Public Abstract

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An American artist best known for a 1919 watercolor series that depicts scenes of the First World War, Claggett Wilson's varied oeuvre includes watercolors, oil paintings, stage sets, costumes, murals, and decorative interiors. Through skilled social-networking, self-promotion, and a willingness to reach outside the discipline boundaries of fine art, Wilson successfully navigated the interwar art world, securing exhibitions, garnering critical favor, and attracting prominent commissions and benefactors. Whether rendering the theater of operations or crafting spaces within which inhabitants performed fashioned identities, his decades-long career was heavily influenced by his involvement within various New York art and theater scenes and his familiarity with contemporaneous queer culture. This dissertation reconstructs the life of this now-forgotten artist, calls attention to his performative stance as ideal soldier and aesthete, and provides a framework for situating his work. Additionally, this dissertation offers close studies of Wilson's most discussed bodies of work, which include war scenes, paintings of Basque sailors, and the mural program and interior design of Ten Chimneys in Genesee Depot, Wisconsin. Wilson's art was at once conservative in its upholding of certain national, racial, and class values, while at the same time sexually rebellious, pushing against contemporary norms of bourgeois respectability. His visual humor employed a range of references, from historical aesthetic styles to contemporary racial stereotypes and political events, and spoke to particular interpretive communities that became increasingly narrow as his artistic projects moved from the New York art scene to midwestern domestic interiors and back.