MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH FOR SEPTEMBER, 1945

WILLIAM GLACKENS, CHEZ MOUQUIN

The dazzling era of beautiful Lillian Russell of "Diamond Jim" Brady, the pinched-in waist, the luxuriant pompadour, the spreading walrus mustache--this is the extravagant era Glackens painted in Chez Mouquin. An immensely popular restaurant during its heyday, it was a mecca for connoisseurs of French cooking, customs, wines, and waiters. Of the two Mouquin restaurants, the more famous, the more thoroughly French in atmosphere was the one on Sixth Avenue at 28th Street, at that time uptown New York! Its elegant dining halls and its specialties, snails a la Parisienne, bouillabaisse (a rich fish chowder,) a fine cellar with nearly one million bottles of excellent vintage wines, made it the talk of the town. The café on the ground floor with its white and gold decorations, luxurious leather-cushioned seats, glittering lights, and mirrored walls was perhaps most popular. At 10 o'clock the orchestra deserted the formal upper dining rooms and came down to the more intimate setting of the café where it became a custom for friends to meet at this hour and enjoy the music and wine. Newsmen, artists, men around town, and Bohemians "of the right sort," of course, flocked here, and Glackens, who enjoyed a glass of fine wine as much as the next, often joined the crowd. This couple whom he has pictured in the café appear enthralled by the music --maybe a Strauss waltz, all the rage at that time. How barren, cold and lifeless the photograph of the café seems beside the painting.
His life-long friend, Guy Pène du Bois, said of William Glackens that he had two real passions, painting and fishing, and that there was some question as to which was the recreation. Glackens never talked shop in the usual highbrow way with big, sententious words to impress the artist and awe the layman—he was sincere, quiet, humble before his work. He was a realist, a dispassionate observer of the life around him; again quoting du Bois, "he is undoubtedly a portrayer of life's most pleasant occupations, of the picnic spirit."

This is an early work, painted in 1905, after his initial start as a magazine illustrator, before his color was lightened by his study of Renoir, and when he was still under Manet's influence. The choice of subject alone is typical of his interest in the French painter, (Bar at the Folies Bergères by Manet from the Courtauld Collection in London shows how much Glackens was influenced), but there are other revealing details such as the manipulation of paint, the fine modulations of grey in the cloak carelessly, beautifully thrown over the foreground chair, and the fragile freshness in the modeling of the woman's face. There is some disparity between her delicacy and the ruddy realism typically American, of the man's face and character, yet this dissolves before the solidity and massiveness of the work, qualities slow to reveal themselves. By judicious use of the mirrored background and by slight touches of color, Glackens with only two figures gives the idea of a crowded, noisy cafe, whereas Christy with all his fussy figures can't fill the page with that pulsating life.