3.10: American art to World War II

American art to World War II c. 1890 - 1945

From the avant-garde to the everyday, American artists responded to rapid changes before WWII.

American Realism

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American Realism was a style in art, music and literature that depicted contemporary social realities and the lives and everyday activities of ordinary people. The movement began in literature in the mid-19th century, and became an important tendency in visual art in the early 20th century. Whether a cultural portrayal or a scenic view of downtown New York City, American realist works attempted to define what was real.

In the U.S. at the beginning of the 20th century a new generation of painters, writers and journalists were coming of age. Many of the painters felt the influence of older U.S. artists such as Thomas Eakins, Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, James McNeill Whistler, Winslow Homer, Childe Hassam, J. Alden Weir, Thomas Pollock Anshutz, and William Merritt Chase. However they were interested in creating new and more urbane works that reflected city life and a population that was more urban than rural in the U.S. as it entered the new century.

From the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, the United States experienced huge industrial, economic, social and cultural change. A continuous wave of European immigration and the rising potential for international trade brought increasing growth and prosperity to America. Through art and artistic expression (through all mediums including painting, literature and music), American Realism attempted to portray the exhaustion and cultural exuberance of the figurative American landscape and the life of ordinary Americans at home. Artists used the feelings, textures and sounds...
of the city to influence the color, texture and look of their creative projects. Musicians noticed the quick and fast-paced nature of the early 20th century and responded with a fresh and new tempo. Writers and authors told a new story about Americans; boys and girls real Americans could have grown up with. Pulling away from fantasy and focusing on the now, American Realism presented a new gateway and a breakthrough—introducing modernism, and what it means to be in the present. The Ashcan School also known as The Eight and the group called Ten American Painters created the core of the new American Modernism in the visual arts.

Thomas Eakins, *The Champion Single Sculls (Max Schmitt in a Single Scull)*

by Meg Floryan

Thomas Eakins, *The Champion Single Sculls (Max Schmitt In A Single Scull)*, 1871, oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 46 1/4" (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

More often than not, an art museum is designed to inspire quiet contemplation, encouraging visitors to stand before a painting and reflect on a work’s gravity and significance. In these somewhat contradictory private-moments-in-public-settings, many elevate these meditations to a more personal level, relating to the artwork within their own frameworks of experience and aesthetic taste. For these individuals, *The Champion Single Sculls (Max Schmitt In A Single Scull)* serves almost as a mirror, reflecting back a portrait of a man engaged in a similar state of introspection. At its heart, the charm of the painting is the very mood it evokes, one that is tranquil, still, even solemn. Its dimensions are not grandiose (roughly 2.5 by 4 feet), and neither is its atmosphere; this is a calm, placid painting.

The scene’s air of quietude could not be more at odds with its true subject matter, as it was meant to commemorate an athlete’s impressive victory in a physically taxing amateur rower’s race. The artist, Thomas Eakins, chose to portray the local hero not in the height of physical exertion, but instead in an anti-dramatic moment of rest during a late afternoon practice session. A Philadelphia native, Eakins completed *The Champion Single Sculls* upon return to his hometown after studying abroad in Paris, Madrid, and Seville. Blending the influences of his French tutors, Jean-Léon Gérôme and Léon Bonnat, as well as the work of the Spanish Baroque artist, Diego Velázquez, Eakins developed a unique style that was extremely labor-intensive and aspired to a high degree of truth to nature.
Self-portrait (detail), Thomas Eakins, *The Champion Single Sculls (Max Schmitt In A Single Scull)*, 1871, oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 46 1/4" (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

*The Champion Single Sculls* is ultimately a snapshot of Eakins, his environment, and his times. Utilizing the Philadelphia-area Schuylkill River as his backdrop (a landmark he would indirectly visit again in his 1877 portrait of William Rush), Eakins is domesticating an exotic genre, that of Orientalist river scenes by artists such as Gérôme and Frederick Arthur Bridgman. As for the painting’s subject, Max Schmitt was a personal friend of Eakins’, and the artist included his own self-portrait as a rower in the composition’s middle ground.

The theme of rowing plays into Eakins’ own love of sports and his tendency toward masculine themes, as well as the contemporary interest in the moral virtues and health benefits of outdoor recreational activities. In an era in which American printmakers were just beginning to take up the rowing craze and memorialize victorious single scullers as gentlemen and regional heroes, Eakins produced nineteen such rowing images.

*The Champion Single Sculls* debuted to mixed reviews, with one critic noting the “scattered effect” of “dealing so boldly and broadly with the commonplace in nature.” Nevertheless, it marked Eakins’ first major success by demonstrating his remarkable technical skill. It also exhibits the artist’s quirky sense of humor: instead of inscribing his signature in the painting’s corner, Eakins subtly included his name and the date on the boat he is shown rowing in the distance.
Additional resources:

This painting at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Americans in Paris – from The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Eakins Rowing Pictures

Eakins letters in the collection of the Archive of American Art (Smithsonian Institution)


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**Winslow Homer, *The Life Line***

by [Dr. Steven Zucker](https://www.columbia.edu/~saz1) and [Dr. Beth Harris](https://www.columbia.edu/~bethh/)

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Winslow Homer, *The Life Line*, 1884, oil on canvas, 28-5/8 x 44-3/4 inches / 72.7 x 113.7 cm (Philadelphia Museum of Art)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Winslow Homer, *The Fog Warning* (or *Halibut Fishing*)

by [Dr. Steven Zucker](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…)

Cite this page as: Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, "Winslow Homer, *The Life Line"," in *Smarthistory*, December 4, 2015, accessed July 13, 2021, [https://smarthistory.org/winslow-homer-the-life-line/](https://smarthistory.org/winslow-homer-the-life-line/).
Winslow Homer, The Fog Warning (or Halibut Fishing), 1885, oil on canvas, 30-1/4 x 48-1/2 inches / 76.83 x 123.19 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
More Smarthistory images…

Cite this page as: Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, "Winslow Homer, The Fog Warning (or Halibut Fishing)," in Smarthistory, November 28, 2015, accessed July 13, 2021, https://smarthistory.org/winslow-homer-the-fog-warning-or-halibut-fishing/

Symbolism

Henry Ossawa Tanner

Henry Ossawa Tanner, The Banjo Lesson

by FARISA KHALID
Henry Ossawa Tanner was the United States’ first African-American celebrity artist. His training at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (under the guidance of Thomas Eakins) and at the Académie Julian in Paris (with Jean-Léon Gérôme) put him in the unique position of having experienced two vastly different approaches to painting—American Realism and French academic painting. He was also one of the few artists to have had such training at a time when there were many barriers to education for African-Americans. Though Tanner lived most of his life in France and became well known for his lush biblical paintings, The Banjo Lesson is his most famous work and the painting that has become emblematic with his oeuvre.

Henry Tanner painted The Banjo Lesson in 1893 after a series of sketches he made while visiting the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina four years before. Tanner had been studying and working in Paris until he developed a bout of typhoid fever and was advised to return to the United States to recover his health and dwindling finances. While taking up a teaching post at Clark University in Atlanta, Tanner’s doctor told him to take in some mountain air. His trip to North Carolina opened his eyes to the poverty of African-Americans living in Appalachia.

The legacy of slavery

The United States had abolished slavery only twenty-four years before, in 1865, and the physical and psychological
wounds of that brutal institution would continue to be a palpable presence in African-American communities—especially so in the South. Though Tanner was born in Pittsburgh within the tight-knit world of highly-educated members of America’s burgeoning African-American intelligentsia, Tanner’s mother Sarah had been born a slave and had escaped north to Pennsylvania through the Underground Railroad. His middle name, Ossawa, was chosen by his father, Benjamin Tucker Tanner, a Methodist minister and abolitionist, after Osawatomie, Kansas—the site of the abolitionist John Brown’s bloody confrontation with pro-slavery partisans on August 30, 1856.

Throughout his education and advancement in the art world in both the United States and Europe, the legacy of slavery haunted Tanner as he tried to establish a niche for himself as painter to be regarded on his own terms. *The Banjo Lesson* grew out of a set of photographs and illustrations (above) that Tanner made for the periodical *Harper’s Young People* in 1893. The illustration is of an elderly man teaching a young boy how to play the banjo, accompanied a short story by Ruth McEnery Stuart called “Uncle Tim’s Compromise on Christmas,” in which the titular character imparts his most prized possession, a banjo, to his grandson on Christmas morning.

American realism + the European tradition

Tanner had spent years been refining a style of his own that combined elements of American Realism and the European
Old Master tradition. *The Banjo Lesson* has its roots in the genre paintings of African-Americans by William Sidney Mount and Thomas Eakins (above) and in Renaissance and Flemish paintings, notably Domenico Ghirlandaio’s *An Old Man and His Grandson* and Johannes Vermeer’s *Woman with a Lute* (below).

![Image of Domenico Ghirlandaio's An Old Man and His Grandson and Johannes Vermeer's Woman with a Lute](image)

While studying in Paris, Tanner was also inspired by the works of the French Realists, namely [Gustave Courbet](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres...) and [Jean-François Millet](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres...), in their depictions of the rural poor. Millet’s *The Angelus*, with its quiet, intensely spiritual portrayal of a farmer and his wife praying amid the fields at dusk, is a palpable influence on Tanner’s *The Banjo Lesson*.

![Image of Jean-François Millet's The Angelus](image)

*A radically different image*

This theme of spiritual solace that Tanner encountered in the paintings of French Realists like Millet resonated with his own upbringing as the son of a Methodist minister. He hoped to find a way of highlighting the dignity and grace of poor African-Americans in the manner that he had seen in France—an approach that would be radically different from stereotypical images of the overly servile "Uncle Tom" figure (named after the main character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's...
iconic 1852 novel) that was familiar to Americans in countless advertisements (like this one, for Ayer’s Cathartic Pills [The Country Doctor], c. 1883) and popular magazines.

In The Banjo Lesson, Tanner’s desire to show us his vision of the resilience, spiritual grace, and creative and intellectual promise of post-Civil War African-Americans is fully realized. The scene is staged within the small confines of a log cabin with the cool glow of a hearth fire casting the scene’s only light source from right corner, enveloping the man and the boy in a rectangular pool of light across the floor. The boy holds the banjo in both hands, his downward gaze a reflection of his focused concentration on his grandfather’s instructions. The older man holds the banjo up gently with his left hand so that the boy is not encumbered by its weight, yet the staging shows us that the man wants the boy to come into the realization of the music and its rewards through his own intuition and hard work.

![The Banjo Lesson, Henry Ossawa Tanner](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres%20America)/Resources/Chapter7/BanjoLesson.jpg)

The contrast between the man’s age and the boy’s adds to the narrative tension within in the painting as in the Ghirlandaio, a counterpoint between age and experience, and youth and the promise of achievement. The boy is bathed in the glow of the fire’s warmth with a glimmer of white light shining across his forehead, the center of knowledge and understanding. The older man is submerged in the cool shadows of the room. This carefully orchestrated play of warm and cool, of shadow and light, conveys that the success of future generations is built upon the legacy of previous ones. Bathed in muted cool tones of grays and blues, the grandfather is the past, the old America of slavery and The Civil War, of oppression, racism, and poverty, while the boy, caught in the warm glow of the fire’s light, is the new America, of renewed opportunities, advancement, education, and new beginnings.

**Banjos, minstrel shows, and stereotypes of African-Americans**

Certainly Tanner would have seen a great deal of his own life played out in this tender scene. As the educated son of a former slave and a minister and abolitionist, Tanner was always striving to live up to his potential as an artist in the post-Civil War, post-Reconstruction era America. It is also important that the instrument that leads the boy towards enlightenment is the banjo, an instrument highly significant to African-American slave culture and the music of the American South. The banjo evolved from the gourd instruments of Africa and the West Indies and became integral to slave music throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

By Tanner’s time, it was a mainstay of minstrel shows, popular variety entertainment that featured white actors in blackface performing songs and skits. In minstrel shows, it was the custom to portray African-Americans as boisterous,
jaunty, buffoonish, and dim-witted. This portrayal fed into the preconceived notions of white racial superiority—that African-Americans, even if they were no longer slaves, would still be infantile and incapable of self-determined action or remarkable achievements. The entire visual and popular culture of Uncle Tom imagery and minstrel shows were part of the pernicious psychological chains of slavery that persisted in America throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The shows also depicted African-Americans as having an innate musicality, which acknowledged their talent but undermined their intelligence.

For Tanner, painting this image of generational torch-passing, was a way of debunking the entrenched derogatory stereotypes of African-Americans propagated by minstrel shows. In Tanner’s painting we see the grandfather and the boy as intelligent, noble, graceful people engaged in an intimate act of sharing creative knowledge. Their lesson becomes emblematic of the larger African-American journey of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, from Emancipation, Reconstruction, the terrors and injustices of the Jim Crow laws, the exodus of the Great Migration, and the foment and dynamism of the Harlem Renaissance.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 8: Henry Ossawa Tanner, The Thankful Poor, 1894, oil on canvas, 90.3 x 112.5 cm / 35 1/2 x 44 1/4 inches (collection of William and Camille Cosby)

An American artist

After painting The Banjo Lesson and The Thankful Poor (above), Tanner moved back to Paris where he would remain for most of his life. Tanner felt that France was less encumbered with the baggage of racial prejudice towards people of color than the United States. “In America, I’m Henry Tanner, Negro artist, but in France, I’m ‘Monsieur Tanner, l’artiste américaine.’”

https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…

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His desire to be recognized by the quality of his talent would inspire him to paint prolifically throughout his life, traveling through the Middle East and North Africa in search of authentic imagery for biblical paintings that would become the hallmark of his later career. When World War I was declared in Europe, Tanner enlisted in the Red Cross, serving as a medical volunteer as well as making numerous sketches and various paintings of the soldiers in France and Belgium. In 1923, he was awarded the Legion of Honour by the French government for his service during the war.

But it is *The Banjo Lesson* that has become the iconic painting of his entire career. Its economy of scale, its emotional delicacy, its nuanced orchestration of light and shadow and symbolism situates it in a resonant space in American art history. Both *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor* were remarkable achievements for Tanner—works that according to the art historian Judith Wilson, “invest their ordinary, underprivileged, Black subjects with a degree of dignity and self-possession that seems extraordinary for the times in which they were painted.”[2] It is a testament to Tanner’s vision as an artist, and his personal convictions as an African-American, amid the possibilities offered by twentieth century, that these two paintings continue to speak so profoundly to us now.


Additional resources:

Henry O. Tanner, exhibition subsite from the Smithsonian American Art Museum


Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Angels Appearing before the Shepherds*

*by FARISA KHALID*

![Figure](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres...%20History%20of%20Art%20-%20Library%20of%20Congress%20%28LC%29)/Tanner/figure.png)

Figure \

Henry Ossawa Tanner’s evocative *Angels Appearing before the Shepherds* compels us to ask larger questions: what is the purpose of art that depicts religious subjects? Can the visual arts dramatize the Biblical word in a way that text cannot? Tanner grappled with these questions in a painting depicting a scene from the New Testament when angels appeared before the shepherds in Bethlehem to announce the birth of Jesus. In doing so, he followed in the footsteps of many artists—like those that crafted the stained glass windows at Reims Cathedral depicting Christian angels and saints or the craftsman that sculpted bronze statues of Hindu gods in 11th century India—who used the power of visual representation for religious messages.

**Tanner, his formation and influences**

Henry Ossawa Tanner was the first African-American painter to gain critical recognition outside of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. Trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts under the guidance of Thomas Eakins and then at the Académie Julian in Paris with Jean-Léon Gérôme, Tanner’s remarkable talent and experience was highly unique for a man of his position and race in post-Civil War America.
Though Tanner painted his most well-known works, *The Banjo Lesson* (1893) and *The Thankful Poor* (1894), in a more naturalistic style, he painted *Angels Appearing before the Shepherds* in a more abstract, Symbolist style. The painting reflects his lifelong fascination with Christianity and the stories of the Bible. Tanner’s father, Benjamin Tucker Tanner, was a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh and a political activist for the abolition of slavery, and religion played an important role in Tanner’s life and art.

Tanner completed this painting a few years after traveling to the Middle East in 1897. His first major biblical paintings, *Daniel in the Lions’ Den* (1896) and *The Resurrection of Lazarus* (1897) (below), gained critical acclaim in the Paris Salon (the official art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts). The art critic Rodman Wanamaker funded a trip for Tanner to visit the Middle East claiming that any serious artist who wanted to paint biblical scenes with conviction should familiarize himself with the Holy Land. From the experience of his travels, Tanner evokes the various shades of blue in the twilight sky of Jerusalem along the hills of Bethlehem.
Tanner’s painting of the angel and shepherds is a familiar subject for many artists like Rembrandt, Castiglione, and Thomas Cole. He depicts the pivotal scene of revelation, but renders it in a more lush and atmospheric tone than seen in the work of previous painters. Tanner’s exposure to the work of the post-Impressionists and the Symbolists in Paris in the 1890s seems to influence his hazy melding of color and line. The work of Odilon Redon, in particular, is a strong influence in this depiction of the multi-formed angel and in the blending of cool muted colors to echo the tones of pastels.

Looking closely at the painting, we have to ask ourselves what was the artist thinking in choosing to paint this dramatic scene in blue. Why would Tanner depict such an important scene of spiritual revelation in shadowy tones and cool colors?
Color and tranquility

As shown in Figure 14: Angels (detail), Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Angels Appearing before the Shepherds*, c. 1910, oil on canvas (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.),

Around the time Tanner painted this, the work of the Symbolist painters was at the vanguard of new intellectual thought in art in Paris, a group which included Paul Gauguin, Odilon Redon, and Gustave Moreau. The Symbolists were influenced by the color theories of German artist Franz von Stücker, who was in turn influenced by Johan Wolfgang von Goethe’s important theory of color published in 1810. According to Goethe, colors, in addition to their inherent optical and scientific qualities, possessed psychological qualities as well. Stücker explained that blue exuded mystery, eternity and calm. Through his modulated use of shades of blue and gray, Henry Tanner’s painting exudes the tranquility of God’s spiritual grace.

Beyond the colors, it is also important to consider our perspective as viewers into the painting. By situating our point-of-view from behind the angels, we look down at the distant figures of the shepherds below. Tanner enhances our sense of wonder by heightening the illusion of flight, the vastness of the landscape, and smallness of the shepherds within the aerial view.
Tanner's evolving style

This painting is emblematic of Tanner’s evolving style in the middle part of his unique career. The critical acclaim of *The Banjo Lesson* made him wary that he might be restricted to painting tender scenes of rural life among black Americans, which would have been limiting to a man of his diverse interests and cosmopolitan background. In *Angels Appearing before the Shepherds*, we see Tanner move from the more traditional, naturalistic style of *The Banjo Lesson*, inspired by the work of Vermeer and the light-infused paintings of the Dutch Golden Age, to the more visionary approach of the Symbolists.

The influence of the nineteenth-century Romantic painters is also a palpable influence. In the cool blue glow of light along the Judean hills, Tanner evokes the moon paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (below), whose work inspired other American artists like Childe Hassam and Frederic Remington. Like Friedrich, who brings his spectator into a hushed communion with his cloaked subjects and the otherworldly eminence of nature and God, in *Angels Appearing before the Shepherds*, Tanner represents a time, tone, and scene conducive to a mood of spiritual reflection. As the art historian Alexander Nemerov describes Friedrich’s paintings, “the figures not only stand for the audience outside the canvas, but show us how to behave in the presence of moonlight—with awe and reverence.”
To an early twentieth-century European and American audience, the grandeur of biblical imagery in art was embodied by the traditional style of Rembrandt, Rubens, and the painters of the Spanish Baroque. Henry Tanner hoped to redefine religious painting in the twentieth century and to prove that an American—a black American—could create incisive and moving religious art on par with the work of the European Masters. Tanner proved that the visual representation of the Bible could indeed continue to be fresh, modern and highly relevant and accessible to any contemporary age.

Additional Resources:

This painting at the Smithsonian American Art Museum


The Ashcan School c. 1908 - 1940

A maverick group of painters in New York City set the foundation for depicting life in the changing, surging metropolis.

The Ashcan School, an introduction

by FARISA KHALID
In the early part of the twentieth century, a maverick group of painters in New York City set the foundation for depicting the sheer variety and scale of life in the changing, surging metropolis. Their name, like that of the Impressionists, was initially a term of derision branded by the prevailing critics, though it ultimately became their banner of pride. The painters of the Ashcan School wanted to create a new kind of art rooted in the raw, visceral day-to-day reality of the city—not the New York that was depicted by the popular painters of the time, the American Impressionists William Merritt Chase and Childe Hassam—the decidedly posh, haute bourgeoisie New York of Park Avenue, Central Park, and Washington Square—but the New York of the Lower East Side and the Bowery, of newly arrived immigrants, dockworkers, nightclub performers, saloonkeepers, boxers, and the average worker trying to make ends meet while squeezing whatever small pleasure there was to be had out of life.

Their art was populist, expansive, and committed to a documentary realism that was far-reaching and ahead of its time. The poetry of Walt Whitman, the prose of Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, the plays of Eugene O’Neill, and the
music of ragtime and Tin Pan Alley comprised their emotional and spiritual soundtrack. The painting above by George Bellows of Madison Square at the intersection of Broadway and Twenty-third Street echoes the panorama and rhythms of Whitman’s 1888 poem, “Mannahatta”:

“I WAS asking for something specific and perfect for my city,
Whereupon, lo! upsprang the aboriginal name!

I see that the word of my city is that word up there,
Because I see that word nested in nests of water-bays, superb, with
tall and wonderful spires...

Numberless crowded streets—high growths of iron, slender, strong,
light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies...

Immigrants arriving, fifteen or twenty thousand in a week;
The carts hauling goods—the manly race of drivers of horses—the brown-faced
sailors;
The summer air, the bright sun shining, and the sailing clouds aloft;
The winter snows, the sleigh-bells—the broken ice in the river,
passing along, up or down, with the flood tide or ebb-tide...

The mechanics of the city, the masters, well-form’d, beautiful-faced,
looking you straight in the eyes;
Trottoirs throng’d—vehicles—Broadway—the women—the shops and
shows,
A million people—manners free and superb—open voices—hospitality—
the most courageous and friendly young men;

The free city! no slaves! no owners of slaves!
The beautiful city, the city of hurried and sparkling waters! the
city of spires and masts!
The city nested in bays! my city!”

The sparkling subject of Whitman’s poem—the expanse of city landscape and life in all its diversity, color, and noise—is at the core of what the Ashcan School painters depicted in much of their work. They wanted to show New York City as it evolved from a sleepy Dutch island into the vital cultural capital of America.

Too many pictures of ashcans?

The Ashcan School formed out of an urge to rebel against the dogmatic criteria of popular painting of the time, namely American Impressionism and academic realism. In the spring of 1907, the Philadelphia-trained painter Robert Henri rallied his friends, John Sloan, Everett Shin, Arthur Davies, Ernest Lawson, Maurice Prendergast, William Glackens, and George Luks when Luks’ painting, Man with Dyed Mustachios, was rejected by the conservative National Academy for
Working together with the prominent Fifth Avenue dealer, William Macbeth, the group set up their first major exhibition at The Macbeth Gallery in February 1908 called Eight American Painters, which later became known simply as “The Eight.” Though he did not participate in the show, the other Ohio-born painter in the group, George Bellows, also joined the Ashcan artists in creating iconic paintings of the city in all its gritty splendor. Their work struck a nerve among emerging collectors: Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney purchased four paintings from the show that would become the basis for the permanent collection of her Whitney Museum of American Art.

It was eight years later, however, in 1916, that the group got their evocative name. John Sloan, Robert Henri, and George Bellows were also illustrators for the well-known socialist magazine, *The Masses*, and one of their staff members voiced a complaint that there were too many “pictures of ashcans and girls hitching up their skirts on Horatio Street.” The artists were amused and flattered, and the name stuck.
Painting true to life

In the 1920s, John Sloan spoke of how the unofficial leader of the group was Robert Henri, a distant cousin of Mary Cassatt’s and the son of a professional gambler and real estate developer who once shot a man to death over a land dispute:

It was really Henri’s direction that made us paint at all, and paint the life around us. The American genre painters Winslow Homer, Eastman Johnson, and William Sidney Mount had painted life around them, but we thought their work was too tight and finished. There were many other artists drawing for newspapers in Chicago, San Francisco…but they did not turn to painting. I feel certain that the reason our group in Philadelphia became painters is due to Henri. ¹

Painting true to life was the key to the Ashcan School’s visual distinction in subject matter and fame. Like the artists of nineteenth century France, Honoré Daumier, Édouard Manet, and Gustave Courbet, the Ashcan painters captured those fleeting scenes of everyday life among the middle and lower classes at work and at leisure.

Figure \(\PageIndex{21}\): William J. Glackens, *Hammerstein’s Roof Garden*, c. 1901, oil on canvas. 30 x 25" / 76.2 x 63.5 cm (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York)

Paintings like William Glackens’ *Hammerstein’s Roof Garden (left)*, John Sloan’s *Chinese Restaurant* (above), and George Bellows’ *Stag at Sharkey’s* (above), show the sheer variety of entertainment that the city had to offer with people reveling in the moment regardless of propriety and decorum. There is a documentary feel and intense presentness to the scenes depicted, from the woman feeding the cat in the John Sloan painting to the man with the cigar turning his
face towards us in the George Bellows, we get an immediate sense of the vitality and evanescence of a society in transition, a newly emergent urban middle class with enough money and time for the short transitory pleasures of the city.

There were also paintings of longshoremen, laundresses, bartenders, and waitresses, all a part of a dynamic working class. The influx of immigration to America from Europe filled the workforce in cities, driving down demand and allowing employers to reduce wages. Many people became part of what was known as “the working poor,” living payday-to-payday. The Danish-American photographer Jacob Riis exposed the staggering poverty and squalor of the Lower East Side’s residents in his groundbreaking series, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890).

![Figure](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres… Updated: Wed, 25 Aug 2021 05:28:40 GMT

The Ashcan painters were generally not as direct and confrontational as Riis in his “muckraking” approach to social reform. They were not reformers, or even explicitly political, aside from illustrating for *The Masses* and frequenting occasional Socialist salons, which was the fashion among intellectuals in New York City at the time. The artists of the Ashcan School would not adopt political doctrine as did some contemporaneous movements in Europe, such as the Constructivists, who were decidedly more political and utopian in its aims. Rather, the Ashcan painters wanted to depict the American worker in a straightforward manner devoid of cant and propaganda: revealing the simplicity and beauty of the American at work and at play.
It's important to remember the painters of the Ashcan School didn’t limit themselves to scenes of the city and its people but also painted a variety of pastoral landscapes. John Sloan and Robert Henri, who both had a classical training under Thomas Anschutz at The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, felt that the role of the American painter of the twentieth century was not confined to a specific social agenda but involved an expansive application of techniques and methods in a variety of genres.

Robert Henri’s *Cumulus Clouds, East River* (above) depicting a sunset and a swirling mass of thick coral cloud along the docks of Upper New York Bay, has echoes of the seascapes of nineteenth-century Romanticism, particularly those of J.M.W. Turner. John Sloan’s *Sunflowers at Rocky Neck* (below) painted along the coast of Gloucester, Massachusetts, was based in part on the swirling vibrancy of Vincent van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* (1888), which Sloan saw at the Armory Show of 1913 in New York along with other works of European Post-Impressionism and modernist painting.
Sloan along with Henri had helped organize The Armory Show, which was a turning point for modern art in America. The public’s exposure to avant-garde work by artists like Marcel Duchamp, Paul Cézanne, Georges Braque, and Henri Matisse, among others, set the tone for the kind of art that Americans thought they should be making if they wanted to keep up with the tide of modernism across the world—art that was startlingly free of academic expectations of realism and conservative thought.

**Food for starving souls**

Though the Armory Show eventually helped propagate a new style of modern painting exemplified by artists like Stuart Davis (a student of Henri’s), Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, and Georgia O’Keefe, the impact of the Ashcan School was far-reaching in American figurative painting for much of the twentieth century. The work of Edward Hopper (another of Henri’s famous pupils) owes a great deal to the subject matter and style of the Ashcan painters in terms of its propensity for human tableaus, theatricality, and detailed intimacy. Contemporaries of Hopper, Charles Burchfield and George Ault, were also inspired by the pioneering work of the Ashcan School, whose stylistic influence is palpable in their city scenes and melancholy vistas.

The lasting legacy of the Ashcan School is that for the first time in the twentieth century, American painting took on a populist commitment dedicated to depicting the reality of life in a changing, diverse, cosmopolitan society. Though the artists themselves never professed to be agents of social change they were bound together by a shared interest in providing meaningful and enjoyable artwork for a large audience: art for everyone and anyone. Writing in the 1930s, in his autobiography, John Sloan described the importance of art in everyday life as a fundamental need that is essential to one’s spiritual survival:

> They say that art is a luxury because of the depression. But I really believe this is the time when people should turn to the artists. Not the artist whose work is selling for thousands, but the interesting work of men who sell their things for reasonable figures. I believe the work of artists, poets, musicians, is a kind of food for starving souls, as necessary as food for the body. Why should we worry about feeding bodies if they have starving souls? That may sound churchy but I don’t mean it so. Select your own soul-food in the way of art.\(^2\)

What Sloan is espousing might seem naïve to some, but as a man who came of age in that period of American history between the end of The Civil War and through World War I, the Roaring Twenties, and the Great Depression, prosperity and poverty were two sides of a swiftly spinning coin in collective fortunes. Art had the ability to provide enlightenment, education, and spiritual fulfillment to an enormous audience, and the painters of the Ashcan School were among the first to expand its changing role in American life.


Additional resources:

The Ashcan School on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History


Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
George Benjamin Luks, *Street Scene (Hester Street)*

*by MARGARITA KARASOULAS, ASSISTANT CURATOR OF AMERICAN ART, BROOKLYN MUSEUM and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER*

Video \(\PageIndex{3}\): George Benjamin Luks, *Street Scene (Hester Street)*, 1905, oil on canvas, 65.5 x 91.1 cm (Brooklyn Museum, 40.339, Dick S. Ramsay Fund) Speakers: Dr. Margarita Karasoulas, Assistant Curator of American Art, Brooklyn Museum and Dr. Steven Zucker

**Additional Resources**

[This painting at the Brooklyn Museum](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…)

**George Bellows**

George Bellows, *Pennsylvania Station Excavation*

*by MARGARITA KARASOULAS, ASSISTANT CURATOR OF AMERICAN ART, BROOKLYN MUSEUM and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER*
Video (PageIndex(4)): George Bellows, *Pennsylvania Station Excavation*, c. 1907–08, oil on canvas, 79.2 x 97.1 cm (Brooklyn Museum), a Seeing America video

Speakers: Dr. Margarita Karasoulas, Assistant Curator, American Art, Brooklyn Museum and Dr. Steven Zucker

Additional resources

[This painting at the Brooklyn Museum](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres...
George Bellows, *Both Members of This Club*  

*by ABBY R. ERON*
In the early twentieth century, the artist George Bellows aspired to represent the rough edges and dark aspects of New York City. In his early twenties, Bellows moved to the city from Ohio, where he had attended the Ohio State University and played baseball and basketball. He studied with Robert Henri at the New York School of Art and became part of an informal group of American artists that came to be called the "Ashcan School" due to the painters' gritty brand of realism and the apparent muddiness of their color palettes. Henri, who led the group, encouraged his associates, a number of whom had been illustrators in Philadelphia, to sketch and paint from real life. Typical subjects for Henri, Bellows, and their Ashcan brethren included rough-and-tumble youths, working class people, immigrant communities, and the hubbub of the urban street. While still in his twenties, Bellows painted *Both Members of This Club* (1909), one of his most recognizable images.

**Style, composition, and color**

In the painting, two men, one white and the other black, on the left and right respectively, engage one another in a prizefighting (boxing for cash prize) ring. The painting’s style reinforces its subject matter. Bellows’ brushstrokes underscore the violence, physicality and vigorous action of the match. Bellows applied paint with a quickness and sketchiness that echoes the energetic movement of the athletes and the flickering of low light as it bounces across the faces of the rowdy, restless audience. The forms, while distinct, are not delicately rendered, but instead are roughly described. Slashes of paint are particularly noticeable in the highlights along the black boxer’s back and side. They are also apparent in the streaks of red, evoking blood, by the elbow of the white boxer, along his ribs and stomach, and across his neck and chin.

Figure \(\PageIndex{26}\): George Bellows, *Both Members of This Club*, 1909, oil on canvas, 115 x 160.5 cm (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.)
The composition is approximately triangular with the apex marked by the collision of the boxers’ upraised fists. The fighter on the right lunges forward, gaining momentum by pushing off an extended and unnaturally attenuated right leg, into the left fighter, whose right knee seems ready to buckle beneath him. Several layers of the crowd define the base of this compositional triangle.

Bellows mostly limited the colors in this painting to shades of blue-gray, brown, and cream, but accentuated this tonal palette with touches of white, red, orange, and pink, plus the green of the left boxer’s trunks. Bellows illuminated the composition to spotlight the action, thus associating the ring with a theater stage. The obscure darkness of the background largely precludes any perception of recession into space, and also creates the feeling of a dangerous and secretive atmosphere. Indeed, the title *Both Members of This Club* refers to the dubious practice of turning boxers into temporary sports club members in order to skirt a New York state law that prohibited public prizefighting. For a time, Bellows lived across the street from Sharkey Athletic Club (one institution that took part in this subterfuge), where he could readily observe men fighting.

**Race and boxing**

Bellows keyed into the racial dynamics of his era by pitting a black fighter against a white fighter. He showed *Both Members of This Club* at the Exhibition of Independent Artists in 1910, the year of a much-anticipated fight between heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson and his challenger Jim Jeffries. The media billed Jeffries as the latest in a series of “great white hopes” who aspired to take the coveted heavyweight title away from Johnson, the African-American man who had held it since 1908. Racial animosity dramatized coverage of the fight, a contest in which Johnson ultimately proved victorious. Though the matchup in *Both Members of This Club* cannot be definitively assigned to any particular boxing bout, race is thematically and compositionally central in Bellows’ scene. The painting’s title
registers as darkly satirical when we realize that, during this period of segregation, fighting—especially illicit prizefighting at a place such as Sharkey's—was one of the few forums in which membership could be conferred equally and close interracial interaction condoned.

The crowd and the city

Bellows' painting also reflects a contemporary interest in crowd psychology (the study of how individuals behave differently as part of a crowd as well as the behavior of the crowd itself). Bellows famously claimed that “the atmosphere around the fighters is a lot more immoral than the fighters themselves." In Both Members of This Club, Bellows exaggerated the faces of the onlookers. They grimace, shout, and stare bug-eyed at the drama before and above them. Particularly startling is the toothy grin of a spectator with a long face who can be spotted just to the right of the black boxer’s foreshortened left foot. Bellows’ incisive depiction of the match’s audience reveals the influence of nineteenth-century French artist and caricaturist Honoré Daumier, but it also points to societal concerns of Bellows’ day.

Bellows painted this canvas in 1909, the year after the publication of what are often considered the first two social psychology textbooks. The books' authors, sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross and psychologist William McDougall, both explored crowd psychology. Ross wrote about the dissolution of individual identity within a crowd, and the crowd’s increased susceptibility to waves of emotion over logical reasoning. Similarly, McDougall theorized that being part of a crowd was a definitive condition of human recreation, stemming from what he referred to as the “gregarious impulse.” He also argued that this “gregarious impulse” was evidenced by the undeniable appeal of cities, which continued to attract residents (such as Bellows himself) despite the high cost of living, pollution, congestion, and risk for disease.
Urban entertainments

Figure \(\PageIndex{29}\): Everett Shin, *The White Ballet*, 1904, oil on canvas, 74.9 x 93.3 cm (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.)

Critics considered Bellows to be distinctly American because he never studied abroad in Europe, as so many other American artists at the time did. Yet Bellows’ work was not insular. His boxing pictures relate to images that fellow Ashcan artist Everett Shinn created of the theater. Shinn was in turn deeply influenced by the work of French Realist and Impressionist Edgar Degas. However, comparison with Shinn and Degas highlights what distinguishes *Both Members of This Club*. Rather than depicting the polite urban recreation of theater attendance, as in Shinn’s *The White Ballet* from 1904, Bellows blatantly exposed the city’s dingy and nearly illegal underside, featuring an all-male space where brutality and head-to-head conflict replaced the glamour and coordination of ballet performance.

Part of the crowd?

Figure \(\PageIndex{30}\): George Bellows, *Stag at Sharkey’s*, 1909, oil on canvas, 110 x 140.5 cm (Cleveland Museum of Art)

*Both Members of this Club* is one of three boxing paintings Bellows made in the first decade of the twentieth century. As
in the other two, *Club Night* (1907) and *Stag at Sharkey’s* (1909), *Both Members of This Club* places its viewers in an ambivalent position. We are implicated as part of the bloodthirsty crowd directly behind the heads of the front row spectators, while simultaneously separated from this crowd as visitors in the hushed and refined space of an art gallery.


**Additional Resources:**

- This painting at the National Gallery of Art
- The Aschcan School at the Timeline of Art History (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

**Bellows, Return of the Useless**

*by DR. JENNIFER PADGETT, CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART* and *DR. STEVEN ZUCKER*
Video \(\PageIndex{5}\): George Bellows, *Return of the Useless*, 1918, oil on canvas, 149.9 x 167.6 cm (Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art), a Seeing America video

Speakers: Dr. Jen Padgett, Associate Curator, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and Dr. Steven Zucker

Additional resources

This painting at The Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art
The Bryce Report at the British Library

John Sloan, *Movies*

by Dr. Lawrence W. Nichols, Toledo Museum of Art and Dr. Steven Zucker
Video \(\PageIndex{6}\): John Sloan, *Movies*, 1913, oil on canvas, 50.3 × 61 cm (Toledo Museum of Art)

Additional resources

This painting at the museum

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
291 and the American avant garde

This New York gallery led by Alfred Stieglitz was at the forefront of modernist painting and photography in the United States.

1908 - 1917

Alfred Stieglitz, The Steerage

by DR. KRIS BELDEN-ADAMS
Video \(\PageIndex{7}\): Alfred Stieglitz, *The Steerage*, 1907, photograph, 33.34 x 26.51 cm (includes black border), Museum Library Purchase, 1965 (LACMA M.65.76.1) A conversation with Eve Schillo, Assistant Curator, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Beth Harris
First class

After his 8-year-old daughter Kitty finished the school year and he closed his Fifth Avenue art gallery for the summer, Alfred Stieglitz gathered her, his wife Emmeline, and Kitty’s governess for their second excursion to Europe as a family. The Stieglitzes departed for Paris on May 14, 1907, aboard the first-class quarters of the fashionable ship Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Although Emmeline looked forward to shopping in Paris and to visiting her relatives in Germany, Stieglitz was anything but enthusiastic about the trip. His marriage to status-conscious Emmeline had become particularly stressful amid rumors about his possible affair with the tarot-card illustrator/artist Pamela Coleman Smith. In addition, Stieglitz felt out of place in the company of his fellow upper-class passengers. But it was precisely this discomfort among his peers that prompted him to take a photograph that would become one of the most important in the history of photography. In his 1942 account “How The Steerage Happened,” Stieglitz recalls:
How I hated the atmosphere of the first class on that ship. One couldn’t escape the ‘nouveau riches.’

[...]

On the third day out I finally couldn’t stand it any longer. I had to get away from that company. I went as far forward on the deck as I could [...]

As I came to the end of the desk [sic] I stood alone, looking down. There were men and women and children on the lower deck of the steerage. There was a narrow stairway leading up to the upper deck of the steerage, a small deck at the bow of the steamer.

To the left was an inclining funnel and from the upper steerage deck there was fastened a gangway bridge which was glistening in its freshly painted state. It was rather long, white, and during the trip remained untouched by anyone.

On the upper deck, looking over the railing, there was a young man with a straw hat. The shape of the hat was round. He was watching the men and women and children on the lower steerage deck. Only men were on the upper deck. The whole scene fascinated me. I longed to escape from my surroundings and join these people.

In this essay, written 35 years after he took the photograph, Stieglitz describes how The Steerage encapsulated his career’s mission to elevate photography to the status of fine art by engaging the same dialogues around abstraction that preoccupied European avant-garde painters:

A round straw hat, the funnel leading out, the stairway leaning right, the white drawbridge with its railings made of circular chains – white suspenders crossing on the back of a man in the steerage below, round shapes of iron machinery, a mast cutting into the sky, making a triangular shape. I stood spellbound for a while, looking and looking. Could I photograph what I felt, looking and looking and still looking? I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life. [...] Spontaneously I raced to the main stairway of the steamer, chased down to my cabin, got my Graflex, raced back again all out of breath, wondering whether the man with the straw hat had moved or not. If he had, the picture I had seen would no longer be. The relationship of shapes as I wanted them would have been disturbed and the picture lost. But there was the man with the straw hat. He hadn’t moved. The man with the crossed white suspenders showing his back, he too, talking to a man, hadn’t moved. And the woman with a child on her lap, sitting on the floor, hadn’t moved. Seemingly, no one had changed position. [...] It would be a picture based on related shapes and on the deepest human feeling, a step in my own evolution, a spontaneous discovery.

Hindsight

With this account, Stieglitz argues with the benefit of more than three decades of hindsight that The Steerage suggests
that photographs have more than just a “documentary” voice that speaks to the truth-to-appearance of subjects in a field 
of space within narrowly defined slice of time. Rather, The Steerage calls for a more complex, layered view of 
photography’s essence that can accommodate and convey abstraction. (Indeed, later photographers Minor White and 
Aaron Siskind would engage this project further in direct dialogue with the Abstract Expressionist painting.)

Stieglitz is often criticized for overlooking the subjects of his photograph in this essay, which has become the account by 
which the photograph is discussed in our histories. But in his account for The Steerage, Stieglitz also calls attention to 
one of the contradictions of photography: its ability to provide more than just an abstract interpretation, too. The 
Steerage is not only about the “significant form” of shapes, forms and textures, but it also conveys a message about its 
subjects, immigrants who were rejected at Ellis Island, or who were returning to their old country to see relatives and 
perhaps to encourage others to return to the United States with them.

**Ghastly conditions**

As a reader of mass-marketed magazines, Stieglitz would have been familiar with the debates about immigration reform 
and the ghastly conditions to which passengers in steerage were subjected. Stieglitz’s father had come to America in 
1849, during a historic migration of 1,120,000 Germans to the United States between 1845 and 1855. His father became 
a wool trader and was so successful that he retired by age 48. By all accounts, Stieglitz’s father exemplified the 
“American dream” that was just beyond the grasp of many of the subjects of The Steerage.

Moreover, investigative reporter Kellogg Durland traveled undercover as steerage in 1906 and wrote of it: “I can, and 
did, more than once, eat my plate of macaroni after I had picked out the worms, the water bugs, and on one occasion, a 
hairpin. But why should these things ever be found in the food served to passengers who are paying $36.00 for their 
passage?”

Still, Stieglitz was conflicted about the issue of immigration. While he was sympathetic to the plight of aspiring new 
arrivals, Stieglitz was opposed to admitting the uneducated and marginal to the United States of America—despite his 
claims of sentiment for the downtrodden. Perhaps this may explain his preference to avoid addressing the subject of The 
Steerage, and to see in this photograph not a political statement, but a place for arguing the value of photography as a 
fine art.

**Additional Resources:**

This photograph at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Gallery 291

291—Little Galleries of the Photo Secession

by Dr. Stephanie Chadwick
If you walked into the “Little Galleries of the Photo Secession” at 291 Fifth Avenue run by New York photographer Alfred Stieglitz and his devotees between 1905–1917, you would likely have been surprised. You might have seen an exhibition of avant-garde photography or perhaps an exhibition of bizarre Cubist paintings. The latter, especially, would have been an unusual sight.

At the time, New York City was not yet well known as an artistic center. As a result, many artists and institutions in New York still looked to European cities—particularly Paris—as artistic and cultural beacons. Although Modernism was gaining ground in Europe, it held little appeal to American audiences outside of small artistic circles. Stieglitz’s 291 gallery, which exhibited modern European painting as well as the latest art photography, helped to change all of that.

Stieglitz and the art of photography

Stieglitz had become a well known photographer—perhaps the most renowned photographer in the United States—a result of his advocacy for the relatively new medium, forming camera clubs (such as the Photo Secession, in 1902), and publishing photography journals. Photography had been used to create art since its invention in the mid-nineteenth century, but it was a relative late comer in comparison to easel painting and printmaking, which had been the preferred artistic media for two-dimensional work since the end of the Renaissance.
Because photographs were created using a mechanical device (an analog camera) rather than by the artist’s hand, many artists and critics debated whether it belonged within the realm of art exhibited in galleries and museums.

Advertisement for the Kodak camera, 1889

Further complicating photography’s claims to art status was the invention in 1888 by the Eastman Kodak Company of the first portable hand-held camera and the advertising slogan “you press the button, we do the rest,” making the ability to take pictures affordable and widely available to ordinary people for the first time. With photography in the hands of the masses as well as commercial studios concerned primarily with portraits, advertisements, and other practical matters, Stieglitz and fellow art photographers felt compelled to differentiate their photography from the production of commercial studios and the common snapshots of everyday life.
Alfred Stieglitz, [The Street – Design for a Poster], 1896, photogravure, 30.6 × 23.3 cm (The J. Paul Getty Museum)
Pictorialism, and later, modern life

Early in his career, Stieglitz championed a photographic style known as Pictorialism, which sought to achieve artistic, even painterly, effects that included soft focus and altering of the photograph using cropping or marking the prints with chemicals. Pictorialist photographers also preferred idealized imagery over images of modern life. Over time, however, Stieglitz shifted his approach and helped to cultivate a photographic aesthetic grounded in the idea of “straight photography.” This meant renouncing the pictorialist alteration of photographs (a practice conceived of as being too rooted in nineteenth-century practices), in favor of more sharply focused images that featured modern forms and artistically emphasized the formal elements of the image. “Straight photographers” heralded in the era of the modern photographic image. In fact, the younger photographer, Paul Strand, instigated a decidedly modernist aesthetic in photography after seeing a Cubist exhibition at 291.
Alfred Stieglitz, *The Steerage*, 1907, photogravure, 33.5cm x 26.4cm (LACMA)

**The modern age, the artistic avant-garde, and “Little Gallery” known as 291**

The painter and photographer Edward Steichen and other notable artists were instrumental in developing the program of exhibitions at 291, which first highlighted Photo Secessionist photographers and then went on to feature exhibitions by prominent European artists including Henri Matisse, Paul Cézanne, and the Cubist works of Pablo Picasso that would influence artists across media around the world. But 291 also exhibited the work of emerging American artists whose paintings and photographs explored modernity (modern life as impacted by new industrial, social, and political developments) or Modernism (the radically different artistic sensibilities avant-garde artists thought best represented modern experiences).
One of the American Modernists exhibiting at 291 was Georgia O'Keefe, whose abstracted urban and organic forms captivated Stieglitz and with whom he became romantically involved. The exhibitions of innovative photographs, paintings, and sculptures at 291 made it the preeminent venue for modern art in the United States in the early twentieth century.

The exhibitions held at 291 were pioneering and impressive, including:
• 1907: The first show of autochrome prints in the United States
• 1908: The first showing of Rodin’s late pencil and watercolor figure drawings
• 1908: The first exhibition of Matisse’s work ever held in the United States
• 1910: The first three lithographs made by Cézanne were shown
• 1911: The first U.S. one-person exhibition of Cézanne
• 1911: The first U.S. one-person exhibition of Picasso
• 1912: The world’s first exhibition of Matisse’s sculpture

The Modern Metropolis

The modern skyscrapers being built in New York appealed to Stieglitz, and he was known to roam the streets of the city looking to capture its essence in his photographs. The thriving metropolis also intrigued Strand, whose photographs of the city conveyed the new modernist aesthetic. New York attracted artists from Europe as well, including Francis Picabia, a French modernist who spearheaded the New York iteration of the Dada movement (artists associated with Dada responded to the horrors of WWI by creating works that featured chance, humor, and absurdity).

Picabia had developed a rapport with Stieglitz and the artists at 291 when he visited New York for the first large-scale exhibition of modern art at the Armory Show in 1913. When he returned to New York to escape serving in WWI he spent time helping out at 291, where artists also gathered for lively discussions. Picabia experimented with a new machine aesthetic and with the idea of the photograph as a work of mechanical reproduction that would change art—including painting—forever.

While at 291, Picabia made portraits called “Mechanomorphs” that portrayed the artists, photographers, and critics there as hybrid machines—depicting Stieglitz as an intriguing camera-like device. Such works also represented the wide array of practices supported by 291 and the idea that the gallery fostered the transmission of European Cubism and Collage (practices of cutting and rearranging images from visual culture) to artists in the United States.
Publishing, circulation, and art in visual culture

One of the activities at 291 that helped promote modern painting and photography was publishing. Stieglitz and his friend Steichen began publishing the journal *Camera Work* in 1903 and continued this project until 1917. During that time the journal featured illustrious art photographs and articles about photography as well as features on modern art from Europe.

The publishing efforts at 291 served as an important conduit for modern art in the United States (even for those viewers who did not pay a visit to the gallery). From 1915–1916 Stieglitz and companions at 291 published a journal of the same name. The short-lived journal 291 featured even more radically modern art—so radical in fact that few readers were interested.

Francis Picabia, *Ici, c'est ici Stieglitz, foi et amour, cover of 291*, No. 1 (1915)

Picabia's bizarre mechanical portrait of Stieglitz (see the Smarthistory essay “Ideal”) was featured on the cover of a 1915 edition of the journal but represented another conundrum. The tendencies of some contributing artists, such as Picabia, to embrace the newly emerging Dada movement made the publication too enigmatic for general audiences and, it is said, even to Stieglitz himself.

Despite the fact that this journal seemed relevant to only a small group of artists in early twentieth-century New York, its transnational contributions and cutting-edge content remain historically significant. Like the gallery at 291, the journal’s function as a conduit for modernism in the United States has earned it a prominent place in art history.

Additional resources:

[Art Institute of Chicago, “Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession/291”](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres)_(Bezemer)%2F291)
Eastman Museum, “From the Camera Obscera to the Revolutionary Kodak”


**Walker Evans, Subway Passengers, New York City**

*by THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART*

**Ansel Adams: Visualizing a Photograph**

*by THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM*
Making America Modern - the "Machine-Age" of American Art

By Sarah Churchill

While America may have possessed the prized icons of modernism, like skyscrapers, capitalism, steel production, the suspension bridge and the car, its artists were largely conservative, even stale by comparison with their European contemporaries. However, with exhibitions like the Armory Show (1913) and galleries like Stieglitz's 291, European modernism, at first shocking to the American eye, became increasingly commonplace and celebrated as the future of American Art.

As global travel became cheaper and easier and dissatisfaction with American realism set in, an emerging generation of young modernists traveled abroad to study art in European capitals like Paris and Rome. Conversely, the devastation of World War I sent the European avant garde, like Picabia and Duchamp, to the relative safety of the United States. The increasing trans-Atlantic contact between America and Europe in the interwar period created the milieu in which artists like Charles Demuth, Joseph Stella, Marsden Hartley, Stuart Davis and Georgia O'Keefe attempted to reckon European abstraction against figurative traditions in American art. Inspired by the dynamism of the city, the precision of straight photography and a changing social fabric in America, American artists in the 1920s and 30s redefined the landscape genre and its relationship to the machine, suggesting that a kind of lyrical spirituality could be found in a complete embrace of the metropolis.

Precisionists like Demuth and Cubo-Futurists like Stella did not approach the same level of abstraction as their...
European contemporaries; rather, they used its strategies to represent the world more precisely, like a kind of "Cubo-Realism." This delicate dance between representation and abstraction has more in common with German New Objectivity, though it lacked any critique of the military-industrial complex. Instead, Machine-age precisionists embraced and classicized the machine and capitalism more broadly. In so doing, these artists assimilated photography into painting in the creation of a new American vision of modernity. As Hal Foster explains, "Such art spiritualizes, monumentalizes, and naturalizes a historical moment as a "machine age": New York as a glorious cathedral, grain elevators as Egyptian pyramids, a factory as a classical landscape."

Georgia O'Keeffe, by contrast, turned away from the city towards the deserts of the American Southwest, seeking to capture the raw emotion and power of forms through abstractions of the natural world. "When you take a flower in your hand," she wrote, "it's your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else." Like Stella, Demuth and Charles Sheeler, she was profoundly influenced by the straight photography of Stieglitz and Paul Strand. Particularly, the camera's ability to see like a magnifying glass can be detected in her large-scale investigation of natural forms at close range. While her art departed from the heroic masculinity of the American machine age, her embrace of monumentality in the natural environment was influential in the development of a feminist art history in the 1960s.


**The Founding of MoMA in New York City**

It may surprise you to learn that the founding of one of the world's most iconic modern art museums was conceived by three women over lunch in 1928. Abby Rockefeller, Lillie P. Bliss and Mary Quinn Sullivan, each of whom was an important collector and patron of the arts in her own right, saw enormous potential in the exhibition of great modern masters in America and in New York particularly. Together, they sought to establish a permanent public museum and center for art and design education, inaugurating a golden age of modern museums in America, which would eventually include the Whitney Museum of American Art (founded in 1931) and the Guggenheim Museum (founded in 1939).

Founding director Alfred H. Barr Jr. initially conceived of the Museum's collection as "a torpedo moving through time, its nose the ever advancing present, its tail the ever receding past of 50 to 100 years ago." However, the institutionalization of modern art in America (before modernism itself had properly taken root among its artists) had important consequences for the future of modern canon, which was largely conceived and directed by Barr himself according to his tastes, interests and motives. Through a series of iconic exhibitions on Cubism and Abstraction, Barr postulated a theory of modernism's "heroic evolution" that the art world has been trying to shake ever since. In his catalog for the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, a now famous diagram charted a direct line from non-Western sources, like Japanese prints, to European Abstraction as modern art's most progressive expression. Such a diagram, however, is less objective than its seems. Rather, Barr here is attempting to stake a claim for MoMA in modern art's ongoing development. The chart, rather, presumes a kind of artificial cohesiveness and universalism that privileges a Western, and largely masculinist, narrative.

Read more about the founding and history of MoMA [here at their interactive timeline](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…). Updated: Wed, 25 Aug 2021 05:28:40 GMT

**The City at night, Joseph Stella’s The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted**

*by* [DR. TRICIA LAUGHLIN BLOOM](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…)* and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…)*
Video \(\PageIndex{8}\): Joseph Stella, *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted*, 1920-22, oil and tempera on canvas (five panels), 99.75 x 270 inches overall (Purchase 1937 Felix Fuld Bequest Fund 37.288a-e, Newark Museum), a Seeing America video

**Additional resources**

- [This painting at the Newark Museum](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…)

**Charles Demuth, *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold***

*by DR. LARA KUYKENDALL*

**Precisionism**
Charles Demuth is known as a Precisionist, and many of his paintings apply the fractured visual language of cubism and the dynamism of futurism to distinctive American places like cities and factories. In the 1920s, Precisionists like Demuth, Charles Sheeler, and others were called the “Immaculates” because of the smooth surfaces, clean lines, and meticulous geometry of their images. In this vein, Demuth painted the church tower and rooftops of Provincetown, Massachusetts in *After Sir Christopher Wren*, 1920, the brand new grain elevators in his hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania in *My Egypt*, 1927, and New York City in *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, 1928.

**From poem to painting**

*I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* was inspired by the poem, “The Great Figure,” written by Demuth’s friend, William Carlos Williams:

```
Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.
```

Williams’ poem recalls a night when he was walking down Ninth Avenue in New York City on his way to painter Marsden Hartley’s studio. He heard the noises of a fire truck, only to turn around just as it was passing by. All he saw was the number of the truck, a five painted in gold, on a red background speeding past. At this moment in his career Williams was trying to create poems that were precise and concrete representations of original experiences, so he avoided symbolism and metaphor in favor of simple language that evokes the speed (“moving tense unheeded”), the sounds (“gong clangs siren howls and wheels rumbling”), and the images (rain, lights, firetruck, dark city) he witnessed. Reportedly, Williams wrote this one-sentence poem right there on the street that night.
Williams’ poetry is deliberately straightforward, but Demuth’s painting is complicated. You really must know the poem to decode the painting. The setting is a tunnel-like street, which is flanked by sidewalks and buildings. Much of this backdrop is gray and black, but for the illuminated shop windows and globular streetlamps on both sides. The fire engine dominates the middle of the composition and although its form is abstracted we can recognize it by its red color. We can see the truck’s ladder on the right, and a long bar stretches across the bottom of the truck, which resembles an axle with two wheels or roaring sirens. The little curved lines that radiate from those sirens or wheels can indicate sound, motion, or both.
**Picturing motion**

Demuth divided the picture plane into rectangles and triangles, which refract light and change the color of space and shapes. The diagonal lines force your eyes to race around as you try to understand the image. That identifying number five repeats very clearly three times in the center of the composition. The fives get larger as they surge into the foreground (or smaller as they recede into the background), and in the upper right corner you can glimpse the curve of a fourth five as it leaves the surface of the picture and enters your space. The echoing numbers evoke the fire truck as it races toward you and past. Demuth’s painting, with its prismatic chards of space and color and the recurring number five, visualizes the motion and mystery of Williams’ experience in a futurist way. It collapses an extended period of time onto one still canvas.

![Figure 5 in Gold (detail), 1928, oil on cardboard, 90.2 x 76.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)](image_url)

**Poster portraits: symbolic and witty**

In addition to representing Williams’ poem, Demuth designed *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* as a portrait of Williams. It is one of at least eight “poster portraits” that Demuth completed during the 1920s. All are abstract or symbolic representations of Demuth’s friends, which contain oblique references to their subjects’ identity instead of depicting them in bodily form. In *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, Demuth included Williams’ initials, W.C.W., at the bottom of the composition. His nickname Bill is cropped at the top, and his middle name Carlos emanates from a skyscraper in the distance (with the “s” on the end hidden behind another structure). These references to Williams are not terribly obvious, though, and they only make sense if you already know to associate Williams with this painting.

The poster portraits function as graphic advertisements for their sitters, but they also included puns or inside jokes that encode Demuth’s friendship with his subjects in more subtle ways. Carlos, which is how Demuth addressed Williams, consists of yellow dots like the light bulbs on an illuminated theater sign, making Williams into a Broadway star. Bill is high in the sky, as if on a billboard above a building, and is a pun on the word “bill,” which can mean poster or ad. *Like I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, the poster portraits that Demuth made of his friends and fellow artists Georgia O’Keeffe and Arthur Dove incorporate their signature subject matter—fruits, plants, and landscapes—and their names, written in popular 1920s commercial fonts and bold colors.
O’Keeffe’s portrait practically shouts the letters of her last name, which people were always misspelling. Here Demuth is telling her (and us) that he knows her well enough to remember how many Es and Fs to include. In his poster portrait, Dove’s scythe has a red ribbon tied around it, a reference to his partner, the painter Helen Torr, who was known to friends as “Reds.” These witty details personalize the images, but only make sense if you know a bit about Demuth and his friends, which is perhaps why critics were slow to appreciate the cleverness of the poster portraits.

**Symbolic portraiture as a modernist tactic**
Symbolic or abstract portraiture was in vogue in Demuth’s day. Writer Gertrude Stein made word portraits of her friends, and Francis Picabia and Arthur Dove caricatured photographer and dealer Alfred Stieglitz as parts of a camera. Images like Marsden Hartley’s Portrait of a German Officer, 1914, a painted collage of symbols like flags, chessboards, and parts of a military uniform, are also important precedents for Demuth’s project. As modernists, all of these artists made works that are conceptually complicated, visually abstract, and exciting responses to the challenge of being innovative in the early twentieth century.

Additional resources:

This painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art


Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Georgia O’Keeffe, *The Lawrence Tree*

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

This was painted in the summer of 1929 while visiting D.H. Lawrence at his Kiowa Ranch during O’Keeffe’s first trip to New Mexico. The tree stands in front of the house.
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:

Figure \(\PageIndex{46}\): More Smarthistory images…
American Modernism

By Sarah Churchill

With the founding of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, 1929, modernism finally found its footing on American soil. Yet, in that same year the American Stock Market crashed, sparking a decade-long, worldwide economic downturn known as the Great Depression. The longest and most severe depression ever experienced in the industrialized world, the Great Depression sparked important changes in American economic policy. Under President Roosevelt's New Deal program, the Federal Art Project (sponsored by the Works Progress Administration or WPA) created economic opportunities for a new generation of modern American artists. Some, like the Abstract Expressionist Lee Krasner and Regionalist Thomas Hart Benton created iconic murals in celebration of American social life. Others, like photographers Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans trained their cameras on racial and economic inequality in the South and American West for the Farm Security Administration, producing iconic images like Lange's Migrant Mother (1936).

As many as 10,000 artists were commissioned to produce WPA funded projects during the Depression. The work they produced was largely figurative, and undoubtedly conservative by the standards of the European avant garde. Nonetheless, the infusion of cash helped to sustain artists during those bleak interwar years, resulting in the later flowering of Abstract Expressionism at the war's end in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

View the online exhibition: America's Great Depression and Roosevelt's New Deal

Millard Sheets, Tenement Flats

by DR. VIRGINIA MECKLENBURG, SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video (PageIndex(12)): Millard Sheets, *Tenement Flats*, 1933 – 34, oil on canvas, 102.1 x 127.6 cm (Smithsonian American Art Museum). A conversation with Dr. Virginia Mecklenburg, Chief Curator, Smithsonian American Art Museum and Dr. Steven Zucker

Additional resources:

This painting at the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Selected paintings from the 1934 Corcoran exhibition

Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*

by EVE SCHILLO, LACMA and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{31}\): Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo California*, 1936, printed later, gelatin silver print, 35.24 x 27.78 cm (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, PG.1997.2). A conversation with Eve Schillo, Assistant Curator, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Steven Zucker.

**Additional resources:**

[This photograph at LACMA](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…)

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"Contact Zones:" The American South and Southwest

By Sarah Churchill

Just as European modernists mined so-called "primitive cultures" in Africa and the South Pacific, American modernists also sought out native peoples in North America as a means towards romanticizing a rural, "exotic" and pre-industrial past. However, the cultural transmission, as we will see, was not one-way. Rather, just as American artists sought inspiration among First Nations inhabitants, Indigenous artists also incorporated elements of abstraction and Art Deco from Anglo-European artists into their painting, weaving and pottery. In the early twentieth century, the American Southwest became a rich "contact zone" between white and Indigenous communities.

Nonetheless, it's important to remember the inherent asymmetry in these relations. The destruction of North America's First Nations by white settler colonialism has had enduring and profound consequences on the lived experience of Indigenous peoples in the present day. The stripping of land, material culture, language and identity resulted in the accumulation of objects in many American museums, where access to these sacred objects by Native peoples became
difficult, if not impossible. The 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which legislated the respectful return of Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony, has gone some way towards repairing the harm done during American expansion, though the fight over access and repatriation continues today. Recently groups like Decolonize This Place have staged protests at the Brooklyn Museum and at the Museum of Natural History demanding that museum boards be more accountable to the communities they serve. Contemporary Indigenous art was also an important facet of the Standing Rock Sioux protests over the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016. “Reservations and slavery were tools enforced by white power structures,” explains Navajo artist Demian DinéYazhi, “Right now, the same structures are harming sacred ancestral land. It’s not purely Indigenous spirituality, it’s something much deeper that is woven into the fabric of human existence that we’ve been distracted and manipulated away from honoring.”

Read more about artistic protest at Standing Rock at HyperAllergic.

Robert Henri, Tom Po Qui (Water of Antelope Lake/Indian Girl/Ramonzita)

by DR. ELIZABETH S. HAWLEY

Robert Henri, Tom Po Qui (Water of Antelope Lake/Indian Girl/Romancita), 1914, oil on canvas; 40-½ x 32-½ inches (Denver Art Museum)

Robert Henri produced this striking portrait of Ramonzita Gonzales (Tom Po Qui) (Tewa, San Juan Pueblo) in 1914, at the onset of the First World War. The date of the painting, the vibrancy of Henri’s palette, and the sitter’s indigenous
Pueblo identity are key to unpacking the significance of the work.

Robert Henri, *Snow in New York*, 1902, oil on canvas, 81.3 x 65.5 cm (National Gallery of Art, photo: [Steven Zucker](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…) ), CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Henri was, by this time, an important figure in the American art world, and was recognized as a leading figure in the development of the [Ashcan School](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…) ) style of painting. He had been the main organizer of a renegade group of artists known as The Eight. *Tom Po Qui* was painted six years later, relatively late in his career, and here we see a shift in style.
A new vibrancy

Just a year prior to the production of this work, the New York art world had been rocked by the 1913 Armory Show (also known as the International Exhibition of Modern Art), which was the first major exhibition of modern art staged in the United States. While some American artists (including Henri) were included in the show, it was the Europeans who really shocked audiences with their avant-garde styles, including Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism. For American viewers who had only recently become accustomed to the gritty realism of Henri and his fellow Ashcan School painters, the experimental European works were shocking.

left: Robert Henri, Figure in Motion, 1913, oil on canvas, 196.2 x 94.6 cm (Terra Foundation for American Art); right: Marcel Duchamp, Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2), 1912, oil on canvas, 151.8 x 93.3 cm (Philadelphia Museum of Art)

In fact, one of Henri's contributions to the show, Figure in Motion, is often compared to Marcel Duchamp's famed Cubist composition Nude Descending a Staircase (No.2) as a way to underscore the resolutely representational character of American Realism with the flat planes and abstracted quality of the European avant-garde. While Henri's work remained figurative in the years after the Armory show, his technique grew looser and his palette became lighter and brighter, likely due in part to experiencing Fauvist works at the Armory.
Robert Henri, *Tom Po Qui (Water of Antelope Lake/Indian Girl/Romancita)* (detail), 1914, oil on canvas; 40-½ x 32-½ inches (Denver Art Museum)

However, the vivid colors of *Tom Po Qui* cannot be explained by exposure to European modernist styles alone; that Henri was in California when he painted this canvas is also important. New York-based Henri typically spent summers abroad, traveling to various European locales (significant previous trips included Ireland, Holland, and Spain). However, World War I broke out in the summer of 1914, which made international voyages untenable. Like many Americans whose travel plans were restricted to domestic trips, Henri turned his eye westward. He took the train out to California, settling for the summer months in La Jolla.
Robert Henri, *Tom Po Qui (Water of Antelope Lake/Indian Girl/Romancita)* (detail), 1914, oil on canvas; 40-½ x 32-½ inches (Denver Art Museum)

Henri was particularly drawn to the intense light of southern California, declaring the conditions ideal for painters. His affinity for this light can be seen in the portrait of *Tom Po Qui*, where the backdrop of the painting is not the dark, interior spaces common in his earlier work, but rather a loosely-painted setting evocative of the sunlight-dappled coastal region where he found himself. The patchy brushwork and bright colors may show evidence of the influence of European modernists such as Paul Cézanne and Henri Matisse, but also the impact of working out west.

“My People”

Henri was not only attracted to the light of California; he was also drawn to the diverse population of the area. Throughout his career, Henri was invested in finding new and interesting people to paint, seeking out models of varying social positions, professions, regions, and ethnicities. In California, he was especially interested in finding sitters of what he understood to be diverse racial identities. During what would eventually be three trips to the area, he painted Black, Chinese American, Mexican American, and American Indian sitters. In a 1915 article predicated on these works, Henri stated: “I was not interested in these people to sentimentalize over them, to mourn over the fact that we have destroyed the Indian, that we are changing the shy Chinese girl into a soubrette, . . . I am looking at each individual with the eager hope of finding there something of the dignity of life, the humor, the humanity, the kindness.” [1]
Today we read his rhetoric as problematically racist and patronizing, particularly in light of the article’s proprietary title, “My People.” But Henri’s desire to paint these sitters as dignified individuals nonetheless defies the more virulent racial stereotyping typical of the era, even as his approach could devolve into exoticism.

Robert Henri, *Tom Po Qui (Water of Antelope Lake/Indian Girl/Romancita)* (detail), 1914, oil on canvas; 40-½ x 32-½ inches (Denver Art Museum)

*Tom Po Qui* is a prime example of such portraiture. On the one hand, the work appears to present Gonzales as an ethnic type, her colorful Native clothing and dazzling silver jewelry highlighted in a manner that seems to render her a decorative object, presented to be consumed by non-Native audiences eager to see depictions of exotic American Indian culture. Yet Gonzales stares out of the canvas with self-possession, evenly meeting the viewer’s gaze in a way that disrupts the interpretation of this work as entirely exploitative. The agency of this sitter cannot be ignored, and indeed the historical record regarding Gonzales’s identity as a Pueblo artist and performer in her own right brings further nuance to analysis of this painting.

**Painted Desert**

Henri painted Gonzales not in La Jolla, but in nearby San Diego, at the site of the Panama-California Exposition, which would open in 1915. The Panama-California Exposition was held between January 1, 1915 and January 1, 1917 in San Diego’s Balboa Park, to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal and to promote tourism in the region. Construction was underway for the Exposition’s various exhibits, including the “Painted Desert,” an ethnographic exhibit with a large-
scale reconstructed pueblo that would display hundreds of Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache performers. Organizers asked several Pueblo families to travel from their homes in New Mexico to the site early and to aid in construction. Gonzales was among them, arriving with her cousin Maria Martinez and Maria’s husband Julian. While Julian Martinez served as a construction foreman, Gonzales and Maria Martinez constructed the large pots that served as chimneys in the living spaces for the reconstructed Pueblo. When the fair opened, they would continue producing pottery, this time for sale to the visitors who flocked to the exposition. Tourist interest in Pueblo pottery during this period spurred a revival in the practice, which had almost died out in the late nineteenth century.

![Painted Desert Exhibit, Panama-California Exposition, 1915](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…Updated: Wed, 25 Aug 2021 05:28:40 GMT Powered by 78)

Unknown photographer, Maria Martinez and Ramoncita Gonzales making pottery, Painted Desert Exhibit, Panama-California Exposition, 1915 (photo: San Diego Museum of Man)

Fairgoers occasionally purchased pots, but they also visited the Painted Desert exhibit to simply observe the Indigenous peoples residing there, undertaking activities deemed traditional—including pottery production. Visitors watched as Maria Martinez and Ramoncita Gonzales shaped and fired their vessels, with Julian Martinez providing the painted designs. These Pueblo figures were artist/performers; they agreed to present themselves as Native peoples living in a traditional manner in exchange for wages paid by the fair organizers. Likewise, as artists such as Henri visited the fairgrounds in search of models, Pueblo performers agreed to sit, or we might say, perform their traditional identity.


Robert Henri, *Tom Po Qui (Water of Antelope Lake/Indian Girl/Romancita) (detail)*, 1914, oil on canvas; 40-½ x 32-½ inches (Denver Art Museum)
Gonzales likely selected her attire for *Tom Po Qui*; it is the same types of clothing and jewelry that we see her and other Pueblo women wearing when the exposition opened. As customary Pueblo livelihoods were threatened by encroaching white culture, Gonzales and others turned to the production of tourist wares and performance as “Show Indians” as a matter of survival. Images such as *Tom Po Qui* are reminders of the exploitative and exoticizing practices that led Pueblo people like Gonzales to take up the performance of their indigenous identity for financial security. It is worth noting however, that simultaneously, this work documented the agency of Native peoples in the early years of the twentieth century, as they adapted indigenous traditions to the needs of their modern lives.


Additional Resources

- This painting at the Denver Art Museum


The lure of the American Southwest: E. Martin Hennings, *Rabbit Hunt* 

by [DR. JENNIFER HENNEMAN, DENVER ART MUSEUM](https://smarthistory.org/henri-tom-po-qui/) and [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://smarthistory.org/henri-tom-po-qui/).
Video \(\PageIndex{13}\): A conversation with Dr. Jennifer Henneman, Assistant Curator of Western American Art, Denver Art Museum, and Dr. Beth Harris about E. Martin Hennings, Rabbit Hunt, c. 1925, oil on canvas (Denver Art Museum)

Special thanks to the Denver Art Museum

Velino Shije Herrera (Ma Pe Wi), *Design, Tree and Birds*

by DR. ADRIANA GRECI GREEN and DR. BETH HARRIS
Video \( \PageIndex{14} \): Velino Shije Herrera (Ma Pe Wi), *Design, Tree and Birds*, c. 1930, watercolor on paper, 25.25 x 17.75 inches (Newark Museum of Art, Gift of Amelia Elizabeth White, 1937, 37.216)

The Pueblo Modernism of Velino Shije Herrera.

**Additional resources:**

This work of art at the Newark Museum

[The Modernist-Inspired Watercolors of a Pioneering Pueblo Painter](#)

[Pablita Velarde’s Paintings of Traditional Pueblo Culture](#)


**Awa Tsireh’s Pottery Makers**

by [RYUICHI NAKAYAMA](#)
Awa Tsireh, *Pottery Makers*, c. 1930, ink and watercolor, 33.02 x 54.29 cm (Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio)

Two Pueblo women sit and decorate pottery with brushes made of yucca leaves. Beside them, finished vessels in white, black, and red are arranged in a horizontal line. Except for delicate shadows cast on the right side of the women and vessels, the background is left blank and we do not know where these women are working. This painting, known as *Pottery Makers*, is one of many that the artist Awa Tsireh (Cattail Bird, Spanish name Alfonso Roybal) created about Pueblo cultures, including images of ceremonial dances and pottery designs. The Pueblo people are one of many Native American cultural groups living in the southwestern United States.

**Increasing contact**

Awa Tsireh was a painter and metalsmith from San Ildefonso Pueblo, a Tewa-speaking Indigenous group in New Mexico. Awa Tsireh (and other contemporaneous Pueblo artists) used commercial artistic media, such as ink and watercolor, and their paintings were sold to primarily non-Native audiences. As the result of Pueblo communities' increased contact with U.S. settler-colonial society in the first decades of the twentieth century, Pueblo pottery and Pueblo paintings depicting pottery-making scenes attracted urban middle- and upper-middle-class white audiences (mostly from the urban East coast) some of whom felt that mainstream U.S. culture had lost its harmonious balance between nature and civilization. Other Pueblo painters such as Ma-Pe-Wi (Velino Shije Herrera, Zia Pueblo) and Quah Ah (Tonita Peña, a San Ildefonso female painter who lived in Cochiti Pueblo) also produced paintings of the same subject matter. *Pottery Makers* demonstrates how Awa Tsireh’s interactions with an emerging community of non-Native cultural elites (including artists, writers, philanthropists, art collectors, and scholars) living in or visiting Santa Fe and Taos in New Mexico shaped how he depicted scenes of Pueblo pottery making.

**Art and ethnography**

In the late 1910s, non-Native cultural elites in Santa Fe, such as Edgar Lee Hewett, founder of the Museum of New Mexico (MNM), and Elizabeth DeHuff, wife of then superintendent of the Santa Fe Indian School began to recognize Pueblo paintings not only as ethnographic documents that described Pueblo ceremonial dances and life at villages, but also as fine art. Early advocates of Pueblo paintings encouraged artists to create art based on their own cultures. However, this does not mean Awa Tsireh passively produced ethnographic depictions of Pueblo culture at the behest of white anthropologists. It is important to emphasize that Pueblo artists like Awa Tsireh had room for negotiation and artistic ingenuity, such as we see in *Pottery Makers*. 
Awa Tsireh, *Pottery Makers* (detail), c. 1930, ink and watercolor, 33.02 x 54.29 cm (Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio)

The pottery in the painting

Unidentified San Ildefonso artist, Jar, c. 1890s, clay and paint, 31.75 cm in diameter (Denver Art Museum)

All but one of the vessels in *Pottery Makers* are globular in shape with a short neck. They look like actual vessels made with black designs on white slip (watery clay paint) and a red band at the bottom as well as on the inside below the rim. Their color palette resembles black-on-cream wares from the late nineteenth century, such as a storage jar made in the 1890s that uses only black color for abstract motifs on the white field and has an undecorated red band at the bottom and on the rim.

Unknown San Ildefonso Artist, Jar, c. 1900 (courtesy of School for Advanced Research; photo: Lynn Lown)

However, by the turn of the twentieth century, black-on-cream ware was gradually replaced by new styles, such as
polychrome ware that showed colorful abstract motifs using reddish brown pigments.

By the time Awa Tsireh produced this painting around 1930, Julian and Maria Martinez had achieved national success with their now iconic monochrome black-on-black polished ware. Importantly, the ceramic style depicted in Pottery Makers does not follow the trend at San Ildefonso Pueblo at that time, which means that Awa Tsireh’s paintings are not exact depictions of life in San Ildefonso Pueblo—despite his use of a naturalistic approach. The artist’s choice to use this style of pottery helps us to understand the complex thought process of a Pueblo artist in the early twentieth century.

"Indian work room, Indian Building, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Navaho Indians among them Elle, the most famous weaver among the Navahos, and Tom of Ganado, her husband, and Indians from other tribes—Santo Domingo, Isleta, Laguna, and San Felipi," a postcard from the Fred Harvey series, c. 1900–09 (Newberry Library)

The significant stylistic change from black-on-cream wares in San Ildefonso pottery around the turn of the twentieth century, and the invention of polished black-on-black wares in the late 1910s, were the result of Pueblo communities’ increased contact with U.S. settler-colonial society. As the result of railroad tourism in the American Southwest from the 1890s, Pueblo pottery became widely popular among white urban middle- and upper-middle-class individuals. Along with the railroad run by Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe (AT & SF) Railway, Fred Harvey Company’s hotels sold Indigenous hand-made objects and set up demonstrations of ceremonial dances as well as the making of Indigenous arts like Pueblo pottery and Diné (Navajo) weavings.

Sales

Meanwhile, Pueblo communities needed to earn cash due to the reduction of the land available for agriculture and hunting due to the encroachment of Anglo and Hispanic ranchers seeking to increase their production of beef as well as the increased presence of a cash economy after New Mexico was annexed by the U.S. in 1848 as a result of the Mexican-American War. The sales of Indigenous hand-made objects for the non-Native market helped Pueblos to survive economically. These sales also created room for Pueblo cultural expression in the face of the forced assimilation policy by the U.S. federal government, which included sending Pueblo youths to boarding schools as well as attacks against ceremonial practices that culminated in a series of documents issued in the early 1920s (by Commissioner of the Office of Indian Affairs Charles Burke) restricting many of them.

At this time, Pueblo potters—mostly women—began to produce less elaborate small pottery vessels and figurines so that they could maximize their sales to tourists. Early tourists preferred small inexpensive vessels as souvenirs and
cared less about quality. At the same time, Pueblo potters began to experiment with non-conventional shapes and designs (such as ashtrays, vases with handles, or figurines). They also created pseudo-ceremonial vessels that appealed to tourists’ and anthropologists’ curiosity about Indigenous esoteric materials, despite the fact that they had no ceremonial function within the Pueblo communities, and were a tactic to protect ceremonial objects from outsiders.

**Questions of authenticity**

Not all of these changes in the production of Pueblo pottery were favorable in the eyes of white cultural elites who were concerned about the impact of tourism and assimilation policies on Pueblo cultural traditions. Some were concerned that changes to these objects made them less “authentic,” a perception that was shaped by the myth of a vanishing race—a pervasive assumption among non-Natives that Indigenous peoples and their cultural distinctiveness would completely disappear in the face of modernization and settler-colonial practices. Herbert J. Spinden, a curator at the American Museum of Natural History, praised San Ildefonso pottery as “decorative art” while expressing his concerns over the destructive impact of “the commercializing American contact” on “the remains of the native culture.” [1] In collectors’ and scholars’ imaginations, Native traditions were on the verge of extinction.

While museums tried to collect what they regarded as pottery vessels free from the negative impact of tourism, Kenneth Chapman, curator of the MNM, encouraged Pueblo potters to study older vessels to revive earlier traditions. Awa Tsireh referenced black-on-cream wares for *Pottery Makers*—the style widely used in San Ildefonso Pueblo before the expansion of tourism in the Southwest that had caused radical changes in Pueblo pottery-making—and was surely aware of the special value attached to older vessels by educated non-Native audiences.

![Photographs showing the “olla maiden trope” were common in the late 19th-century U.S. Pueblo Women Carrying Water, c. 1870–98, from Stereoscopic views of the Indians of New Mexico, c. 1870–1908, albumen photoprint (The New York Public Library)](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres...) Updated: Wed, 25 Aug 2021 05:28:40 GMT Powered by 85)

**Women in the painting**

Interestingly, Awa Tsireh’s pottery-making scenes rarely include male figures (even though pottery-making is traditionally women’s work among Pueblo people, men also participated in the production of pottery—and the artist himself decorated vessels). Representations of Pueblo women carrying an *olla* on their head (“olla” is a Spanish word meaning “cooking pot” but often used as “water jar” in this context) were ubiquitous in dominant U.S. visual culture including in photographs, advertisements, and artworks.
The trope of the “olla maiden” is a romanticized image of Pueblo culture, especially women. White intellectuals in the late nineteenth century saw over-packed urban spaces and machine-made commodities as causing human alienation as well as physical and moral degeneration (especially among white males). The olla maiden became a symbol of an attempt to restore what they felt had been lost: a harmonious balance between nature and civilization. For them, traditional Native handmade objects made by women from natural materials, such as basketry and pottery vessels, provided symbolic connections to nature and a romanticized past. In his pottery-making scenes, Awa Tsireh aligned his pottery-making scenes with the popular “olla maiden” trope by showing only women and adding more globular-shaped jars that referred to earlier types of vessels rather than a diversity of vessels including plates, different types of bowls, canteens, and so forth.

Photographer unknown, Dolorita Vigil: Dressmaker and Potter, San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico, c. 1915 (Palace of the Governors Photo Archives Collection)

Awa Tsireh’s pottery-making scenes reference an even more specific variation of the “olla maiden” trope—images of Pueblo women making pottery. A staged photograph that shows this subject includes Dolorita Vigil, from San Ildefonso; she squats on her heels, holds a water jar, and is surrounded by three other water jars. She holds a brush made out of a yucca leaf in her right hand as if she is decorating the jar. The brick-paved ground and the wall behind her suggest that she is probably in the courtyard of the Palace of Governors in Santa Fe where Kenneth Chapman had invited San Ildefonso potters to perform demonstrations for white middle- and upper-middle-class visitors.

This staged photograph derives from popular demonstrations of Indigenous art being made at tourist sites. Tourist interest in these hand-made objects was so great that they sought to observe ceramic production by the hands of Indigenous artists. The artificiality of this photograph’s setting reveals that the focus was on reproducing images of a Pueblo woman with her water jar, even if it was outside the Pueblo context. Awa Tsireh was surely aware that the “olla maiden” trope provided a frame of reference to strengthen the notion of “authenticity” projected onto Pueblo pottery.

Documenting production

Although photographers had produced images of Pueblo pottery-making since the late nineteenth century, a renewed interest in documenting production emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century. Non-Native specialists studied techniques and design principles for different types of pottery as a way of establishing criteria to discern the
quality of Pueblo pottery. They believed this could help to elevate the status of Pueblo pottery to fine art.

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Illustration of the Pueblo pottery arranged according to what was considered “good” (the row on top) and “bad” (the bottom row) by collectors. from Olive W. Wilson, “The Survival of an Ancient Art,” Art & Archaeology (January 1920): 28.

An essay in Art and Archaeology by Olive Wilson, “The Survival of an Ancient Art” (1920) illustrated the processes of pottery-making with photographs and text. It also includes a photograph showing Pueblo pottery arranged horizontally, similar to what we see in Awa Tsireh’s Pottery Makers—he was likely referencing this type of photographic representation of Pueblo culture. The photograph in Wilson’s essay contrasts what the author regarded as “good” pottery on the top row (namely globular-shaped jars with refined shapes and meticulous details and a traditional rectangular corn-meal bowl) and “bad” pottery on the row below (here there are types of vessels invented and sold for tourists, such as clay figurines and non-conventional-shaped vessels decorated with less elaborate designs).

This photograph also shows pottery vessels from a consistent angle, and arranges them isolated from the surrounding environment. This type of neatly arranged photographic image resonated with emerging research on designs of Indigenous artifacts. It shows a marked difference from the cluttered souvenirs commonly found in home decoration that became widely popular among US white middle- and upper-middle classes around the turn of the twentieth century. A trend where Indigenous artifacts from different cultures were promiscuously displayed among artworks and books about Indigenous peoples in dens, alcoves, and hallways. This fashion became possible when department stores and world fairs brought Indigenous art to their clientele, and reflected the value that Indigenous hand-made objects had for some urban white elites. Displays at “Indian corners” framed Indigenous hand-made objects as “souvenirs” and “curios” rather than as “fine arts” or “ethnographic specimens.”

The photographic representation of Pueblo pottery employed by anthropologists and curators, could dictate to viewers how these wares should be viewed and what constituted “good” or “bad” pottery as “fine art.” Awa Tsireh drew on the authority tied to this photographic format for Indigenous work, in part, perhaps, because of its appeal to white audiences.
Awa Tsireh, *Pottery Makers*, c. 1930, ink and watercolor, 33.02 x 54.29 cm (Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio)

**Unique representations**

Awa Tsireh’s choice to incorporate older styles into his painting may have resonated with his predominantly white, educated, non-Native audiences, who had access to books and articles about Pueblo pottery. He chose to appeal to their particular interest in older vessels from the late nineteenth century rather than those produced by contemporary potters. Awa Tsireh’s *Pottery Makers* tacitly confirms his non-Native audience’s understanding of ideally good Pueblo pottery, and gives his painting an aura of authenticity that would have appealed to his audience. Meanwhile, the artist reinforced his audiences’ romanticized image of Pueblo culture by referencing the “olla maiden” trope. Because of decades of interactions with non-Native intellectuals, artists at San Ildefonso Pueblo—like Awa Tsireh—were aware of the interest in describing Native techniques and analyzing designs.

*Pottery Makers* demonstrates that Awa Tsireh created his own unique representation of Pueblo women and pottery by integrating different modes of representations of Pueblo people and culture found in settler-colonial U.S. visual culture into his pottery-making scenes. These ranged from the popular “olla maiden” trope to anthropological photographs studying pottery design. By aligning his artworks with his audiences’ desire for authenticity, Awa Tsireh found a means to solidify his external reputation as an outstanding Pueblo artist. At the same time, Awa Tsireh visualized his understanding of contemporary Pueblo communities interacting with outsiders (tourists and anthropologists alike). This created a complex dynamic where his own culture was Othered by the very outsiders he references in his artwork. In this way, Awa Tsireh disrupted the uneven power relationship between the colonizer as observer, and the colonized peoples as the observed.

*At the beginning of this project, the author consulted with the Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) of San Ildefonso Pueblo in order to make sure another essay did not violate protocols of religious matter from the perspectives of cultural specialists. Out of respect to the decision made by the board member, the author decided to write about this topic instead of the original plan. I express my gratitude to the members of the advisory board who reviewed my proposal, and Mike Bremer, officer of THPO. Western academic institutions have tended to regard Indigenous communities as the subject of research and excluded from the decision-making processes related to research projects. Tribal consultation is an important approach to redress structural problems of academic research about Indigenous cultures. Although just a consultation is not enough to redesign research to better reflect interests of Indigenous communities, this essay seeks to introduce such issues to a broader public by using a platform like Smarthistory.*

**Notes:**
[1] Spinden discussed this in his article “The Making of Pottery at San Ildefonso” (1911)

Additional resources:


Harlem Renaissance

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The Harlem Renaissance was an intellectual and cultural revival of African American music, dance, art, fashion, literature, theater and politics centered in Harlem, Manhattan, New York City, spanning the 1920s and 1930s. At the time, it was known as the “New Negro Movement”, named after The New Negro, a 1925 anthology edited by Alain Locke. The movement also included the new African American cultural expressions across the urban areas in the Northeast and Midwest United States affected by a renewed militancy in the general struggle for civil rights for African Americans that occurred in the wake of civil rights struggles in the then-still-segregated US Armed Forces in WWI and which was further inspired by the NAACP, the Garveyite movement and the Russian Revolution, combined with the Great Migration of African American workers fleeing the racist conditions of the Jim Crow Deep South, Harlem being the final destination of the largest number of those who migrated north.

Though it was centered in the Harlem neighborhood, many Francophone black writers from African and Caribbean colonies who lived in Paris were also influenced by the movement. Many of its ideas lived on much longer. The zenith of this “flowering of Negro literature”, as James Weldon Johnson preferred to call the Harlem Renaissance, took place between 1924—when Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life hosted a party for black writers where many white publishers were in attendance—and 1929, the year of the stock-market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression.

The Art of the Harlem Renaissance: Visualizing Black Greatness

No one style came to define the visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance, which included the painters Jacob Lawrence and Aaron Douglas and photographer James Van Der Zee, among others. Rather, the artists associated with the movement shared a desire to develop and promote a distinctly African American culture inspired by Alain LeRoy Locke's The New Negro (1925), which called for a renewed "self-respect and self-dependence" within the Black
community. Collectively, the art of the Harlem Renaissance asserted a pride in black life and identity, explored a rising consciousness of inequality and racism and promoted an interest in the modern world.

Notably, the Harlem Renaissance provided the fertile soil upon which future Black artists were to be educated and supported and launched the careers of several important art educators. Hale Woodruff, for example, returned from Paris after the 1929 Stock Market Crash to establish the first fine art department for Southern Black students at Atlanta University in 1931 and was one of the first African American professors hired at New York University, where he worked until 1968. He mentored many important artists, including Jacob Lawrence, Leo Twiggs and Faith Ringgold. Along with Romare Bearden and Richard Mayhew, Woodruff also later co-founded Spiral in 1963, a collective of African American artists dedicated to examining the role of visual art in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1932 Augusta Savage founded the Savage School of Arts & Crafts, where she mentored Bearden, Lawrence and Norman Lewis. Savage's Harlem Arts Guild was also active in community arts projects and education initiatives, some of which were funded by the Federal Arts Project.

Photography also flourished during the Harlem Renaissance. James Van Der Zee, the unofficial chronicler of Black life in Harlem, was joined by James Latimer Allen and Roy DeCarava. The formal studio portraits of Van Der Zee and Allen document a thriving community of up and coming Black middle-class Americans. DeCarava's snapshot and street documentary photographs captured the textures and energy of the neighborhood with great empathy and affection for his subjects. In 1952, DeCarava became the first Black photographer to receive the prestigious Guggenheim fellowship, which enabled him to spend an entire year documenting Harlem.

View the [online exhibition](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…/Updated%20-%202021) on the Harlem Renaissance at the National Gallery of Art.

*by TIMOTHY ANGLIN BURGARD, FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO and DR. BETH HARRIS*
Video \(\PageIndex{16}\): Aaron Douglas, *Aspiration*, 1936, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4 cm (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco), a Seeing America video

**Jacob Lawrence**

**Jacob Lawrence, The Migration Series**

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS

Directly below is the shorter version of this video. You can access the longer version by scrolling down the page.
Video \(\PageIndex{17}\): Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*, 1940-41, 60 panels, tempera on hardboard (even numbers at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, odd numbers at the Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.)
Video \(\PageIndex{18}\): Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*, 1940-41, 60 panels, tempera on hardboard (even numbers at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, odd numbers at the Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.)

**Additional resources:**

*The Migration Series* at the Phillips Collection

*The Migration Series* at The Museum of Modern Art

A finding guide for images related to the Great Migration at the Library of Congress

A finding guide for primary documents related to the Great Migration at the Library of Congress

**Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:**
A Harlem street scene by Jacob Lawrence, *Ambulance Call*

by DR. JENNIFER PADGETT, CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART and DR. BETH HARRIS

Video: Jacob Lawrence, *Ambulance Call*, 1948, tempera on board, 61 x 50.8 cm (Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art) Speakers: Jennifer Padgett, assistant curator, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and Beth Harris
**Social Realism & American Regionalism c. 1930 - 1945**

The Great Depression was a profoundly transformative moment in American social history. Waves of successive bank panics, record unemployment (between 20 and 30% at its height), home foreclosures, severe drought and crop failure left many American families on precarious financial footing. American artists responded with empathy and compassion, turning away from European abstraction (and its association with upper-class, bourgeois avant gardism) to embrace more familiar subjects associated with America's rural heartland. This new figurative style known as American Regionalism (or American Scene Painting) embraced working-class, local and populist narratives. Their art told the American story rendered in precise detail and rich emotion. Throughout the 1930s and ‘40s artists like Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood (all Midwesterners) drew on local sources for their subjects to celebrate and lament the plight of average Americans. Regionalism was the means by which many artists during the period connected with their local communities rather than with the universalism of their European contemporaries.

In the late 1930s however, the threat of totalitarianism in Europe, the artists of which used social realism to propagandistic ends, threatened the success of the American Regionalist style. It began to be seen as politically unpalatable and regressive and was eventually dismissed by postwar artists like the Abstract Expressionists. Nonetheless, the Regionalists were instrumental educators of later American artists. The famed Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock, for example, was a student of Thomas Hart Benton's at the Art Student's League in New York City. Though their work was dramatically different, the two artists shared a close friendship. As Pollock later recalled, Benton “drove his kind of realism at me so hard I bounced right into non-objective painting.”

Source: Debra Mancoff, "I taught Jack that" – Thomas Hart Benton and his student, Jackson Pollock,

**Todros Geller, Strange Worlds**

*by* SARAH ALVAREZ, THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO *and* DR. BETH HARRIS
Video (PageIndex(20)): Todros Geller, *Strange Worlds*, 1928, oil on canvas, 71.8 x 66.4 cm (Art Institute of Chicago), a Seeing America videoSpeakers: Sarah Alvarez, Director of School Programs, Department of Learning and Engagement, The Art Institute of Chicago and Steven Zucker

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Figure \(\PageIndex{48}\): More Smarthistory images…

Grant Wood

Grant Wood, *American Gothic*

*by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER*

Media, iframe, embed and object tags are not supported inside of a PDF.

Video \(\PageIndex{21}\): Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930, oil on beaver board, 78 x 65.3 cm / 30-3/4 x 25-3/4" (The Art Institute of Chicago)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Grant Wood, Parson Weems' Fable

by DR. SHIRLEY REECE-HUGHES, AMON CARTER MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video: A conversation with Dr. Shirley Reece-Hughes, Curator, Amon Carter Museum of American Art and Dr. Steven Zucker in front of Grant Wood, *Parson Weems’ Fable*, 1939, oil on canvas, 38 1/8 x 50 1/8 inches (Amon Carter Museum of American Art)

Reginald Marsh, *Wooden Horses*

by ERIN MONROE, WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

Additional resources:

American art at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

Ben Shahn, Miners' Wives

by JESSICA T. SMITH, PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART and DR. BETH HARRIS
Video (PageIndex(24)): Ben Shahn, *Miners’ Wives*, c. 1948, tempera on panel, 121.9 x 91.4 cm (The Philadelphia Museum of Art) © Estate of Ben Shahn A conversation with Jessica T. Smith, Susan Gray Detweiler Curator of American Art, and Manager, Center for American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art and Dr. Beth Harris

**Edward Hopper, Nighthawks**

by [CHRISTINE ZAPPELLA](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/Art_E103%3A_Art_History_III_(1840%E2%80%93Pres…)

Updated: Wed, 25 Aug 2021 05:28:40 GMT

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Video \(\PageIndex{26}\): Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942, oil on canvas, 84.1 x 152.4 cm (33-1/8 x 60 inches) (The Art Institute of Chicago)

Figure \(\PageIndex{57}\): Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942, oil on canvas, 84.1 x 152.4 cm / 33-1/8 x 60” (Art Institute of Chicago)

**Near misses**

In place of meaningful interactions, the four characters inside the diner of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* are involved in a series of near misses. The man and woman might be touching hands, but they aren't. The waiter and smoking man might be conversing, but they're not. The couple might strike up a conversation with the man facing them, but somehow, we know they won't. And then we realize that Hopper has placed us, the viewer, on the city street, with no door to enter the diner, and yet in a position to evaluate each of the people inside. We see the row of empty counter stools nearest us. We notice that no one is making eye contact with any one else. Up close, the waiter's face appears to have an
expression of horror or pain. And then there is a chilling revelation: each of us is completely alone in the world.

The slickness of the paint, which makes the canvas read almost like an advertisement, and immediate accessibility of the subject matter draws the viewer into Hopper’s painting. But he does not tell us a story. Rather than a narrative about men and women out for a festive night on the town, we are invited to ask questions about the characters’ ambiguous lives. Are the man and woman a couple? Where are they coming from? Where are they going? Who is the man with his back to us? How did he end up in the diner? What is the waiter’s life like? What is causing his distress?

The light

By setting the scene on one of New York City’s oblique corners and surrounding the diner with glass, Hopper was able to exploit stark pictorial devices. First, the fluorescent light flooding the diner is the only light that illuminates the painting; in the absence of a streetlamp, it spills into the night through both windows onto both sides of the street corner. It throws a series of cast shadows onto the sidewalk and apartment buildings, but ultimately draws our attention back to the men and woman inside the diner. The angle also allows him to show the people in a mix of frontal and profile views, heightening the sense that no figure is really communicating with another.

This feeling can be understood by comparing *Nighthawks* to Hopper’s earlier painting *Early Sunday Morning*. Both paintings are set in front of the red brick apartments of New York’s Greenwich Village and show us an hour of the day when people are typically not awake. Like *Nighthawks*, which was created at the beginning of America’s involvement in World War II, *Early Sunday Morning* was also painted at a historically important moment, the beginning of the Great Depression. But despite their similarities, *Early Sunday Morning* produces a sense of ease in the viewer, not anxiety.

Partially, this is because of the flooding light of dawn. But *Early Sunday Morning*, with its frilly awnings, brightly colored barber’s pole, squat fire hydrant, and windows opening to meet the morning sun, presents a world that is about to bustle with life. *Nighthawks* shows the opposite. The windows of the shops and apartments are empty and dark. The only remnants of human activity outside the diner are a cash register in a shop window and a cigar advertisement above the glass pane. There is no clock in the restaurant, but the empty coffee tureens on the back counter betray the indecent hour of night. This is a world shut down. Because our characters are awake, they are alienated—not only from each other, but also from civilization itself.
A timeless feel

_Nighthawks_ is one of Hopper's New York City paintings, and the artist said that it was based on a real café. Many people have tried to find the exact setting of the painting, but have failed. In his wife's diaries, she wrote that she and Hopper himself both served as models for the people in the painting. Despite these real-life details, the empty composition and flat, abstracting planes of color give the canvas a timeless feel, making it an object onto which one can project one’s own reality. Perhaps this is why it has lent itself to so well to many parodies, even appearing as a motif on an episode of The Simpsons.

When it was completed the canvas was bought almost immediately by the Art Institute of Chicago where it remains, and has been wildly popular ever since. The painting’s modern-day appeal can also be understood because of its ability to evoke a sense of nostalgia for an America of a time gone-by. Despite its inherent universality, the dress of the four people—the woman evoking a pin-up doll, the men in their well-tailored suits and hats, the worker in his soda jerk costume—as well as the “Phillies” advertisement, firmly plant the painting in a simpler past, making it a piece of Americana.

A subtle critique

But perhaps _Nighthawks_’ enduring popularity can be explained because of its subtle critique of the modern world, the world in which we all live. Despite its surface beauty, this world is one measured in cups of coffee, imbued with an overwhelming sense of loneliness, and a deep desire, but ultimate inability, to connect with those around us.

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Norman Rockwell, *Rosie the Riveter*

by DR. MARGARET C. CONRADS and DR. BETH HARRIS

Video: Norman Rockwell, *Rosie the Riveter*, 1943, oil on canvas, 52 x 40 inches (Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Figure \(\PageIndex{60}\): More SmartHistory images…