHAUNCEY STILLMAN, WETHERSFIELD, and a Very Personal Legacy

**W**hen I was a teenager, I often received Holy Communion in the private chapel of a country estate 95 miles north of New York City, watched over by one of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's devotional paintings.

The Spanish master's *Madonna and Child* (1660–70) hung opposite the wooden altar, on which rested a large 16th-century Swabian crucifix. What has fixed itself in my memory, aside from the excruciating intimacy of this chapel, was how very young Murillo's Virgin Mary looked. Robed in burnished red and brown, she didn't look much older than me, and I was 13 at the time. What's more, she looked a tiny bit defiant, surly even. The Christ child was a bonny baby, but he had a mature look and piercing eyes, brown like his mother's — a trick of chiaroscuro, though I didn't know that at the time. He looked straight at me. His modest mother never did, even though I willed her to look straight at me too as I perched on my gilded chair, exposed, with no pew or pillar to hide behind.

I confess I never much liked that Murillo and, until recently, have felt ambivalent about Marian imagery in general. All of this is a good thing. Art is there to awaken us, and the earlier it does so, the better.



(ABOVE) The drawing room as it once appeared, with the Toulouse-Lautrec on the far wall and the two Cassatts on either side of the fireplace ■ (RIGHT) BARTOLOMÉ ESTEBAN MURILLO (1617–1682), *Madonna and Child*, 1660–70, oil on canvas, 49 x 37 in., photo courtesy Wethersfield Foundation





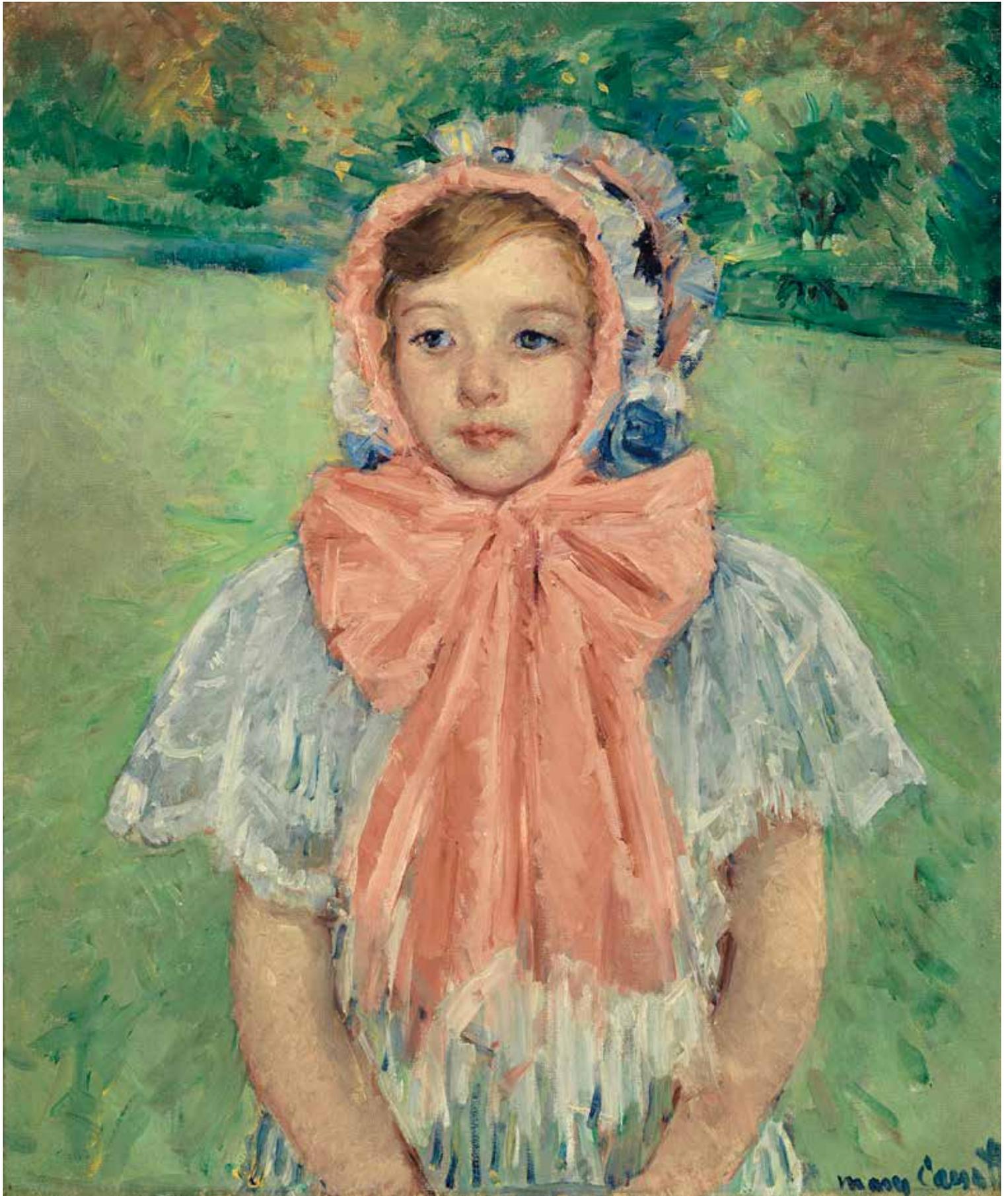
**HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC** (1864–1901), *L'enfant au chien, fils de Madame Marthe et la chienne Pamela-Taussat*, 1900, oil on canvas, 51 1/4 x 28 in., sold at Christie's New York for \$1,207,500 on May 15, 2017

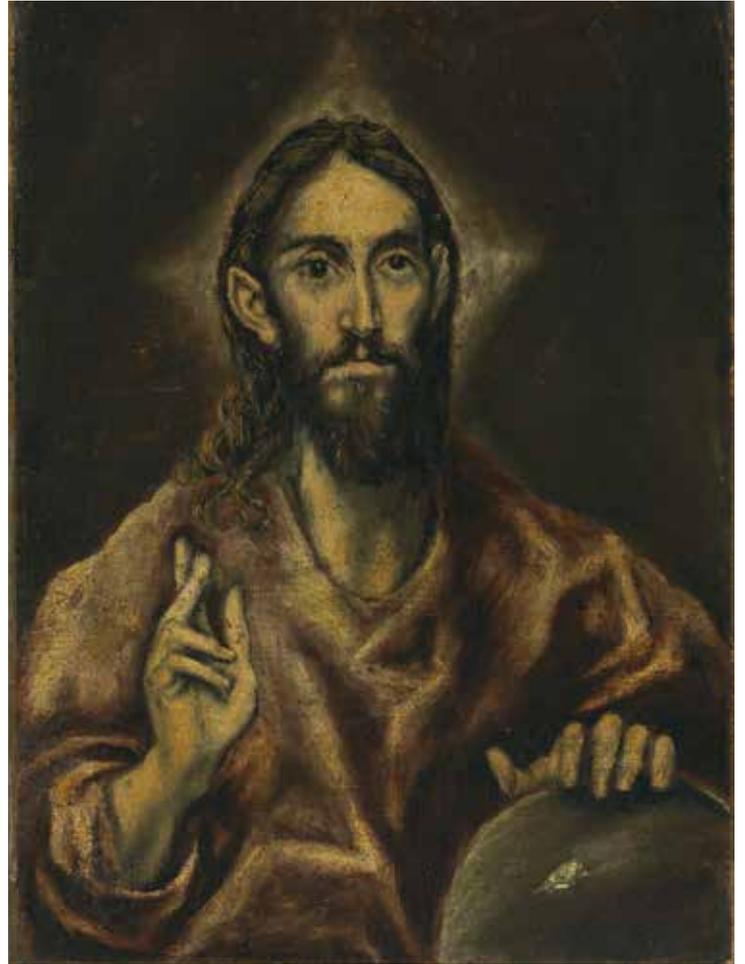
The chapel was located in the home of the philanthropist and collector Chauncey Devereux Stillman (1907–1989), a close friend of my late father and godfather to my older brother. Chauncey's grandfather James Jewett Stillman headed the bank that ultimately became Citigroup. His house in Dutchess County, Wethersfield Farm, is a neo-Georgian mansion, designed in 1939 by the architect Bancel LaFarge and envisioned by Stillman as a home for both his family and his beloved art collection. The house is set in breathtaking natural surroundings that were, for a devout Roman Catholic like Chauncey, an intimation of the divine.

The house contained major works by such masters as Ingres, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Cassatt, and Sargent. Also represented was Gilbert Stuart, one of whose more than 130 portraits of George Washington (this one was the Vaughan version) hung in Chauncey's bedroom, which is why I never saw it. My encounter with these artworks during my regular summer stays at Wethersfield — first when I was too young to remember them, then as a teenager visiting from England — fermented in me a formative and lively dialogue with fine art. My visits normalized art, made it feel as natural as the pure air up in Chauncey's 1,200-acre hilltop estate, which surveys the Catskill Mountains to the west and the Litchfield Hills to the east. It was a gift of sorts, a cultural legacy. But I only realized this when a recent chronic illness caused me to look back on my childhood and to question whether I had transmitted any kind of cultural or moral legacy — any road map for living — to my own young sons.

At Wethersfield, you couldn't miss the Toulouse-Lautrec, painted in 1900. Entitled *L'Enfant au chien, fils de Madame Marthe et la chienne Pamela-Taussat*, this huge portrait of a boy in a sailor suit, standing with a black dog almost as big as he is, hung at the far end of the panelled drawing room. Like Murillo's Virgin Mary, this boy mesmerized me. For a start, he seemed to be wearing red lipstick, and there was a hint of a curl forming on his forehead. He looked lonely, standing there against a swirling sky, he and his dog gazing in opposite directions.

I was 13, staying at Wethersfield for the first time since immigrating to the U.K. following my American father's death when I was 5, and my British mother's four years later. I had nothing in common with this old-fashioned sailor boy. Yet I clocked him whenever I entered that drawing room, where portraits by Pietro Annigoni of Stillman's two daughters and two Cassatt portraits also hung. Who knows what Toulouse-Lautrec's sailor made of the night "Uncle" Chauncey, as he was known to me, asked my sister, then 14, to play something on the grand piano after dinner. When she declined, he asked if either of us could read some poetry. I offered to do so. Chauncey passed me Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1816), which I had never seen before. I sounded the X of Xanadu as X-ray, and, feeling Chauncey and my sister wince, stumbled through the rest of the poem. When I think





(OPPOSITE PAGE) MARY CASSATT (1844–1926), *Girl in a Bonnet Tied with a Large Pink Bow*, 1909, 26 3/4 x 22 1/2 in., sold at Christie's New York for \$2,287,500 on May 23, 2017 ■ (ABOVE LEFT) PONTORMO (Jacopo Carucci, 1494–1557), *Portrait of a Halberdier*, 1528–30, oil on panel transferred to canvas, 37 1/2 x 28 3/4 in., sold by Christie's to the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, in 1989 for \$35.2 million ■ (ABOVE RIGHT) STUDIO OF DOMÉNIKOS THEOTOKÓPOULOS, called EL GRECO (1541–1614), *Christ in Benediction*, oil on canvas, 14 3/8 x 10 3/8 in., sold at Christie's New York for \$75,000 on April 27, 2017 ■ (BELOW) The Gloriette, with Pietro Annigoni's decorations

of the Toulouse-Lautrec portrait, I think of *Kubla Khan*, and I blush. I also see that, by initiating me into a sort of neo-18th-century Parisian salon, Chauncey was sharing his passion for the arts and thereby bequeathing me something of lasting emotional and cultural value.

“Art is all, at some level, both a mnemonic and a form of memory,” the British novelist and critic A.S. Byatt has written. That seems to be true for Tara Shafer, Chauncey’s granddaughter. Shafer is a trustee of the Wethersfield Foundation, the roots of which lie in the Homeland Foundation her grandfather established in 1938; last year it was renamed to reflect its new emphasis on the Wethersfield Estate. “Of all the paintings in the house, and when I became aware of them I was very young, it’s the Toulouse-Lautrec which most resonates with me,” Shafer says. “I remember sitting, as a little girl, trying to imagine what the story of this boy was. There was something slightly wistful in him.”

For my part, the Wethersfield paintings transport me back, as vividly as Proust’s madeleine, to intense emotions, none more so than Pontormo’s *Portrait of a Halberdier* (1528–30), the Mannerist masterpiece that overlooked us as Chauncey, my sister, and I took cocktails or digestifs in





(TOP) The front façade of Wethersfield ■ (BELOW) The Palladian arch in the garden



the Gloriette, his ballroom-cum-gallery-cum-Sistine Chapel. When I think of that painting, what I remember are the camellias Chauncey picked from a flower bed before evening drinks and ceremoniously presented to my sister and me. I remember how taken I was, aged 16, by the silver bowl placed on the table in front of the Halberdier, beside a champagne bottle and our glasses. It was filled with still more of those rose-like flowers. I associate camellias, and Pontormo's Halberdier, with affection and a feeling of intense, if fleeting, happiness. To see the Halberdier today — it now resides permanently at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles — is to go down memory lane, to take what the British critic Frank Kermode described as “deep, vertiginous mnemonic plunges.”

I definitely did not like the neo-Baroque fresco of nudes frolicking in the woods that decorated the Gloriette's vaulted ceiling. As with the classical statue of a naked man whose gown failed to cover his modesty — one of several dotting Chauncey's woodland wilderness — I didn't know which way to look. The Gloriette's decorations were created by Stillman's Italian friend Pietro Annigoni (1901–1988), who remains best known for his silvery 1955 portrait of the young Queen Elizabeth II. In one of the Gloriette's portico frescoes, Chauncey himself

appears in the foreground while Annigoni can be seen, arms raised, ranting in the undergrowth. A man stands between them, the estate manager, apparently. This scene still has a comic-strip appeal, and gave me something to talk about over our lunch of heirloom tomatoes and farm-fresh corn.

As for Pontormo's Halberdier, he was the same age as me but, again, we had nothing else in common: he was a foot soldier dressed in puffy gold and red silk, after all. Yet, rather like Murillo's Madonna, there was something about the boy's face that drew me in. While the Madonna possesses what the British critic John Ruskin identified in Murillo's depictions of the Holy Mother as “mortal features” cast in a “light of holy loveliness” and “unfathomable love,” the Halberdier was psychologically penetrating, or, in teenage parlance, he got under my skin. He seemed arrogant. Only as an adult did I learn that the sitter is believed to be either Duke Cosimo de' Medici or the young nobleman Francesco Guardi, whose inheritance was imperilled by the Siege of Florence. For either lad, entitlement and indeed arrogance were bound up with their high social status.

Tara Shafer sees her youthful responses to her grandfather's collection as testimony to the fundamentally democratic nature of art: “I remember sitting in the light-filled living room, the light that poured in no matter the season, setting off the two Cassatt portraits on either side of the fireplace and the Annigoni portraits of my mum and my aunt. I understood beauty in a context; the common thread with all the pictures and portraits in that house was that it was possible to understand the perspective of beauty in a way that is universal... If you are exposed to art and beauty, in whatever form and no matter where, it trains your eye to try to always look for the beauty in things; you don't have to be in a formal dining room at Wethersfield with fine art all around. You can find beauty wherever you are.”

This is a humanist ideology, or a tenet of Christian faith, depending on your frame of reference. (Chauncey's worldview was decidedly Christian, of course.) Above the door of his chapel, so small you could miss it, hung *Christ in Benediction*, then attributed to El Greco but now to his studio. In this familiar image redolent of El Greco's earlier Byzantine icons, Christ raises one hand in benediction and rests the other on a globe-like sphere. I've spent a lot of time trying to remember that painting in situ, but instead recalled other things about Wethersfield: the bright orange carp in the pond on the terrace; Chauncey cooing for his peacocks; carriage rides through the woods; riding horses together; Chauncey's boots out of his stirrups and me clinging to my horses's mane as we galloped through open countryside; the vista near the swimming pool that stretched out from the Palladian arch in the Italianate gardens to the hills beyond.

Musing on how it was to grow up amid rare artworks and classical architecture, Tara Shafer says, “I think I was trained without being formally trained.” To a lesser degree, I think I was, too. I cannot think of a better legacy to leave any child. ●

**Epilogue:** As a youngster, I simply had no idea how valuable Chauncey's paintings were. In 1989, Pontormo's *Portrait of a Halberdier* was sold by his executors to the J. Paul Getty Museum for \$35.2 million. Last year, 16 more important artworks from Chauncey's collection were sold at Christie's in New York City and London. Cassatt's *Girl in a Bonnet Tied with a Large Pink Bow* fetched \$2.2 million, and Toulouse-Lautrec's painting of the boy and his dog \$1.2 million. Among the other artists whose works were sold: James Edward Buttersworth (\$271,500), Lorenzo di Credi (\$667,500), Edgar Degas (\$22,500), Francesco Francia (\$1,447,500), Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (£173,000), Nicolas Lancret (\$1,207,500), Giovanni Pietro Rizzoli (\$56,250), Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (\$125,000), John Singer Sargent (\$523,500), and Gilbert Stuart (\$1,327,500).

**Information:** Located in Amenia, New York, 95 miles north of Manhattan, Wethersfield is open to the public, who can visit the main house, gardens, carriage house, and farm. For details, see [wethersfieldgarden.org](http://wethersfieldgarden.org).

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