The paintings, watercolors, and prints in “Taxing Visions: Financial Episodes in Late Nineteenth-Century American Art” explore an economy in turmoil. A series of equity and commodity crashes—“panics”—in 1857, 1869, 1873, and 1893 helped to produce financial catastrophes both national and personal. Americans living comfortably in the middle or upper classes, such as the couple portrayed by Charles Knoll in *Panic of 1869* (1869), found themselves caught up in their society’s rampant culture of speculation only to face ruin overnight. Others already less fortunate, including the woman in Alfred Kappes’ compelling *Tattered and Torn* (1886), existed at the margins of the economy due to race, ethnicity, or inability to adapt to a rapidly industrializing and increasingly consumer-oriented economy.

As producers of hand-crafted luxury goods, American artists could sympathize with the struggles of the artisan at the dawn of a more mechanized age. However, art is an intellectual as well as physical labor, and artists considered themselves to be white-collar professionals whose peers included lawyers, doctors, and managers of railroads, banks, or factories—the very ranks of businessmen who collected art. Because of their unique position straddling the laboring and professional classes, often impoverished but frequently socializing with the wealthy who bought their work, American artists in the late 19th century had a unique position from which to view the financial misery of their age, and they addressed fiscal crises with a mixture of reportage, protest, humor, and hope.
Making Connections

After visiting “Taxing Visions,” explore The Huntington’s permanent collection in the Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art to find paintings that provide striking visual and thematic comparisons. Below are some ways to compare.

The Artist and the Economy

David Gilmour Blythe’s *Art Versus Law* (1859–60) in “Taxing Visions” is a satirical look at an artist’s own failure to make ends meet. The hapless artist, a self-portrait of Blythe, has returned to his attic studio to find that he has been evicted. Blythe’s depiction of the shabby figure borders on caricature, suggesting that artists may not be very hygienic. He also adds humorous details in the signage that directs future tenants to apply “way” downstairs. The wit in the work belies its serious subject matter—the artist is now presumably homeless and removed from his place of work.

William Merritt Chase’s *The Inner Studio, Tenth Street* (1882), in The Huntington’s collection (Scott Galleries, Room 2), features an opulent artistic environment, full of eye-catching antique furniture, objects, and fabrics from all over the world that are meant to convey Chase’s fine aesthetic sensibilities and worldly success. In the center of the painting an unidentified man—perhaps a potential buyer—examines a painting in a gilded frame. The work, with its loose, impressionistic technique and portrayal of a wide variety of materials and textures, is a contrast to Blythe’s straightforward realism, demonstrating the pluralism of artistic style in the late 19th century.

The Price of War

Eastman Johnson’s *Sugaring Off* (ca. 1865) in The Huntington’s collection (Scott Galleries, Room 9) depicts the return to traditional, community-based activity in New England after the Civil War. In the foreground, a veteran dressed in blue and wearing a Union Army cap flirts with two women, signifying the resumption of youthful pleasures after the horrors of war.

The veteran in Johnson’s *The Pension Claim Agent* (1867) in “Taxing Visions” is not so fortunate. He displays his amputated leg to the government employee sent to verify his claim of a pension for his service and injury. The work is a poignant reminder of the literal cost of the war, as the veteran “traded” his leg for money in the war’s aftermath.
The Worth of Goods

**Job Lot Cheap (1878)** in “Taxing Visions” and The Huntington’s **After the Hunt** (1883) by William Michael Harnett (Scott Galleries, Room 2) contain collections of old, worn objects painted in a strikingly realistic style. However, in **Job Lot Cheap**, the motley assortment of tattered books has been put together by a wholesaler who hopes to sell them to an enterprising merchant. A deep economic depression had started in 1873, and the painting seems to tell of a bookseller’s desperate need to sell anything for income, as these trashed tomes with torn bindings and ripped pages could scarcely have been considered desirable commodities in the best of times.

Although the implements of the hunt in The Huntington’s painting are also patinated and aged, they are not placed into an economic context but instead seem well-loved by their owner and worn through years of use. Harnett’s interest in this work seems as much about “fooling the eye” with his deceptive realism as it is to create an evocative tension between the natural and the man-made. He also seems interested in the juxtaposition of the past and the present by contrasting the freshly killed game with the vintage rifle, horn, hat, and other objects created by skilled craftsmen in a bygone era.

**Book**

“Taxing Visions: Financial Episodes in Late Nineteenth-Century American Art” is accompanied by a richly illustrated 80-page catalog of the same title by Leo G. Mazow and Kevin M. Murphy, published by Penn State University Press with 58 color and six black-and-white illustrations. The book ($24.95, softcover) is available at The Huntington’s Bookstore & More, 626-405-2142, e-mail: bookstore@huntington.org.

**Book Group Series**

**Classic American Fiction**
(Wednesdays) Jan. 26, Feb. 23, March 23, April 27
11 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

**Lecture**

“Artful Tales of War and Reconciliation: American Painting, 1865 to 1876”
Thurs., Feb. 3, 2010, 6:30 p.m.

**Curator Tour**
Thurs., Feb. 24, 4:30–5:30 p.m.

“Taxing Visions: Financial Episodes in Late Nineteenth-Century American Art” was co-organized by the Palmer Museum of Art of Pennsylvania State University and the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, Calif. This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. The Huntington’s installation is supported by the Susan and Stephen Chandler Exhibition Endowment and funds from Steve Martin for exhibitions of American art.

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**The Worth of Goods**