14.6: American and regional culture

American and regional culture

How have ideas, beliefs, and art shaped the United States?

From ancient cultures to modern cross-cultures.

Figure 1: John Trumbull, Declaration of Independence, 1819, oil on canvas, 366 x 549 cm (United States Capitol)
Art is a conversation with time

Essay by Dr. Bryan Zygmont

John Trumbull’s The Declaration of Independence (1817-18)—perhaps his most enduring and important work—has appeared in countless history textbooks, and in this way, American students of all ages have been led to believe that there was a magical day on the Fourth of July in 1776 when delegates gathered together at Independence Hall to sign this foundational document in the history of the United States. But paintings do not necessarily tell the truth, and Trumbull’s masterpiece is no exception. The Declaration of Independence was not formally signed on the Fourth of July (as yearly commemorative fireworks might suggest), and not all 56 men who would eventually sign the Declaration were present when it was officially autographed some weeks later.

There is another whispered untruth in this painting. Trumbull has depicted 47 people in this somewhat confined space, 42 of whom were delegates who (eventually) would sign the Declaration of Independence. Each representative Trumbull painted is a white male, which makes this group far from representational of the population of the each colony they represented (the American colonies were far more pluralistic). The same has been true of the United States in all the decades that followed. “We the People” are both men and women, both native born and recently arrived, and look both similar to and distinct from the 47 landholders in Trumbull’s painting. The broad history of art in North America makes this succinctly clear. In that art we can get a more true sense of what the United States of America was in the past and what the United States of America is today.

The Puritans — less dour than you might suspect!

But it is not only in regards to the signing of the Declaration of Independence that history textbooks might deceive high school students. In fact, if one can conjure up a mental image of what a seventeenth-century pilgrim might look like, that image would likely include joyless facial expressions and austere clothing that did not stray from black and white—for this is the somewhat romanticized view that nineteenth-century artists would later present (Robert Weir’s The Embarkation of the Pilgrims is but one example). But although the Puritans fled England and then Holland in search of religious liberty, they were not as dour as historical lore might suggest. Indeed, as the Freake Portraits (1671-74) make...
clear, the Puritans were far more colorful and extravagant than our history books might indicate. This is true of their
dress and attire, and it is equally as true as it pertains to their home furnishings.

Figure \(\PageIndex{3}\): Court Cupboard, 1665-73, red oak with cedar and maple (moldings), northern white cedar and
white pine, 142.6 x 129.5 x 55.3 cm (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art)

A Court Cupboard (c. 1665-73) in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art aptly illustrates this important point. This
particular cupboard was owned by Thomas Prence. Prence arrived in Plymouth Colony in what is now Massachusetts in
November 1621, some 12 months after the Mayflower first brought Puritans to the New World. Pence was clearly a man
of some talent and ability. He first served as Governor of Plymouth Colony from 1634-35 while still in his early 30s. He
again served a short term from 1638-39, and then a much longer term from 1657 until is death in 1673.

Figure \(\PageIndex{4}\): Lathe-turned column, and doors decorated with spindles, Court Cupboard, 1665-73, red oak
This cupboard is architectural in its mass and form and shows the ways in which domestic furniture made in the American colonies during the seventeenth century was influenced by European architecture. When looking at this object, for example, one can see various architectural elements. The topmost edge resembles a cornice and the open space underneath that cornice has the appearance of a kind of ionic frieze. Immense lathe-turned columns appear on the upper left and right edges, and twenty engaged columns—here called spindles—decorate the front.

The patina of time has changed the color of this object, but when first made it would have appeared red, black and vibrant yellow. In total, this object suggests opulence far more than austerity. But this wealth is indicated not only by the object—its size, its decoration, its form—but also by what Prence and his wife would have placed both within and upon it. Without doubt, one of the reasons to own such a cupboard would be to display and store items of luxury, and we can well imagine silver plate displayed atop the cupboard and fine textiles in the drawers.

But this display of opulence—both in this extravagant piece of furniture and the luxury items it was meant to display and contain—does not only comment on Prence’s wealth, but also upon his blessedness. As a Puritan, Prence was a firm believer in the concept of predestination, the idea that he had—from birth—been selected for heavenly salvation. And because God was omnipotent (that is, all powerful) the wealth that Prence and his family enjoyed was clearly a signifier of God’s favor. For the Puritans, then, the tasteful display of wealth (be it clothing, jewelry, or furniture) was a material representation of their own goodness and God’s divine esteem.

A peaceable kingdom?

As one of the governors of Plymouth Colony during the seventeenth century, Prence was forced to deal with those who were in the New World before the arrival of the Puritans—Native Americans—and those who would follow—the Quakers. The historical record suggests that he was far kinder to the former than the latter, but these two groups—the Quakers and Native Americans—serve as the primary subjects for Edward Hick’s most popular subject, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1826). In total, Hick’s—who was a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers) himself—painted more than five dozen versions of this subject, but the one in Philadelphia Museum of Art is interesting for the ways in which the artist included text into the borders of the image. Together, the text and image eloquently speak to the religious toleration the Quakers hoped to preach and practice in Pennsylvania, a toleration they had not found when they first settled in Massachusetts.
On the right we can see a young boy—so young, in fact, that he wears what appears to be a dress as he has not yet been “breeched” to wear pants—standing astride and with his left arm around an adult (if diminutive) lion. A leopard and wolf join the lion as predators in this implausible garden, seemingly at peace with the docile ox, sheep, and lamb. The text on the left, top, and right reference a passage from the Book of Isaiah (11: 1-9) in the Jewish Bible and speaks to what our own earthly world would be like if the peace of Heaven could be found on earth.

If most of the text on the border references the Bible, the text on the bottom—*When the great PENN his famous treaty made With indian chiefs beneath the Elm-tree’s shade*—is decidedly secular. This text makes specific reference to the treaty William Penn signed with the Lenni Lenape (sometimes called the Delaware) Indians. In order to visually represent this, Hicks has depicted the mighty elm tree and a group of Quakers and Native Americans negotiating the treaty that bears Penn’s name. Hicks makes clear that Penn’s motives and intentions with the peoples who already occupied the land of what would become Pennsylvania were noble and good.

**A beaded Lakota suitcase**

But few of the interactions the new (European) arrivals had with longstanding (Native American) residents were so noble and good, and we are reminded of this in a beaded suitcase Nellie Two Bear Gates made and likely presented to her cousin, Ida Claymore. The artist was a member of the Lakota, who primarily lived in the Standing Rock area of North and South Dakota.
Figure \(\PageIndex{6}\): Nellie Two Bear Gates, Suitcase, 1880-1910, beads, hide, metal, oilcloth, thread (Minneapolis Institute of Art)

Gates has decorated the valise on both sides in a way that was traditional to the Lakota people. The abstract patterns that decorate the valise are artistic elements that go back centuries, but the artist has also introduced figural elements that provide a narrative. In the lower part of the object, for example, a woman stands wearing a red dress with a white breastplate; this is presumably the bride. To her left hang a variety of decorated bags, two beautifully embellished buffalo hides, a trade cloth, and another robe. These objects—which suggest the wealth of the bride—are items she brought to her marriage. On the upper part of the valise we can clear see the bride’s father on the left and her mother on the right. The pails that hang from the rail between them suggest the sumptuous feast that would commemorate the wedding.

Figure \(\PageIndex{7}\): Nellie Two Bear Gates, Suitcase, 1880-1910, beads, hide, metal, oilcloth, thread (Minneapolis Institute of Art)

If the front of the valise shows a happy event, the obverse shows one that is much more somber when it is considered within the framework of Lakota life. On it we see two Lakota men riding horses. One has already lassoed a branded bull, while another has raised his right arm and is set to capture the bull that gallops from left to right. Although this may at first seem to be a scene—like the other—that captures an element of every day Lakota life, there is something more
The Lakota's centuries old nomadic life ways came to an end during the final quarter of the nineteenth century when they were forced onto reservations. This forced relocation was in part a result of the destruction of the resource that the Lakota depended upon for their nomadic existence: the American bison. In this way, the narrative on the suitcase signifies an important shift in the Lakota way of life, from a nomadic one that followed the bison, to a confined, government-mandated way of life dependent upon cattle for sustenance.

**Coney Island and leisure**

![Figure 8: Reginald Marsh, Wooden Horses, 1936, tempera on board, 61 x 101.6 cm (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

More than a thousand miles from the tragedy at Standing Rock Reservation, Americans delighted in the meteoric rise of Coney Island at the southern end of the borough of Brooklyn. Three competing amusement parks—Steeplechase Park, Luna Park, and Dreamland—opened between 1897 and 1904, and entertained the millions who came to visit. If at first Coney Island was a resort for the well to do, in the decades that followed it was venue where all different classes could mix and mingle regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. At the height of the Great Depression, Coney Island was known as the Nickel Empire. A hotdog, a soda, and an excursion on one of the many rides all cost five cents (five cents in 1935 roughly equates to $.93 in 2019). Because of inexpensive nature of a trip to Coney Island, it attracted people of all walks of life who could collectively gather and forget—for a time—the hardships brought on by the economic crisis that then enveloped the world.

The artist, Reginald Marsh was keenly interested in depicting the vibrant nature of city life, and his painting, *Wooden Horses* (1936), captures this energy. A Parisian by birth but a New Yorker by choice, Marsh is remembered today for his energetic, vibrant use of primary colors and line, and for the fact that he used tempera—pigment mixed with egg yolk—rather than the more common oil paint. In this image, we can see many figures who all ride—sometimes by themselves or in other instances in tandem—on extravagantly carved wooden horses on an attraction meant to mimic the speed and thrill of a steeplechase race.

At first glance this may seem to be a painting that captures the exhilaration of the ride, but upon further reflection, there are elements that may prompt a sense of unease. For example, the artist—at least to our modern eyes—seems to objectify the women in a way that was rather typical at the many dance halls that were a part of men's Coney Island experiences. Their racy attire, bright lipstick, and their straddling of the horse (rather than sitting in side-saddle fashion) all suggest a certain bawdiness. The pair in middle are particularly interesting. He—a self portrait of the artist a
generation or so older than she—sits on the hind end of the carved equine and wraps his arms around her bodice. She—seemingly indifferent to his advances—focuses on the ride while the forward motion of her steed flutters her skirt, showing a not insignificant amount of her thigh.

Remembering Nazi Germany

![George Grosz, Remembering, 1937, oil on canvas, 71.2 x 91.76 cm (Minneapolis Institute of Art, © Estate of George Grosz)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

Although George Grosz painted *Remembering* (1937) only one year after Marsh completed *Wooden Horses*, the tone he captures could not be more different. Grosz was born in Berlin and immigrated to the United States in 1933 after spending the summer before in New York City teaching at the Art Students League. His departure from Germany preceded—by less than a month—Adolph Hitler’s mercurial rise to power when he was appointed chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. Grosz, of course, was familiar with Hitler and his ambitions, and had spent considerable effort in the 1920s using his art as a way to ridicule German political leadership. As early as 1923, for example, Grosz had drawn caricatures of Hitler. Given the ways in which he had used his art to criticize the government, the artist knew it was best to escape far beyond the Nazi’s reach. Grosz remained in the United States for much of the rest of his life, though he did venture back to Europe on occasion.

One such trip was a brief return in 1935. If Grosz dreaded what fascist Germany was becoming when he immigrated to the United States in 1932, this subsequent visit confirmed his worst fears. *Remembering* is a product of that visit and the realization that the country of his birth had been completely swept up in an ideology of hate. In the painting, Grosz has painted his own likeness on the figure in the left foreground, and he sits in what looks to be a ruined building. A men’s jacket has been draped over his shoulders, but his arms cross his chest while the arms of the jacket lifelessly hang at his side. The worried look suggests he is aware of the chaos that surrounds him, but has turned his back to that bedlam. When Grosz escaped to the United States in 1933, he brought his wife and two sons with him, but his extended family and countless friends were forced to endure the atrocities that Hitler brought to the German people and to the world. One can imagine the guilt he felt at leaving loved ones behind.

As an artist, Grosz part of something significant about the United States during the second quarter of the twentieth
century, namely the mass exodus of talented men and women from Europe to the United States who sought to escape
the totalitarian regimes that were coming to power. These people arrived with dreams and aspirations of finding a better
life in the United States. In addition to receiving the liberty they were seeking, they enriched their adopted country and
the communities in which they lived, contributed to the Melting Pot—the *e pluribus unum*—that the United States has
always been.

The AIDS epidemic

![Masami Teraoka, *American Kabuki (Oishiwa)*, 1986, watercolor and sumi ink on paper mounted on a four-panel screen, 196.9 x 393.7 x 3 cm (de Young Museum, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco), © Masami Teraoka](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

Although born in the Hiroshima Prefecture of Japan prior to the beginning of World War II, Masami Teraoka moved to
the United States in 1961. His mature artistic style of the 1980s engages contemporary events within the framework of
traditional Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. The genre of *ukiyo-e* flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries in
Japan. *Ukiyo-e* works draw their subject matter from popular theater (Kabuki), and urban life—especially the streets of
Edo (Tokyo).

Although at first glance Teraoka owes an aesthetic debt to the great printmaker Hokusai and his iconic *The Great Wave
of Kanagawa* (c. 1830), *American Kabuki* is different in many regards. Hokusai’s *ukiyo-e* print measures about 10” x
15”, while Teraoka’s colossal screen measures 6’5” x 12’10”. While *The Great Wave* is a small, almost intimate
seascape with boats before Mount Fuji, the scale of *American Kabuki* is so large that it almost surrounds the viewer.
And this enormity of scale forces the viewer to not only to address the landscape, but the horror that the landscape
contains. The date—1986—is of paramount importance, for it was in the middle of the 1980s when America—and the
entire world—came to more fully understand the horrors of the AIDS epidemic.
First published in 1987—the year after Teraoka’s painting—Randy Shilts’s *And the Band Played on: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* astutely chronicles the early years of this health tragedy. Although the terms were often used interchangeably during the 1980s, HIV—the human immunodeficiency virus—was the cause of AIDS, the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. Shilts explores the early populations most at risk for this mysterious disease. The largest of these groups was homosexual men. The second group was hemophiliacs, people—many of them children—who needed frequent blood transfusions in order to compensate for their genetic disorder that prevented their blood from clotting. The third group was intravenous drug users.

Gay men, sick children, and intravenous drug users had at least one thing in common in the early to mid-1980s: none of these groups had much political influence. And as a result of this lack of voice and the political indifference of the American government, HIV became a national and worldwide pandemic. As journalist Igor Volsky reported:

> Reagan’s surgeon general…explained that “intradepartmental politics” kept Reagan out of all AIDS discussions for the first five years of the administration “because transmission of AIDS was understood to be primarily in the homosexual population and in those who abused intravenous drugs.” The president’s advisers, Koop said, “took the stand, ‘They are only getting what they justly deserve.’” Igor Volsky, “Recalling Ronald Reagan’s LGBT Legacy Ahead Of The GOP Presidential Debate ”

*Think Progress* (September 7, 2011)

This pandemic and the indifference that allowed it to fester and spread is the theme of Teraoka’s work. The artist had a friend whose child was infected with HIV when given a tainted blood product. In *American Kabuki*, we see a mother—either rising from the waves or being torn down by them, we cannot tell—who clutches her child under her left arm. Her wind-tousled hair and terrified eyes provide a sense of horror to the scene, as do the skeletal, finger-like shape of the waves.
Within the framework of Japanese history, blackened teeth suggested the married status of a woman, but in Teraoka’s image it also serves to suggest eminent death and decay. The lesions on her cheek, forehead and forearm likely suggest Kaposi’s sarcoma, purple blotches on the skin that was one of the earliest symptoms of AIDS. The green hue around her eyes (and around the head of her largely hidden child) was frequently used in Kabuki theater performances to suggest a ghost or spirit. This, when combined with her teeth and lesions all suggest what people had come to know in 1986 even if they had not yet developed the vocabulary to express it: once a person had HIV they would in time have AIDS, and once they had AIDS they would soon die.

In time, the HIV/AIDS pandemic would become a plague on all of our houses, a tidal wave of death that has not yet been cured. Teraoka eloquently speaks to that destruction and the indifference of the government to advocate on behalf of those in need.

Understanding art to understand American culture

Art is, of course, the product of a unique moment in time, and it can take many forms. It can be a piece of furniture carved from wood; it can be a large-scale folded screen meant to mimic works made centuries ago in a far-off land an ocean away. While art many not speak in absolute truths, a careful and thoughtful analysis of it can provide crucial information about the shifts of American society and how it has changed and evolved over the centuries. What America is now is not what it has always been, and what it is now is not what it will become in the future. But regardless of when or where, artists will create art to chronicle the happenings of their time and provide future generations with insight into to their own culture and society.

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c. 11,000 B.C.E.
Clovis culture

The first clear evidence of human activity in North America are spearheads used to hunt large game.

Clovis culture

The first clear evidence of human activity in North America are spearheads like this. They are called Clovis points. These spear tips were used to hunt large game. The period of the Clovis people coincides with the extinction of mammoths, giant sloth, camels and giant bison in North America. The extinction of these animals was caused by a combination of human hunting and climate change.

Figure \(\PageIndex{12}\): Clovis Spear Point, c. 11,000 B.C.E., flint, 2.98 x 8.5 x 0.7 cm, found Arizona © Trustees of the British Museum

How did humans reach America?

North America was one of the last continents in the world to be settled by humans after about 15,000 BC. During the last Ice Age, water, which previously flowed off the land into the sea, was frozen up in vast ice sheets and glaciers so sea levels dropped. This exposed a land bridge that enabled humans to migrate through Siberia to Alaska. These early Americans were highly adaptable and Clovis points have been found throughout North America. It is remarkable that
over such a vast area, the distinctive characteristics of the points hardly vary.

Typical Clovis points, like the example above, have parallel to slightly convex edges which narrow to a point. This shape is produced by chipping small, parallel flakes off both sides of a stone blade. Following this, the point is thinned on both sides by the removal of flakes which leave a central groove or “flute.” These flutes are the principal feature of Clovis or “fluted” points. They originate from the base which then has a concave outline and end about one-third along the length. The grooves produced by the removal of the flutes allow the point to be fitted to a wooden shaft of a spear.

The people who made Clovis points spread out across America looking for food and did not stay anywhere for long, although they did return to places where resources were plentiful.

Clovis points are sometimes found with the bones of mammoths, mastodons, sloth and giant bison. As the climate changed at the end of the last Ice Age, the habitats on which these animals depended started to disappear. Their extinction was inevitable but Clovis hunting on dwindling numbers probably contributed to their disappearance.

Although there are arguments in favor of pre-Clovis migrations to America, it is the “Paleo-Indian” Clovis people who can be most certainly identified as the probable ancestors of later Native North American peoples and cultures.

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Go deeper


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c. 1000 C.E.
Mesa Verde: carving a home from the cliffs

Remarkable structures in the American Southwest were home to cliff-dwelling farmers until around 1300.

Mesa Verde: a home in the cliffs

Some of the most remarkable structures in the U.S. are a millennium old

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBank
Video \(\PageIndex{1}\): Cliff dwellings, Ancestral Puebloan, 450–1300 C.E., sandstone, Mesa Verde National Park.

Speakers: Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker

**Wanted: stunning view**
Imagine living in a home built into the side of a cliff. The Ancestral Puebloan peoples (formerly known as the Anasazi) did just that in some of the most remarkable structures still in existence today. Beginning after 1000-1100 C.E., they built more than 600 structures (mostly residential but also for storage and ritual) into the cliff faces of the Four Corners region of the United States (the southwestern corner of Colorado, northwestern corner of New Mexico, northeastern corner of Arizona, and southeastern corner of Utah). The dwellings depicted here are located in what is today southwestern Colorado in the national park known as Mesa Verde (“verde” is Spanish for green and “mesa” literally means table in Spanish but here refers to the flat-topped mountains common in the southwest).

The most famous residential sites date to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Ancestral Puebloans accessed these dwellings with retractable ladders, and if you are sure footed and not afraid of heights, you can still visit some of these sites in the same way today.

To access Mesa Verde National Park, you drive up to the plateau along a winding road. People come from around the world to marvel at the natural beauty of the area as well as the archaeological remains, making it a popular tourist destination.

The twelfth- and thirteenth-century structures made of stone, mortar, and plaster remain the most intact. We often see traces of the people who constructed these buildings, such as hand or fingerprints in many of the mortar and plaster walls.
Ancestral Puebloans occupied the Mesa Verde region from about 450 C.E. to 1300 C.E. The inhabited region encompassed a far larger geographic area than is defined now by the national park, and included other residential sites like Hovenweep National Monument and Yellow Jacket Pueblo. Not everyone lived in cliff dwellings. Yellow Jacket Pueblo was also much larger than any site at Mesa Verde. It had 600–1200 rooms, and 700 people likely lived there (see link below). In contrast, only about 125 people lived in Cliff Palace (largest of the Mesa Verde sites), but the cliff dwellings are certainly among the best-preserved buildings from this time.

**Cliff palace**

The largest of all the cliff dwellings, Cliff Palace, has about 150 rooms and more than twenty circular rooms. Due to its location, it was well protected from the elements. The buildings ranged from one to four stories, and some hit the natural stone “ceiling.” To build these structures, people used stone and mud mortar, along with wooden beams adapted to the natural clefts in the cliff face. This building technique was a shift from earlier structures in the Mesa Verde area, which, prior to 1000 C.E., had been made primarily of adobe (bricks made of clay, sand and straw or sticks). These stone and mortar buildings, along with the decorative elements and objects found inside them, provide important insights into the
lives of the Ancestral Puebloan people during the thirteenth century.

![Figure 17: View of Cliff Palace structures, Mesa Verde (photo: Paul Middleton, Shadow Dancer Images, CC: BY-NC 2.0)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

At sites like Cliff Palace, families lived in architectural units, organized around kivas (circular, subterranean rooms). A kiva typically had a wood-beamed roof held up by six engaged support columns made of masonry above a shelf-like banquette. Other typical features of a kiva include a firepit (or hearth), a ventilation shaft, a deflector (a low wall designed to prevent air drawn from the ventilation shaft from reaching the fire directly), and a sipapu, a small hole in the floor that is ceremonial in purpose. They developed from the pithouse, also a circular, subterranean room used as a living space.

![Figure 18: Kiva without a roof, Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde National Park (photo: Adam Lederer, CC: BY-NC-SA 2.0)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

Kivas continue to be used for ceremonies today by Puebloan peoples though not those within Mesa Verde National Park. In the past, these circular spaces were likely both ceremonial and residential. If you visit Cliff Palace, you will see the kivas without their roofs (see above), but in the past they would have been covered, and the space around them would have functioned as a small plaza.
Connected rooms fanned out around these plazas, creating a housing unit. One room, typically facing onto the plaza, contained a hearth. Family members most likely gathered here. Other rooms located off the hearth were most likely storage rooms, with just enough of an opening to squeeze your arm through a hole to grab anything you might need. Cliff Palace also features some unusual structures, including a circular tower. Archaeologists are still uncertain as to the exact use of the tower.

**Painted murals**

The builders of these structures plastered and painted murals, although what remains today is fairly fragmentary. Some murals display geometric designs, while other murals represent animals and plants.
For example, Mural 30, on the third floor of a rectangular “tower” (more accurately a room block) at Cliff Palace, is painted red against a white wall. The mural includes geometric shapes that are thought to portray the landscape. It is similar to murals inside of other cliff dwellings including Spruce Tree House and Balcony House. Scholars have suggested that the red band at the bottom symbolizes the earth while the lighter portion of the wall symbolizes the sky. The top of the red band, then, forms a kind of horizon line that separates the two. We recognize what look like triangular peaks, perhaps mountains on the horizon line. The rectangular element in the sky might relate to clouds, rain or to the sun and moon. The dotted lines might represent cracks in the earth.

The creators of the murals used paint produced from clay, organic materials, and minerals. For instance, the red color came from hematite (a red ocher). Blue pigment could be turquoise or azurite, while black was often derived from charcoal. Along with the complex architecture and mural painting, the Ancestral Puebloan peoples produced black-on-white ceramics and turquoise and shell jewelry (goods were imported from afar including shell and other types of pottery). Many of these high-quality objects and their materials demonstrate the close relationship these people had to the landscape. Notice, for example, how the geometric designs on the mugs above appear similar to those in Mural 30 at Cliff Palace.

**Why build here?**

From 500–1300 C.E., Ancestral Pueblos who lived at Mesa Verde were sedentary farmers and cultivated beans,
squash, and corn. Corn originally came from what is today Mexico at some point during the first millennium of the Common Era. Originally most farmers lived near their crops, but this shifted in the late 1100s when people began to live near sources of water, and often had to walk longer distances to their crops.

Figure \(\PageIndex{23}\): New Fire House, Masa Verde National Park (photo: Ken Lund, CC: BY-SA)

So why move up to the cliff alcoves at all, away from water and crops? Did the cliffs provide protection from invaders? Were they defensive or were there other issues at play? Did the rock ledges have a ceremonial or spiritual significance? They certainly provide shade and protection from snow. Ultimately, we are left only with educated guesses—the exact reasons for building the cliff dwellings remain unknown to us.

**Why were the cliffs abandoned?**

The cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde were abandoned around 1300 C.E. After all the time and effort it took to build these beautiful dwellings, why did people leave the area? Cliff Palace was built in the twelfth century, why was it abandoned less than a hundred years later? These questions have not been answered conclusively, though it is likely that the migration from this area was due to either drought, lack of resources, violence or some combination of these. We know, for instance, that droughts occurred from 1276 to 1299. These dry periods likely caused a shortage of food and may have resulted in confrontations as resources became more scarce. The cliff dwellings remain, though, as compelling examples of how the Ancestral Puebloans literally carved their existence into the rocky landscape of today’s southwestern United States.

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**Go deeper**

- [Mesa Verde National Park site](#)
- [Yellow Jacket Pueblo reconstruction](#)


David Grant Noble, ed., The Mesa Verde World: Explorations in Ancestral Pueblo Archaeology (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2006).


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Video \(\PageIndex{2}\)

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Figure \ref{PageIndex(24)}: More Smarthistory images…
c. 850 and 1250
Chaco Canyon: urban center of the Ancestral Puebloans

Located in a high desert, Chaco’s residents dedicated much of their energy to controlling water for crops.

The ancient community of Chaco Canyon

Ancestral Puebloans built a thriving society in the desert

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK

Figure \(\PageIndex{25}\): Fajada Butte, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. Chacoan petroglyphs can be found at the base of the cliffs (photo: Adam Meek, CC BY 2.0)

New Mexico is known as the “land of enchantment.” Among its many wonders, Chaco Canyon stands out as one of the
most spectacular. Part of Chaco Culture National Historical Park, Chaco Canyon is among the most impressive archaeological sites in the world, receiving tens of thousands of visitors each year. Chaco is more than just a tourist site however, it is also sacred land. Pueblo peoples like the Hopi, Navajo, and Zuni consider it a home of their ancestors.

![Map of major ancestral Puebloan sites in the Four Corners region](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

Figure \(\PageIndex{26}\): Map of major ancestral Puebloan sites in the Four Corners region (National Park Service)

The canyon is vast and contains an impressive number of structures—both big and small—testifying to the incredible creativity of that people who lived in the Four Corners region of the U.S. between the 9th and 12th centuries. Chaco was the urban center of a broader world, and the ancestral Puebloans who lived here engineered striking buildings, waterways, and more.

![Petroglyphs, Chaco Canyon](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

Figure \(\PageIndex{27}\): Petroglyphs, Chaco Canyon (photo: KrisNM, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Chaco is located in a high, desert region of New Mexico, where water is scarce. The remains of dams, canals, and
basins suggest that Chacoans spent a considerable amount of their energy and resources on the control of water in order to grow crops, such as corn. Today, visitors have to imagine the greenery that would have filled the canyon.

Astronomical observations clearly played an important role in Chaco life, and they likely had spiritual significance. Petroglyphs found in Chaco Canyon and the surrounding area reveal an interest in lunar and solar cycles, and many buildings are oriented to align with winter and summer solstices.

Great Houses

“Downtown Chaco” features a number of “Great Houses” built of stone and wood. Most of these large complexes have Spanish names, given to them during expeditions, such as one sponsored by the U.S. army in 1849, led by Lt. James Simpson. Carabajal, Simpson’s guide, was Mexican, which helps to explain some of the Spanish names. Great Houses also have Navajo names, and are described in Navajo legends. Tsebida’t’ini’ani (Navajo for “covered hole”), nastl’a kin (Navajo for “house in the corner”), and Chetro Ketl (a name of unknown origin) all refer to one great house, while Pueblo Bonito (Spanish for “pretty village”) and tse biyaanii’ahii (Navajo for “leaning rock gap”) refer to another.
Pueblo Bonito is among the most impressive of the Great Houses. It is a massive D-shaped structure that had somewhere between 600 and 800 rooms. It was multistoried, with some sections reaching as high as four stories. Some upper floors contained balconies.

There are many questions that we are still trying to answer about this remarkable site and the people who lived here. A Great House like Pueblo Bonito includes numerous round rooms, called kivas. This large architectural structure included three great kivas and thirty-two smaller kivas. Great kivas are far larger in scale than the others, and were possibly used to gather hundreds of people together. The smaller kivas likely functioned as ceremonial spaces, although they were likely multi-purpose rooms.
Among the many remarkable features of this building are its doorways, sometimes aligned to give the impression that you can see all the way through the building. Some doorways have a T shape, and T-shaped doors are also found at other sites across the region. Research is ongoing to determine whether the T-shaped doors suggest the influence of Chaco or if the T-shaped door was a common aesthetic feature in this area, which the Chacoans then adopted.

Recently, testing of the trees (dendroprovenance) that were used to construct these massive buildings has demonstrated that the wood came from two distinct areas more than 50 miles away: one in the San Mateo Mountains, the other the Chuska Mountains. About 240,000 trees would have been used for one of the larger Great Houses.

**Chacoan Cultural Interactions**

Traditionally, we tend to separate Mesoamerica and the American Southwest, as if the peoples who lived in these areas did not interact. We now know this is misleading, and was not the case.

Chacoan culture expanded far beyond the confines of Chaco Canyon. Staircases leading out of the canyon allowed people to climb the mesas and access a vast network of roads that connected places across great distances, such as Great Houses in the wider region. Aztec Ruins National Monument (not to be confused with ruins that belonged to the Aztecs of Mesoamerica) in New Mexico is another ancestral Puebloan site with many of the same architectural features we see at Chaco, including a Great House and T-shaped doorways.
Archaeological excavations have uncovered remarkable objects that animated Chacoan life and reveal Chaco’s interactions with peoples outside the Southwestern United States. More than 15,000 artifacts have been unearthed during different excavations at Pueblo Bonito alone, making it one of the best understood spaces at Chaco. Many of these objects speak to the larger Chacoan world, as well as Chaco’s interactions with cultures farther away. In one storage room within Pueblo Bonito, pottery sherds had traces of cacao imported from Mesoamerica. These black-and-white cylindrical vessels were likely used for drinking cacao, similar to the brightly painted Maya vessels used for a similar purpose.

The remains of scarlet macaws, birds native to an area in Mexico more than 1,000 miles away, also reveal the trade networks that existed across the Mesoamerican and Southwestern world. We know from other archaeological sites in...
the southwest that there were attempts to breed these colorful birds, no doubt in order to use their colorful feathers as status symbols or for ceremonial purposes. A room with a thick layer of guano (bird excrement) suggests that an aviary also existed within Pueblo Bonito. Copper bells found at Chaco also come from much further south in Mexico, once again testifying to the flourishing trade networks at this time. Chaco likely acquired these materials and objects in exchange for turquoise from their own area, examples of which can be found as far south as the Yucatan Peninsula.

### Current Threats to Chaco

The world of Chaco is threatened by oil drilling and fracking. After President Theodore Roosevelt passed the Antiquities Act of 1906, Chaco was one of the first sites to be made a national monument. Chaco Canyon is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Chacoan region extended far beyond this center, but unfortunately the Greater Chacoan Region does not fall under the protection of the National Park Service or UNESCO. Much of the Greater Chaco Region needs to be surveyed, because there are certainly many undiscovered structures, roads, and other findings that would help us learn more about this important culture. Beyond its importance as an extraordinary site of global cultural heritage, Chaco has sacred and ancestral significance for many Native Americans. Destruction of the Greater Chaco Region erases an important connection to the ancestral past of Native peoples, and to the present and future that belongs to all of us.

### Go deeper

- [Chaco Canyon UNESCO World Heritage Site webpage](#)
- [Chaco Research Archive](#)
- “Unexpected Wood Source for Chaco Canyon Great Houses” from the University of Arizona


### Selected Contributors

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c. 1590
Inventing "America": Theodore de Bry's Collected Travels...

De Bry's images of the Americas affirm and assert a sense of European superiority.

Picturing America

Theodore de Bry's collected travels

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBank

Theodore de Bry’s Collected travels in the east Indies and west Indies

In the center of this image we see a finely-dressed Christopher Columbus with two soldiers. Columbus stands confidently, his left foot forward with his pike planted firmly in the ground, signaling his claim over the land. Behind him to the left, three Spaniards raise a cross in the landscape, symbolizing a declaration of the land for both the Spanish monarchs and for the Christian God.
Unclothed Taínos, the indigenous peoples of Hispaniola, walk toward Columbus bringing gifts of necklaces and other precious objects. Further in the background, on the right side of the print, other Taínos, with arms raised and twisting bodies, flee in fear from the Spanish ships anchored offshore.

This print from 1592, by the engraver Theodore de Bry, presents Columbus and his men as the harbingers of European civilization and faith, and juxtaposes them with Tainos, who are presented as uncivilized, unclothed, and pagan. This print, along with hundreds of others de Bry made for his 27 volume series, published over more than forty years, *Collected travels in the east Indies and west Indies* (1590–1634), affirm and assert a sense of European superiority, as well as invent for Europeans what America—both its land and its people—was like.

Though de Bry is most famous for his engravings of European voyages to the Americas (and Africa, and Asia), he never actually traveled across the Atlantic. It is not surprising then that de Bry’s depiction of the indigenous peoples of the Americas was a combination of the work of other artists who had accompanied Europeans to the Americas (artists were often brought on journeys in order to document the lands and peoples of the Americas for a European audience) as well as his own artistic inventions. For instance, he adapted (without credit) some of the images created by Johannes Stradanus, a well-known illustrator who created early images of the Americas. In his *Collected travels in the east Indies and west Indies*, de Bry republished (and translated into multiple languages) the accounts of others who had spent time traveling around the globe, and created more than 600 engravings to illustrate the volumes. The engraving above of Columbus and the Taínos comes from volume 4 of the *Collected travels in the east Indies and west Indies*. This volume reprinted the accounts of the Milanese traveler Girolamo Benzoni, who himself had drawn on the accounts of Columbus in his own writings.
The volumes of the *Collected travels in the east Indies and west Indies* that treat the voyages across the Atlantic to the Americas are known as the *Grands Voyages*, while the *Petit Voyages* (small voyages), were those to Africa and Asia.

**Documenting America**

De Bry’s copperplate engravings were among the first images that Europeans encountered about the peoples, places, and things of the Americas, even if he began making them almost a century after Columbus’s initial voyage. In the engraving with Columbus on the shoreline, the barely clothed Taínos resemble Greco-Roman sculptures, especially their poses and musculature. De Bry apparently had no interest in documenting the actual appearance of the Taínos.

![Figure](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

**De Bry and his audiences**

De Bry was a Protestant, and fled Liège (today in Belgium) where he was born to avoid persecution. He made his way to Frankfurt, which is where he started work on *Grands Voyages*. After his death in 1598, his family continued his work and finished the remaining volumes in 1634. Interestingly, different versions of the *Grands Voyages* catered to different Christian confessional groups. The volumes in German were geared towards Protestants, while those in Latin appealed to Catholics. De Bry created images that he could market to either audience, but he made changes to the texts to appeal more to either Catholics or Protestants. Psalms that Calvinists felt encapsulated their beliefs or longer passages criticizing Catholic beliefs or colonial practices were omitted from Latin versions, which were often filled in with more engravings duplicated from other parts of the text.
General subjects of the *Grands Voyages* engravings

Figure \(\PageIndex{36}\): Theodore de Bry, Indians pour liquid gold into the mouth of a Spaniard, 1594, from *Collected travels in the east Indies and west Indies (Collectiones peregrinationum in Indiam occidentalem)*

While some of de Bry’s prints in *Grands Voyages* focus on the exploits of famed European navigators like Columbus, others show indigenous groups and their customs. Some of these images display the atrocities that occurred in the wake of Europeans’ arrival, violent conquest, and colonization. Indigenous peoples are fed to dogs, hanged, or butchered. Still others depict native responses to the European invasion, such as drowning Spaniards in the ocean or pouring liquid gold into invaders’ mouths.
Travels to Virginia

The *Grands Voyages* (the section on cross-Atlantic voyages) begins with a reprint of an earlier text by the English colonist Thomas Hariot, *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1590). It also includes translations of this text into Latin, German, and French. De Bry’s accompanying engravings were based on watercolors by John White, who had settled on Roanoke Island, North Carolina in 1585 and who had created paintings while there. His watercolors document clothing, dwellings, and rituals of the eastern Algonquian peoples.

Even though Virginia and North Carolina were colonized by Europeans after they had seized other areas in the Americas, de Bry placed them in the first volume of his *Grands Voyages*. This may be because he had visited London just after Hariot’s book was published in 1588, and was given both that text and the watercolors of White. De Bry was clearly not interested in providing a chronological account of European exploration and colonization.

One of White’s paintings represents the town of Secoton, with people going about their daily life activities. In the right foreground people dance in a circle. Corn grows in neat rows. Dwellings line a road. In his engraving, de Bry made several changes to White’s watercolor. He expanded the village and removed the textual inscriptions that identified...
important features of the village (instead incorporating a separate key).

Figure \(\PageIndex{38}\): Theodore de Bry, Bird’s-eye view of a native American village (Secoton), 1590, engraving (after the watercolor by John White above) for volume 1 of *Collected travels in the east Indies and west Indies* which reprinted Thomas Hariot, *A brieue and true report of the new found land of Virginia, of the commodities and of the nature and manners of the naturall inhabitants* (British Library)

For his engravings, de Bry also transformed watercolors White had created of Scottish Picts (an ancient pagan indigenous peoples of Scotland who lived in a loose confederation of groups and who painted their bodies). But why include a discussion of Picts in a book on the Americas?

Hariot’s text states that “Some picture of the Picts which in the old time did inhabit one part of the great Britain,” which according to him “show how that the inhabitants of the great Britain have been in times past as savage as those of Virginia.”[1] White compares them to the Algonquian peoples to suggest that Europe has its own history of uncivilized, pagan people. Despite attempting to reconcile the Algonquian peoples with the Picts in Europe, the manner in which he
compares them—as savages—speaks to a presumed European superiority.

Figure \(\PageIndex{40}\): Theodore de Bry, *Indians worship the column in honor of the French king*, 1591, engraving for *Collectiones peregrinationum in Indiam occidentalem*, vol. 2: René de Laudonnière, *Brevis narratio eorum quae in Florida Americae provinci Gallis acciderunt* (Frankfurt am Main: J. Wechelus, 1591) ([Rijksmuseum](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14\%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06\%3A_New_Page)).

Figure \(\PageIndex{41}\): Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, *Laudonnierus et rex athore ante columnam a praefecto prima navigantion locatam quamque venerantur floridenses*, gouache ([New York Public Library](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14\%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06\%3A_New_Page)).

**Travels to Florida**

Volume 2, published in 1591, focused on French voyages to Florida, and was based on the accounts of the French colonist René Goulaine de Laudonnière. De Bry created engravings based on the watercolors of Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, who was part of the French expeditions to Florida that were headed by Jean Ribault in 1562 and Laudonnière in 1564. One of the engravings adapted from Le Moyne’s watercolors shows the Timucua worshipping a column that had supposedly been erected by Ribault. The most prominent figure, identified as chief Athore, stands next to Laudonnière, who has followed him to see the sight. The other Timucua kneel, while raising their arms in gestures of reverence in the direction of the column, itself decorated with garlands. Before it, offerings of food and vegetables
abound. De Bry made several notable changes to the print, such as adjusting Athore’s features to look more European, with raised cheekbones and an aquiline nose. Le Moyne’s earlier watercolor had also Europeanized the Timucua peoples: he paints them with the same complexion as Laudonnière, but with even blonder hair.

**Cannibalism in Brazil**

![Figure](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

Figure \(\PageIndex{42}\): Theodore de Bry, engraving depicting cannibalism in Brazil for volume 3 of *Collected travels in the east Indies and west Indies* which reprinted Hans Staden’s account of his experiences in Brazil, 1594 ([British Library](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)).

Cannibalism was (and remains) commonly associated with certain indigenous peoples of the Americas. In de Bry’s series, his third volume recounted Hans Staden’s experiences of cannibalism in Brazil. De Bry’s engravings for this volume were among the most well-known in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, in large part because of their gruesome and sensationalistic character. Note that de Bry’s print, “Indians pour liquid gold into the mouth of a Spaniard,” may also depict cannibalism among the figures shown in the background.
Staden, a German soldier who traveled to South America, had been captured in 1553 by the Tupinambá, an indigenous group in Brazil. After his return to Europe in 1557, he wrote about Tupinambá customs, family life, and cannibalism, describing how the Tupinambá practiced it ceremonially, especially eating their enemies. Staden’s initial book included simple woodcuts, but de Bry’s updated engravings proved far more popular and enduring in the European cultural imagination. Perceptions of indigenous Brazilians were shaped by these images, and reinforced the notion that the Tupinambá, and others like them, were depraved, primitive, and sinful.

One of his images depicts naked adults and children drinking a broth made from a human head and intestines, visible on plates amidst the gathering of people. Another depiction of the Tupinambá shows a fire below a grill, upon which body parts are roasted. Figures surround the grill, eating. In the back is a bearded figure, most likely intended to be Staden. Hand-colored versions of de Bry’s prints emphasize the disturbing subject of the images even more.

Cannibalism would come to be closely associated with peoples of the Americas. De Bry would even use images of cannibals to serve as the engraved frontispiece to volume 3. Showing the Tupinambá eating human flesh exoticized them, and justified European control.
Other volumes and the legacy of de Bry

The fourth, fifth, and sixth volumes of the set focus on Girolamo Benzoni’s accounts, such as *Historia Mondo Nuovo*, with part 6 discussing the atrocities committed against the indigenous population of Peru. Parts 7 to 12 incorporated the travel accounts of Ulricus Faber, Sir Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh, José de Acosta, Amerigo Vespucci, John Smith, and Antonio de Herrera among others. Like the volumes that came before them, de Bry provided numerous images to increase readers understanding of the narratives.

The *Grands Voyages*, and the entire *Collected Travels*, relate more generally to the forms of knowledge and collecting popular at the time. Like a *cabinet of curiosity*, de Bry’s project organized information in text and images so that readers could come to know the Americas. The volumes seek to provide encyclopedic knowledge about the Americas, much as the objects did in a curiosity cabinet. De Bry’s many prints were important resources for Europeans who sought to better understand the Americas. It allowed readers to take possession of these distant lands and peoples, where they could become participants in the colonial projects then underway, allowing them to feel a sense of dominance over the peoples and lands across the Atlantic—lands which many in Europe would never see firsthand. These often inaccurate images and narratives supported a sense of superiority, with Europeans positioned as more civilized and advanced, and the American “others” as less so. De Bry’s images of America would cement for Europeans a vision of what America was like for centuries to come.

[1] “Some Pictvre of the Pictes which in the olde tyme dyd habite one part of the great Bretainne,” which according to him “showe how that the inhabitants of the great Bretainne haue been in times past as sauuage as those of Virginia.” 67. Thomas Hariot, with illustrations by John White, *A Brieue and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1590).

Additional resources:

- Early Images of Virginia Indians: The William W. Cole Collection at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture
- Picturing the New World: The Hand-Colored de Bry Engravings of 1590
- White Watercolors and de Bry engravings, on Virtual Jamestown
- De Bry engravings of the Timucua, on Florida Memory
- Columbus reports on his first voyage, 1493


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1665-73
Thought the Puritans were dour? Think again!

We think of Puritans aesthetics as restrained and humble, but this elaborate cupboard proves otherwise.

Thought the Puritans were dour?

This elaborate cupboard proves otherwise

by BRANDY CULP, WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART and DR. BETH HARRIS

Video \(\PageIndex{3}\): Court Cupboard, 1665-73, red oak with cedar and maple (moldings), northern white cedar and white pine, 142.6 x 129.5 x 55.3 cm (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art). Speakers: Brandy Culp, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and Dr. Beth Harris

Test your knowledge with a quiz

START
Key points

- The Puritans came to North America as religious pilgrims, establishing Plymouth Colony in 1620.* Thomas Prence, the original owner of this cupboard, served three terms as the colony’s governor. Prence set policy regarding the inclusion or exclusion of Quakers (in fact, Plymouth Colony was particularly intolerant of the Quakers, a group that was also persecuted in England), and established more peaceful relations with the region’s indigenous population.

- Decorative domestic objects signified social status and values among colonial families. Silver was most highly prized, followed by textiles, furniture, ceramics, and glass. For Puritans like Thomas Prence, the display of such objects also reflected the religious belief that their wealth signified that they were predestined to go to Heaven.

- In British colonial America, makers combined artistic influences from different European periods, styles, and countries to produce ornate furniture. These objects were important for their daily domestic use and as a visible display of the owner’s wealth and status.

*The Separatist Pilgrims were part of the larger Puritan movement in England. However, in American history texts, the term Puritan often refers only to the colonists at Massachusetts Bay. Those who founded Plymouth colony are often referred to as “Separatists” or “Pilgrims.”

The earliest English settlers of New England were called “Puritans,” a label coined and hurled at them derisively by their enemies. The label stuck; and even today, nearly four hundred years later, we tend to think of the first settlers of Massachusetts as dour killjoys. This view of Puritan society derives from the prejudices of later generations, who disparaged their Puritan progenitors as the kind of repressive folk they most loved to hate.

The “Puritan” epithet both clarifies and obscures these early English settlers for us. Members of the Church of England, they did not wish to leave the church but to purify it. Their “purifying” mission sought to rid the church of its elaborate customs and showy ritual. They wanted a simple style of worship, appropriate to what they viewed as God’s truth. As their model, they took the “primitive church,” Christianity in its earliest years before its institutionalization- and to Puritan eyes, corruption-in Rome.

In rejecting pomp and ostentation, the Puritans were also condemning the church as an elitist institution allied with the aristocracy. They sought to make religion appropriate to the values of their own emerging middle class. The Puritans believed that salvation did not lie in a set of rituals performed by the church on behalf of the sinner but in a drama within the soul of the believer, and they called those whom God had saved “saints.” They believed in a “revolution of the saints” and viewed themselves as the culmination of a biblical narrative that extended without interruption from ancient Jerusalem to their own time.

The Puritans were not democrats: like most people of their day, they subscribed to a hierarchical view of the world organized in a “Great Chain of Being,” a scale that ranked all creation from the lowest orders to the highest in graduated steps, mirroring the mind of God. Though they despised the “corruption” of aristocratic culture, they nonetheless maintained the deferential customs of a class society in which the “lower orders” deferred to the authority of their “betters.” They had only a limited notion of what we call today scientific causality. They viewed all events as direct signs from God, rather than as the results of natural causes.

And yet, even as they dragged a large portion of the late-medieval world across the ocean with them, the Puritans also produced the first outlines of modern social life. They enjoyed the highest literacy rate in seventeenth-century Western society, insisting that salvation was tied to a person’s ability to read the Bible. Within six years of founding the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in Boston, the Puritans established Harvard College (1636); and within ten years, they were...
publishing the first books in English in the New World.


**Go Deeper**

See the collection of American Decorative Arts at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

Read about the Puritans and predestination

Use primary sources to learn about colonial era religion in the United States

See historical records from Plymouth Colony

Read about colonial American furniture in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Learn about carpenters, joiners, and other tradespeople in the colonial period

Learn more about Puritan New England: Plymouth

**More to think about**

In the colonial homes of Puritans, the display of the family’s silver and textile collections showed their social status and reflected their cultural values. How is this practice continued today through objects displayed in the home? What are some examples in your own home that serve as displays of your values, concerns, and beliefs?

**Selected Contributors**

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- Minneapolis Institute of Art
- Newark Museum
Were they Freakes? The quiet ostentation of the early Puritans

Forget what you think you know about Puritan fashion and get ready to Freake.

The quiet ostentation of early Puritans

Forget what you think you know about Puritan fashion—get ready to Freake

by Dr. Bryan Zygmont

Figure (PageIndex{44}):
Robert W. Weir, Embarkation of the Pilgrims, 1843, oil on canvas, 12 x 18 feet (Rotunda, U.S. Capitol)

Elementary school history books in the United States might give young students a slightly misleading impression of what the earliest Puritans in North America—those who history calls the Pilgrims—were really like. If images in these texts are to be believed, the men wore black pants and matching waistcoats that were embellished with plain rectangular lace.
collars. When feeling particularly formal, these Puritans would often wear a plain black hat that was only decorated with an inexplicable buckle in the front. Puritan women dressed in similarly austere attire, seldom straying from dark, somber clothing.

**Mr. Freake**

While this may have been true for the earliest Puritans in North America, it is significantly less accurate for the Puritans who came to live in the northeast as the seventeenth century moved onwards. This fallacy is visually demonstrated by portraits completed about 1670 by an unidentified artist called the Freake Painter, an artist so named because of his most well known sitters—members of the Freake family. These two paintings, both begun in 1671, depict John Freake in the first portrait, and his wife Elizabeth and their daughter Mary in the second. In many ways, these pendant portraits eloquently speak as to what it meant to be part of the upper-middle-class elite in Colonial New England during the final decades of the seventeenth century.

![Image of John Freake](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

We can learn much about John Freake (1631-1674), his perception of self, and his place within society through a careful analysis of his portrait. Born in England, Freake immigrated to Boston in 1658 when in his mid twenties and became a merchant and attorney of significant wealth. Indeed, before his death he owned two homes, a mill and brew house, and profitable shares in six mercantile ships. Clearly, he was a man of assets and wealth, and this is reflected in his attire. To begin, Freake wears a fine velvet coat that is dark brown in color rather than the more stereotypical black most of his Puritan brethren may have worn 50 years before. In addition, his coat is decorated with more than two-dozen silver buttons, both along the front of the jacket and atop the pocket flaps. The tailor—either one in colonial Boston or, more likely, one across the Atlantic in England—embellished each buttonhole with expensive silver thread.
Freake’s expensive coat is but one indicator of his elevated social and economic status. In addition, Freake wears a fashionable white muslin shirt with puffed sleeves and elaborate crenulated cuffs. His collar is not the plain, rectangular one we might expect on the basis of our elementary school history books, and is instead a highly decorated and elaborate lace collar imported from Europe, likely from Venice, Italy. Rather than descend from his throat to his sternum, this collar instead circles his neck and stretches across both of Freake’s shoulders. The ornate silver broach Freake touches with his left hand and the gloves he holds with his right—in addition to the ring he wears on the pinky of his left hand—all speak to his wealth and his status as a gentleman.

**Roundhead or Cavalier? Look at the hair!**

Thus, Freake’s clothing announces something important about his prosperity. Likewise, his hair comments on his sense of religious identity. During the end of the seventeenth century, there were two distinct hairstyles that helped identify those who wore them. If one were to wear their hair in short manner, they announced themselves to be a Roundhead, a visual representation of Puritan austerity. In contrast, long hair—or, the wearing of a wig—announced the man as one who was a morally questionable Cavalier. With these two extremes in mind—the Puritanical Roundhead and the suspicious Cavalier—John Freake comfortably resides in the middle. Neither too short nor too long, Freake’s hair—and it is that, rather than an artificial wig—announces his morality and religiosity squarely in the middle, a kind of hirsute *juste milieu* (middle ground).

Thus, Freake’s clothing and hair does much to identify him during the end of the seventeenth century. His attire is fashionable, but not overly extravagant. Freake was among those who believed that his prosperity in life was due to God’s blessing, and as that was the case, it was not inappropriate to dress in a way that highlighted that divine favor. Likewise, his hair identifies him as religiously moderate; neither excessively devout nor liturgically loose.

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Figure \(\PageIndex{46}\): Freake painter, *Elizabeth Clarke Freake (Mrs. John Freake) and Baby Mary*, c. 1671 and
Mrs. Freake

Similarly, the artist has depicted John’s wife, Elizabeth, in a way that highlights her appropriate wealth—and thus her favorable position within the eye’s of God—and her religious moderateness. Like her husband, Elizabeth wears unexpectedly fine attire. A small amount of blond hair is visible underneath her white lace hood. That hood, tied nearly underneath a slightly protruding chin, brings visual attention to the white collar and the striking white lace that covers most of the bodice of her silver taffeta dress. Underneath her skirt is a striking red-orange velvet underskirt that is embroidered with a gold, lace-like pattern. She wears a white blouse that features lace cuffs on the sleeves, while red and black bows provide a visual splash of color and contrast against an otherwise somewhat achromatic ensemble.

Like her husband, Elizabeth’s portrait is filled with baubles that speak to their affluence and to the family’s growth. She wears a triple-stranded string of pearls about her neck, a gold ring on her finger and a beautiful four-stranded garnet bracelet can be seen on her left thumb and wrist. She sits on a fashionable chair, and a Turkey-work rug can be seen resting on the back of the chair. Although Elizabeth currently holds her infant Mary, radiograph x-ray photography shows that she originally held a fan. That the painting has been modified—fan out, new baby who wears a fashionable dress in—tells us much about the extravagant cost of having one’s portrait commissioned in the seventeenth century. It was more practical to have your daughter painted into an old portrait than to pay for a new one.

Displays of wealth

A twenty-first-century audience might scoff at these images, thinking them, perhaps, too flat, too inanimate, and too serious for our own particular aesthetics. However, this pair of images powerfully speaks to the Freakes’ understanding of their place in their world while at the same time dismissing our mistaken stereotypes of seventeenth-century Puritans. The Freakes are not an austere couple, entirely clad in black. Instead, they display their wealth—both in dress and in accessories—in a moderate and acceptable way that suggests divine blessing. In addition, while we might dismiss this artist as an unaccomplished limner (an artist with no or little formal training), he was instead a talented portraitist who was working within a rich tradition of Elizabethan painting. His images helped situate his sitters within a distinguished and rich traditional of English court portraiture.

Go deeper

Elizabeth Clarke Freake at the Worcester Art Museum

John Freake at the Worcester Art Museum

Art and Identity in the British North American Colonies, 1700–1776 on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Selected Contributors

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Amon Carter Museum of American Art
1768
A portrait and a poem: the making of Paul Revere's fame

Well known in his own day as a silversmith, Revere is shown in casual attire, with a teapot brimming with meaning.

The making of Paul Revere's fame

Where a silver teapot brims with meaning

by DR. BRYAN ZYGMONT
The fame of Paul Revere

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April in Seventy-Five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.
He said to his friend,—“If the British march
By land or sea from the town to-night,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry-arch
Of the North-Church-tower, as a signal-light—
One if by land and two if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be,
Ready to ride and spread the alarm
Through every Middlesex village and farm,
For the country-folk to be up and to arm.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Paul Revere’s Ride”

Thus begins Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s famous poem “Paul Revere’s Ride,” a work that was first published in the January 1861 issue of The Atlantic Monthly. Although Paul Revere is now famous as one of the Massachusetts Minutemen—a local militia who would defend the colony against the British army at a moment’s notice—he was hardly a public figure during his own lifetime. History tells us that he did ride from Boston’s Old North Church to warn of the approach of the British, but he was never elected to public office and he was only tangentially involved with Revolutionary politics. Indeed, Revere’s limited fame in his own day stems from his considerable talents as a silversmith. His fame during the second half of the nineteenth century comes from his appearance in Longfellow’s poem. Revere’s fame today, however, can be attributed—in part at least—to the remarkable portrait John Singleton Copley painted of the artisan in 1768.

Copley’s beginnings

Copley had extensive access to early eighteenth century prints, and he often incorporated poses and clothing from older images into his portraits of Bostonians (his mother married Peter Pelham, an engraver who specialized in mezzotints after his father died). At the age of 15, for example, Copley painted the portrait of Mrs. Joseph Mann (Bethia Torrey). Her pose—holding a string of pearls—and attire of a scoop-neckline dress with white trim—were directly taken from a mezzotint of Princess Anne. In today’s world, we might look at such “borrowing” as a kind of visual plagiarism. But this was the vein in which eighteenth-century artists worked and learned. It was expected that one could become great through the attentive copying of the Old Masters.
As Copley matured as an artist, however, he became more compositionally inventive. A great example of this is an early masterpiece, *Boy with a Squirrel*, a portrait of the artist’s half-brother, Henry Pelham. Copley sent this portrait to London for the 1766 exhibition of the Society of Artists. Copley received feedback from his contemporary expatriate Benjamin West and Sir Joshua Reynolds—perhaps the most authoritative voice on British art at the time. Captain R.G. Bruce,
Copley’s friend, took *Boy with a Squirrel* to London and returned with Reynolds’s assessment: “in any Collection of Painting it will pass for an excellent Picture, but considering the Disadvantages…you had labored under, that it was a very wonderfull Performance.” The “disadvantages” to which Reynolds refers to are likely those that involve Copley’s location (Boston, the very fringe of the British empire) and his opportunity for formal artistic instruction there (none).

Figure \(\PageIndex{49}\): John Singleton Copley, *John Hancock*, 1765, oil on canvas, 124.8 x 100 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

And yet despite these disadvantages (although some scholars of American art believe that it was because of them), Copley quickly became the most sought after portrait painter in the colonies. By the middle of the 1760s, he was painting the economic and political elite of his city, and had become a rather wealthy man himself. Before the 1760s were done, Copley had married into a wealthy family and had purchased a 20-acre farm with three houses on it. This estate placed Copley next door to John Hancock, one of the wealthiest merchants in Boston (and future president of the Continental Congress and governor of Massachusetts) when Copley painted him in 1765 (left).

But it was not only the wealthy and political elite who Copley painted. Indeed, during a politically tumultuous time, Copley painted both sides of this vitriolic divide, both Whigs (those in favor of a break with Great Britain) and Tories (those who wished to remain a part of the Empire).

It seems that Copley’s only requisite was that the sitter had the finances to pay for the likeness. It is also possible that Copley would paint a sitter for exchange for past or future goods or services. Paul Revere, a silversmith with modest if not affluent means, might just be one such case.
The portrait of Paul Revere

Copley’s portrait of Paul Revere is striking in many ways. To begin, Revere sits behind a high polished wooden table. Rather than wear his “Sunday’s Best” clothing, as sitters for portraits (and elementary school pictures) so commonly did (and still do), Revere instead wears simple working attire, a decision that underscores his artisan, middle-class status. His open collared shirt is made from plain white linen, and the lack of cravat—a kind of formal neckwear—lends to the informal nature of the portrait. What looks to be an undershirt peeks from underneath his linen shirt, and a wool (or perhaps a dull silk) waistcoat is likewise unbuttoned (although decorated with two gold buttons, features that were not likely present in Revere’s work vest). He does not wear a jacket or coat, and even his wig—something almost every male would have worn if they could to afford to do so—is missing. We can compare what Revere wears to men’s attire from the twenty-first century. Imagine a man wearing a three-piece suit (blazer, vest, buttoned white dress shirt, and a tie). If you were to remove the jacket and tie and unbutton the shirt and vest, you would have an idea of the informality present in Copley’s eighteenth-century portrait of Revere.

Figure \(\PageIndex{50}\): John Singleton Copley, *Paul Revere*, 1768, oil on canvas, 89.22 x 72.39 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

Indeed, comparing Copley’s portrait of the silversmith with that of Copley’s neighbor, John Hancock, makes the differences all the more obvious. Both seem to be at work in some ways—Revere on his teapot and Hancock at his ledger—but there the similarities end. Even though Hancock is not dressed as ostentatiously as he could have been, he still wears a dark blue coat that is embellished and trimmed with golden braid and buttons. White cuffs extend beyond his sleeves, and a silken cravat is tied around his neck. His breeches have golden buckles and silk stockings cover his
lower legs. A modest powered wig sits upon his head. This modest attire—modest for Hancock, at least—demonstrates the uniqueness of Copley painting Revere while wearing what amounts to working clothes. Indeed, this is the only completed portrait Copley painted of an artisan wearing less than formal attire.

But it is not only what Revere is wearing, it is also what he is doing. The sitter looks at the viewer, as if we have momentarily distracted him from his work. The edge of the table in the foreground suggests that the table he sits behind is parallel to the picture plane. Few would claim that this table is his workbench, for the surface is far too polished and pristine to have been used in the daily activity of his trade. The surface of the table reflects Revere's white shirt, and the tools in front of him, his engraver's burins. With his right hand, Revere seems to support his head—and as a corollary, his brain—the source of his artistic ingenuity. His left hand holds the product of that mind, a nearly completed silver teapot, a vessel that has been polished to such a high sheen that Revere’s hand beautifully reflects on its surface.

As a silversmith, Revere made many kinds of objects; spoons, bowls, shoe buckles, dentistry tools, beer tankards, creamers, coffee pots, and sugar tongs. That he should be shown with a teapot was an overtly political decision. By the end of the 1760s, Great Britain was nearing financial ruin after the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War (the North American component of this conflict is called the French and Indian War; the most famous depiction of this war is Benjamin West’s 1770 painting *The Death of General Wolfe*). In order to increase the revenue in the crown’s coffers in
1767 the British Parliament passed the Townshend Acts, which placed a tax on the colonials’ use of tea (among other imported goods). Paul Revere was clearly engaged in this political issue, for his signature appears on an October 1767 Non-importation agreement. Clearly tea was becoming a politicizing good and it is interesting that Revere chose to be shown holding an object so tied to a commodity that became a divisive symbol. Indeed, this political thread reached a climax with the so-called Boston Tea Party on 16 December 1773 when a collection of colonials—some disguised as Native Americas—raided a merchant vessel in Boston Harbor and threw the tea overboard. Interestingly, the owner of that boat was Richard Clarke, John Singleton Copley’s father-in-law.

Copley, Revere and the Boston Massacre

One other facet of the portrait of Paul Revere is worth exploring, that of its date of completion, for the artist seldom dated or signed his portraits. Copley and Revere had been acquainted since at least 1763 when Revere’s account book notes that Copley had ordered a gold bracelet. Revere also subsequently made sliver frames for Copley’s miniature portraits, and it has been suggested that this portrait might have served as a kind of payment from Copley to Revere for past services rendered and goods received. Clearly, Revere and Copley had a professional relationship. However, this relationship did not likely extend beyond the first half of 1770.

One of the most pivotal movements leading up to the American Revolutionary War was the so-called Boston Massacre. On 5 March 1770, a group of British soldiers fired at an unarmed group of protesters who were throwing snowballs (loaded with rocks) and other objects at the infantrymen. The crowd also repeatedly yelled “Fire!” at Captain Preston, the commanding officer on duty, daring him to order his soldiers to fire their muskets into the crowd. Eventually, the British army obliged their tormentors; five men were mortally wounded and another six were wounded. The soldiers were arrested and stood trial, accused of murder. Their lawyer was future President John Adams, achieved six acquittals and two reduced charges of manslaughter.

This event was instantly politically divisive, and both Whigs and Tories began to use visual propaganda as a way to bring those who were neutral in regards to declaring independence from Great Britain onto their side. In short time, Henry Pelham, Copley’s half-brother completed one such attempt at depicting the events of the Boston Massacre. Pelham finished his engraving immediately following the events of 5 March and then lent a copy to Paul Revere. The silversmith, who had been engraving political cartoons since at least 1765, and ever the entrepreneur, then faithfully copied Pelham’s print and placed an advertisement for its sale no later than 26 March, just three weeks after the event and a week prior to Pelham’s own print being available for purchase.
When seen side by side, it is clear that Revere plagiarized Pelham’s then unpublished work; the same arrangement of dead and injured bodies on the left, the same organization of the British soldiers on right, the same dog, the same framing architecture. Although the crescent moon is placed in the same part of the print—the upper left-hand corner—the biggest difference between these two images could be that Pelham’s moon is open on its right side whereas Revere’s is open to the left. This egregious affront against a family member likely brought an end to John Singleton Copley’s relationship with Paul Revere.

It is ironic that Revere is most known today because of Longfellow’s poem, a work that does not mention his more famous artisanal career. Copley’s portrait of the silversmith, likewise as famous, was hidden in a descendant’s attic for most of the nineteenth century and was not publicly displayed until 1928. Since that time, however, the image has contributed to the sitter’s prestige, and the sitter’s fame has likewise contributed to the painting’s fame.

Go deeper

Copley’s *Paul Revere* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Copley’s *Boy with a Flying Squirrel* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Copley’s *Epes Sargent* at the National Gallery of Art

The Printed Image in the West: Mezzotint on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Biography of Copley from the Worcester Art Museum

The Boston Massacre from the Gilder Lehrmann Institute of American History
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![Image](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

Figure \(\PageIndex{54}\): More Smarthistory images...

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1770-1806
An architect of the Enlightenment, Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello

In addition to being an politician, Jefferson was an ardent supporter and practitioner of classical architecture.

Architect of the Enlightenment

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello

by DR. BRYAN ZYGMONT

Figure \( \PageIndex{55} \): Thomas Jefferson, Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia, 1770-1806 (Photo: Rick Stillings, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

A gentleman architect

In an undated note, Thomas Jefferson left clear instructions about what he wanted engraved upon his burial marker:
Jefferson explained, “because by these, as testimonials that I have lived, I wish most to be remembered.” To be certain, there are important achievements Jefferson neglected. He was also the Governor of Virginia, American minister to France, the first Secretary of State, the third president of the United States, and one of the most accomplished gentleman architects in American history. To quote William Pierson, an architectural historian, “In spite of the fact that his training and resources were those of an amateur, he was able to perform with all the insight and boldness of a high professional.”

Indeed, even had he never entered political life, Jefferson would be remembered today as one of the earlist proponents of neoclassical architecture in the United States. Jefferson believed art was a powerful tool; it could elicit social change, could inspire the public to seek education, and could bring about a general sense of enlightenment for the American public. If Cicero believed that the goals of a skilled orator were to Teach, to Delight, and To Move, Jefferson believed that the scale and public nature of architecture could fulfill these same aspirations.

Return to the classical

Jefferson arrived at the College of William and Mary in 1760 and took an immediate interest in the architecture of the college’s campus and of Williamsburg more broadly. A lifelong book lover, Jefferson began his architectural collection while a student. His first two purchases were James Leoni’s *The Architecture of A. Palladio* (1715-1720) and James Gibbs’ *Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture* (1732).

Although never formally trained as an architect, Jefferson, both while a student and then later in life, expressed dissatisfaction with the architecture that surrounded him in Williamsburg, believing that the Wren-Baroque aesthetic common in colonial Virginia was too British for a North American audience. In an oft-quoted passage from Notes on
Virginia (1782), Jefferson critically wrote of the architecture of Williamsburg:

“The College and Hospital are rude, mis-shapen piles, which, but that they have roofs, would be taken for brick-kilns. There are no other public buildings but churches and court-houses, in which no attempts are made at elegance.”

Thus, when Jefferson began to design his own home, he turned not to the architecture then in vogue around the Williamsburg area, but instead to the classically inspired architecture of Antonio Palladio and James Gibbs. Rather than place his plantation house along the bank of a river—as was the norm for Virginia’s landed gentry during the eighteenth century—Jefferson decided instead to place his home, which he named Monticello (Italian for “little mountain”) atop a solitary hill just outside Charlottesville, Virginia.

**French Neo-Classicism for an American audience**

Construction began in 1768 when the hilltop was first cleared and leveled, and Jefferson moved into the completed South Pavilion two years later. The early phase of Monticello’s construction was largely completed by 1771. Jefferson left both Monticello and the United States in 1784 when he accepted an appointment as America Minister to France. Over the next five years, that is, until September 1789 when Jefferson returned to the United States to serve as Secretary of State under newly elected President Washington, Jefferson had the opportunity to visit Classical and Neoclassical architecture in France.

This time abroad had an enormous effect on Jefferson’s architectural designs. The Virginia State Capitol (1785-1789) is a modified version of the Maison Carrée (16 B.C.E.), a Roman temple Jefferson saw during a visit to Nîmes, France. And although Jefferson never went so far as Rome, the influence that the Pantheon (125 C.E.) had over his Rotunda (begun 1817) at the University of Virginia is so evident it hardly need be mentioned.

Politics largely consumed Jefferson from his return to the United States until the last day of 1793 when he formally resigned from Washington’s cabinet. From this year until 1809, Jefferson diligently redesigned and rebuilt his home, creating in time one of the most recognized private homes in the history of the United States. In it, Jefferson fully integrated the ideals of French neoclassical architecture for an American audience.

In this later construction period, Jefferson fundamentally changed the proportions of Monticello. If the early construction...
gave the impression of a Palladian two-story pavilion, Jefferson’s later remodeling, based in part on the Hôtel de Salm (1782-87) in Paris, gives the impression of a symmetrical single-story brick home under an austere Doric entablature. The west garden façade—the view that is once again featured on the American nickel—shows Monticello’s most recognized architectural features. The two-column deep extended portico contains Doric columns that support a triangular pediment that is decorated by a semicircular window. Although the short octagonal drum and shallow dome provide Monticello a sense of verticality, the wooden balustrade that circles the roofline provides a powerful sense of horizontality. From the bottom of the building to its top, Monticello is a striking example of French Neoclassical architecture in the United States.

Figure \(\PageIndex{58}\): Rembrandt Peale, *Thomas Jefferson*, 1805, oil on linen, 28 x 23 1/2 inches (New-York Historical Society)

Jefferson changed political parties and was a Democratic-Republican by the time he was elected president. He believed the young United States needed to forge a strong diplomatic relationship with France, a country Jefferson and his political brethren believed were our revolutionary brothers in arms. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that Jefferson designed his own home after the neoclassicism then popular in France, a mode of architecture that was distinct from the style then fashionable in Great Britain. This neoclassicism—with roots in the architecture of ancient Rome—was something Jefferson was able to visit while abroad.

**Buildings that speak to democratic ideals**

By helping to introduce classical architecture to the United States, Jefferson intended to reinforce the ideals behind the classical past: democracy, education, rationality, civic responsibility. Because he detested the English, Jefferson continually rejected British architectural precedents for those from France. In doing so, Jefferson reinforced the symbolic nature of architecture. Jefferson did not just design a building; he designed a building that eloquently spoke to the
democratic ideals of the United States. This is clearly seen in the Virginia State Capitol, in the Rotunda at the University of Virginia, and especially in his own home, Monticello.

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**1820**

**Daily life in Brooklyn, Francis Guy, Winter Scene in Brooklyn**

This snowy image of a bygone Brooklyn is sprinkled with farm animals, townspeople... and casual racism.
Daily life in 1820 Brooklyn

Francis Guy, *Winter Scene in Brooklyn*

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

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

Video \(\PageIndex{4}\): Francis Guy, *Winter Scene in Brooklyn*, 1820, oil on canvas, 147.3 x 260.2 cm (Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art). Speakers: Dr. Margaret C. Conrads and Dr. Beth Harris.

**Key points**

- While this painting looks spontaneous and like it is capturing a frozen moment, it is a composite of views from the artist’s studio windows. It does however give an accurate image of this location. Francis Guy has taken pains to carefully render the buildings, and they would have been identifiable to people who knew this part of Brooklyn.

- The scene shows the physical specifics of the neighborhood but also its social hierarchy. We see the fancy houses and shops of those higher on the social scale, and a carpenter speaking with a man who wears a fur coat and is obviously well-fed. There are also figures caring for farm animals and possibly enslaved African-American men who are sawing wood and selling coal.

- As a further indication of social hierarchy, Guy identified all of the white figures in his painting, but not any of the African-American ones. He also includes a comic scene at the expense of one African-American man who has slipped on the icy ground. This kind of making fun of African-Americans was also found in the literature and theater of the time.

- Guy has also placed himself in the painting, walking in the foreground with a painting under his arm. His attention to detail, social situations, and the broad expanse of the sky harken to the Dutch landscape and genre painting traditions, a reminder that Brooklyn was originally a Dutch colony.
Go deeper

This painting at the Crystal Bridges Museum

Exhibition materials for Picturing Place: Francis Guy’s Brooklyn, 1820 at the Brooklyn Museum

A biography of Francis Guy at the Dallas Museum of Art

Brooklyn abolitionism at the Brooklyn Historical Society

More to think about

Francis Guy’s representation of the people of Brooklyn — from the elites and lower classes, whites and African Americans — shows us specific stereotypes that shaped and were shaped by the way society thought about these groups. What media examples can you think of from modern life that present similar kinds of social stereotypes? What media have the most influence, and how might they be used for positive change?

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- Portland Art Museum
- Smithsonian American Art Museum
- Terra Foundation for American Art
- Toledo Museum of Art
- Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art
1826
Hicks’ The Peaceable Kingdom as Pennsylvania parable

In his Peaceable Kingdom series of over 60 images, Hicks depicts a visionary scene of peace on earth that extends back to include William Penn and the founding of Pennsylvania.

The Peaceable Kingdom as Penn’s parable

What does William Penn have to do with a little boy and a lion?

by BARBARA BASSETT, PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART and DR. BETH HARRIS

Video \(\PageIndex{5}\): Edward Hicks, The Peaceable Kingdom, 1826, oil on canvas, 83.5 x 106 cm (Philadelphia Museum of Art). Speakers: Barbara Bassett, Philadelphia Museum of Art and Dr. Beth Harris

Test your knowledge with a quiz

START

Key points

- William Penn was granted land by King Charles II in 1682 to found a colony in present-day Pennsylvania. As a Quaker, he had been persecuted in England, so Penn’s goal was to create a place of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Philadelphia quickly became a community of many different peoples and faiths.
• Led by his religious convictions, William Penn sought to deal fairly with the Lenape people who lived in the region. When he added land to the colonial settlement, he compensated the Lenape. However, his son, Thomas Penn, later unfairly claimed more land than agreed on in the terms of the 1737 Walking Treaty.

• Edward Hicks was both a preacher and painter. According to his Quaker principles, fine art was frowned upon as a luxury, so Hicks specialized in utilitarian sign paintings and gave away works like Peaceable Kingdom. His style reflects this commercial influence, drawing heavily from graphic arts and lettering to create scenes that were easily understandable. He combined this with references from popular art (including a widely circulated biblical illustration) and fine art (specifically here, a painting by Benjamin West).

• In his Peaceable Kingdom series of over 60 images, Hicks depicts a visionary scene of peace on earth that extends back to include William Penn and the founding of Pennsylvania.

Go deeper

See this object at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

Read more about William Penn and explore his country estate

Learn about the founding of Philadelphia

Read William Penn’s description of meeting the Lenape

Find out about the history of Quakers in colonial North America

Explore an online exhibition of the impact of religion in the founding of the American republic

Learn more about Benjamin West’s painting William Penn’s Treaty with the Indians

More to think about

Compare Hicks’s work to Benjamin West’s painting of _William Penn’s Treaty with the Indians when he founded the Province of Pennsylvania in North America_ as primary source documents about the historical founding of Pennsylvania. What ideas are reinforced through each artist’s perspective? What is left out? What questions might remain about these historical events?

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Terra Foundation for American Art
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1845
Dignity in the face of injustice: The White Cloud, Head Chief of the Iowas

This dignified portrait of a Native leader belies the cruel treatment he endured at the time of its painting.

*The White Cloud, Head Chief of the Iowas*

This portrait of a native leader belies the cruel treatment he endured.

by FARISA KHALID

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Robed in his most splendid costume, his face gleaming with precious vermillion paint, he sits, like the prince he is, among his proud acolytes, solemnly smoking his pipe. [He is] a modern Jason.


This is what the nineteenth century French novelist and critic George Sand said when she first saw this striking portrait of the head chief of the Iowas, The White Cloud, or “Mew-hu-she-kaw,” painted by the American artist, explorer, and ethnographer, George Catlin. This painting, along with a series of other portraits of American Indians by Catlin, was exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1846 (the Salon was the official exhibition of the Academy of Fine Arts in France). They stunned and titillated bourgeois Parisians with the spectacle and strangeness of the vast American wilderness and its “noble savages.”
Vanishing heroes

The comparison to the Greek mythological seafarer Jason is not unusual; the tendency to link the diminishing American Indian population to a vanished race of classical heroes was popular among Europeans and Americans in the nineteenth century. In 1821 the American artist Charles Bird King caused a sensation when he painted a group of Plains Indian chiefs in profile as dignified and as stately as Roman statues.

But rhapsodizing over the Indian’s innate nobility was easy to do in the face of his near extinction. By the mid-nineteenth century the popular image of the terrifying Indian who threatened Western expansion and Manifest Destiny (the widely held belief in the United States that American settlers were destined to expand throughout the continent) gave way to a more dignified, but defeated figure as the numbers of Indians across the country fell due to diseases, forced relocation, and poverty. By 1750, the American Indian population east of the Mississippi River fell by approximately 250,000 while the Caucasian and African-American population rose from around 250,000 in 1700 to nearly 1.25 million by 1750.[1]

Catlin painted this portrait of The White Cloud around 1844, twenty years after the Iowa tribes were forced by the U.S. government to move from Iowa to small reservations in Kansas and Nebraska. The displacement from their ancestral and spiritual homeland left the dwindling Iowa people in a fragile state. Only thirteen years before Catlin’s painting, American Indians endured one of their most traumatic collective experiences, “The Trail of Tears.” As part of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the government forced many of the southeastern tribes, the Cherokee, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chickasaw, to leave their homes and move west to designated Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma. Hundreds of thousands died along the grueling journey from disease, exposure, and starvation.

A dignified portrayal

Catlin met The White Cloud, not in the U.S., but in Victorian London, when the Indian chief and his family were touring Europe as part of P.T. Barnum’s traveling circus from 1843 to 1845. The dancing Indians were a featured act in Barnum’s “Greatest Show on Earth” which showcased what Barnum believed to be rare cultural curiosities from all over the world.
By 1844, George Catlin was already something of a celebrity in America and in Europe with his Indian portraits. Catlin exaggerated his rustic backwoods character by occasionally wearing fur and moccasins to entrance his eager European audience who were hungry for an undiluted taste of the American wilderness (Catlin had grown up in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania).

The exotic plumage of traditional Indian dress appealed to Catlin at a fundamental level. It connected him to another culture and to the roots of American identity and the land.

In his journals he describes their beauty in detail:

I love the Indians for their dignity, which is natural and noble. Vanity is the same all the world over. Good looks in portraiture and fashions, whatever they are—crinoline of the lip or crinoline of the waist (and one is as beautiful and reasonable as the other), or rings in the nose or rings in the ears, they are all the same.


However, Catlin’s portrayal of The White Cloud, in his resplendent warrior regalia, stands in sharp contrast to the squalid
way in which Barnum treated him. Indian performers during the nineteenth century, whether they were with Buffalo Bill’s “Wild West Show” or P.T. Barnum’s circus, were by and large cruelly exploited. In an 1843 letter to the collector and cultural historian Moses Kimball, founder of the Boston Museum, Barnum writes of the challenges of including Indians in his act while denigrating them:

Dear Moses:

The Indians arrived and danced [last] night...They dance very well but do not [look] so fine as those last winter. They rowed, or rather paddled, another [race] last Saturday at Camden. I hired them out for the occasion for $100 and their board.

You must either get a [building] near the museum for the Indians to sleep and cook their own victuals [in] or else let them sleep in the museum on their skins & have victuals sent them from Sweeny shop. I boil up ham & potatoes, corn, beef, &c. at home & send them at each meal. The interpreter is a kind of half-breed and a decent chap; he must have common private board. The lazy devils want to be lying down nearly all the time, and as it looks so bad for them to be lying about the Museum, I have them stretched out in the workshop all day, some of them occasionally strolling about the Museum.

D—n Indians anyhow. They are a lazy, shiftless set of brutes—though they will draw [in a crowd].

As quoted in P.T. Barnum: America’s Greatest Showman (Knopf, 1995)

Barnum’s view of the Indians in his employ is the opposite of Catlin’s portrayal of The White Cloud, which brings out this man’s inherent grace and dignity.

Traditional dress
The White Cloud wears the traditional costume of the Iowa chieftain, indicative of his strengths as a warrior and hunter. His face is painted in glowing vermillion with a green handprint across his cheeks, a sign that he was skilled in hand-to-hand combat. He wears a headdress of two eagle feathers and deer's tail (also dyed vermillion) and a black band across his forehead made of otter fur. His earrings are made of carved conch shells. White wolf skin covers his shoulders over his deerskin robe and he wears a necklace made of grizzly bear claws, which testifies to his superior skill as a hunter.

The necklace is the costume's pièce de résistance, the aspect that signifies that The White Cloud is indeed the chief of his tribe. Catlin added the hazy blue sky in the background from his own imagination—the portrait was actually painted indoors in a draughty studio in London.

Catlin's portrayal of Indian chiefs galvanized the imagination of a generation of European writers such as George Sand, Charles Baudelaire, and J.M. Barrie, whose Indians in Peter Pan are derived in part from Catlin's portraits. Yet underneath the images of plumed warriors and braves there was a sense of underlying sadness and determination to document a vanishing way of life. "We travel to see the perishable and the perishing," Catlin wrote in his journal in the 1830s. "To see them before they fall."[2]

**Catlin's portraits today**

It is difficult to look at Catlin’s *The White Cloud* today without overlaying our knowledge of the oppression and violence Indian peoples suffered over hundreds of years. Nevertheless, it’s important to remember that during Catlin’s time, painting was an important means that Europeans used to record and preserve the changing status of Native Americans. The cultural historian Richard Slotkin said, “Catlin tried to deal with the ephemeral quality of the wilderness—the fact that white men were destroying it as they were trying to appropriate it.”[3] The Indian, to Catlin, represented a beautiful, primordial aspect of America endangered in the face of industrialization and westward expansion.
George Catlin’s paintings of the American Indians remain an enduring window onto the Old West, one of the most fascinating and contentious periods of American history. In certain aspects the art of the Old West shows us what the art historian Bryan J. Wolf calls, “the eternal last act in an imperial drama that began, as it ended, not just with territorial expansion but with cultural conquest as well.”[4] Catlin’s paintings and illustrations, free of sanctimony or fabrication, show us the Indian not as a noble savage, as the European audiences often saw him, or as a demonic figure in the view of many nineteenth-century settlers, but as a real person in a real, though exotic, setting.


Go deeper

This painting at the National Gallery of Art

George Catlin and his Indian Gallery from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Biography of the artist from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Charles Bird King, Young Omahaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri, and Pawnees at the museum

Susanna Reich, Painting the Wild Frontier: The Art and Adventures of George Catlin, (New York: Clarion), p. 77


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1880-1910
Two sides of Lakota life on a beaded suitcase by Nellie Two Bear Gates

This one-of-a-kind suitcase tells the surprising story of an artist, a wedding, and a people.

Lakota life on a beaded suitcase

The surprising story of an artist, a wedding, and a people

by DR. JILL AHLBERG YOHE, MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ART and DR. BETH HARRIS
Test your knowledge with a quiz

START

Key points

- The Lakota had a nomadic lifestyle, made possible by horses, which Spanish colonists had brought to North America in the 16th century. In the 19th century, the US government cut off their food supply by decimating the buffalo population, and then confined the Lakota to small reservations where they relied on cattle, as shown on this suitcase from the late 19th or early 20th century.

- Nellie Two Bear Gates adorns this suitcase with detailed beaded imagery, blending the Lakota’s traditional beliefs about marriage and family with modern life on a reservation in the early 20th century. To these, she adds geometric abstractions and the name of the recipient of this gift, making it both a commemorative and useful object.

- Although Gates uses glass beads, introduced to Plains Indians in the 17th or 18th century, her technique is based on quillwork Lakota women historically used to decorate clothing, regalia, and functional objects.

Go deeper

See this object in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art

Learn more about Nellie Two Bear Gates and her beadwork
View another beaded suitcase by Nellie Two Bear Gates

Learn more about the decimation of buffalo in the United States

View an online exhibition on the history of Native Americans in the upper midwest

Learn about Great Plains beadwork traditions

Find out more about art and cultural heritage of the Sioux Nation

More to think about

This object by Nellie Two Bear Gates reflects the historical blending of cultures that has contributed to modern society in the United States. Discuss the cultural origins of different elements in this suitcase and how they reflect a synthesis of different traditions and lifestyles. What are some examples of works of art, literature, music, dance styles, or other forms of popular culture that show the complexity of our society today?

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National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts

Philadelphia Museum of Art

Portland Art Museum

Smithsonian American Art Museum
1893
Henry Ossawa Tanner: the first African-American celebrity artist

Tanner studied in Philadelphia and Paris, and his style combined elements of American Realism and the Old Masters.

The first African American celebrity artist

Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Banjo Lesson*

by FARISA KHALID

Figure \(\PageIndex{67}\): Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Banjo Lesson*, 1893, oil on canvas, 49 × 35.5 inches/124.5 × 90.2 cm (Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA)
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 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).

While studying in Paris, Tanner was also inspired by the works of the French Realists, namely Gustave Courbet and Jean-François Millet, 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*. 
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 contrast between the man’s age and the boy’s adds to the narrative tension within 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.

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.’"[1]
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.


**Go deeper**

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


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1909

Heavyweights: illicit boxing and racial tensions in New York City, George Bellows, Both Members of This Club

The violence and physicality of this boxing match reflect contemporary racial tensions in pre-WWI New York.

Illicit boxing and racial tension in NYC

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.
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 in to 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.¹

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.

Figure \(\PageIndex{79}\): Crowd (detail), Both Members of This Club, 1909, oil on canvas, 115 x 160.5 cm (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)

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.²
Urban entertainments

Figure \(\PageIndex{80}\): 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 \(\PageIndex{90}\): George Bellows, *Stag at Sharkey’s*, 1909, oil on canvas, 110 x 140.5 cm (Cleveland Museum
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)

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Newark Museum

National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts

Philadelphia Museum of Art
1930
As contested as the nation: understanding Grant Wood's American Gothic

Though often thought of as a simple image of American values, this painting resists easy interpretation.

As contested as the nation

Understanding *American Gothic*

by [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)
Video \(\text{PageIndex}(7)\): 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). Speakers: Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

**Key points**

- *American Gothic* is an iconic painting that has come to represent small-town middle America. In the years since its creation, it has been interpreted in many different ways. Many aspects of the painting create general, universal forms that lean towards the geometric. It allows the painting to feel both real and symbolic at the same time.

- Grant Wood grew up on a remote farm in rural Iowa. He is considered an American Scene or Regionalist painter, a movement that sought to represent the American midwest and its values. Wood however spent time in Paris and Munich, and his art was informed by these travels. His style changed from a semi-Impressionist style to the hard-edged one seen in *American Gothic*, possibly influenced by early Northern Renaissance art as well as the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement in Germany.

- In 1930 the US had changed from going through one of its most prosperous moments to the stock market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression. Fascists in Europe were just beginning to take power, and the ideology that went with that was often about going back to a rural, primitive experience. Some art historians have looked at this painting and seen an echo of anti-internationalism, but that is only one of many interpretations.

**Go deeper**

- [This work of art at the Art Institute of Chicago](#)
- [About the house in *American Gothic*](#)
- [“Meet Grant Wood’s Sister, the Woman Made Famous by *American Gothic,*” at Smithsonian Magazine](#)
“In Search of the Real Grant Wood,” at Smithsonian Magazine

A biography of Grant Wood at the National Gallery, Washington DC

More to think about

The video argues that one of the reasons that *American Gothic* has become such an icon is that its ambiguity allows the viewer to see what they want in it. What other reasons might have made the painting as famous as it has become?

What other works of art do you associate with American identity? What vision of America do those works of art promote? Are those visions of America accurate? Why or why not?

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Source: demo trading and stock market tips
1936
Cheap thrills: Coney Island during the Great Depression, Reginald Marsh, Wooden Horses

According to the artist (Reginald Marsh), at Coney Island, “The best show is the people themselves.”

Coney Island during the Depression
The cheap thrills of Reginald Marsh's *Wooden Horses*

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

**Test your knowledge with a quiz**

**START**

**Key points**

- During the Great Depression, amusements like Steeplechase Park in Coney Island provided an affordable escape from the anxieties of daily life. Coney Island attracted people of different classes, races, and genders, bringing them together in ways that were not always considered socially acceptable in other environments.

- Reginald Marsh documented the lives and activities of the working class, part of a general trend in the 1930s towards capturing life realistically. While many of his colleagues, including the photographer Dorothea Lange, worked in rural areas, Marsh focused his attention on life in urban spaces.

- Marsh’s depictions of women combine elements of reality and popular culture that portray women through a voyeuristic and sexualized lens. His buxom figures were inspired by movie stars, and also reflect the salacious spectacle of Coney Island, where working-class women like those in this image could supplement their income in dance halls and popular entertainment.

**Go deeper**

See this painting in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art
Learn about other artworks and stories that portray Coney Island

Read this famous article in *Fortune* magazine about Coney Island in the 1930s

Learn more about the history of Coney Island

Find out how George C. Tilyou, the founder of Steeplechase Park, developed business practices still in use today

Read about how some of the “lost” wooden horses from Steeplechase Park turned up in a storage yard

Learn more about arts and entertainment during the Great Depression

See photographs of Marsh sketching, as well as examples of his sketches

**More to think about**

Coney Island was a place of social permissiveness, entertainment, and escape that crossed lines of class, race, and gender. What are some settings that function in this way today? How would you compare these contemporary examples to the scene that Marsh shows us in his work?

**Selected Contributors**

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- Los Angeles County Museum of Art
- Minneapolis Institute of Art
- Newark Museum
1937
Premonition or memory? George Grosz’s Remembering

Nazi violence forced many artists and intellectuals to leave Germany in the 1930s, and like Grosz, many came to the United States.

The premonition of *Remembering*

George Grosz and Nazi Germany

by DR. ROBERT COZZOLINO, MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ART and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video (PageIndex9): George Grosz, *Remembering*, 1937, oil on canvas, 71.2 x 91.76 cm (Minneapolis Institute of Art, © Estate of George Grosz). Speakers: Dr. Robert Cozzolino, Minneapolis Institute of Art and Dr. Steven Zucker

**Test your knowledge with a quiz**

**START**

**Key points**

- The persecution of political adversaries and marginalized groups of people began years before the start of World War II. Witnessing the rise of fascism during the 1930s, many artists and intellectuals sensed the dangers of remaining in Germany and emigrated to America.
- In 1937, the opening of the *Degenerate Art* exhibition represented a fascist attack on art and culture. It included work by many artists who had been politically engaged and often critical of the National Socialist party. Meant to ridicule the international avant-garde, the exhibition highlighted modernism as an example of a sick (or degenerate) society.
- As an expressionist artist, George Grosz combines elements of both abstraction and representational figure painting to evoke sensations of reflection and memory.

**Go deeper**

See this work in the Minneapolis Institute of Art

See images from the *Degenerate Art* exhibition and read more about it
Learn about Germany in the years between the world wars

Read the press release for the 1941 exhibit of George Grosz’s work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York

Learn more about the history of German immigrants in America

Read about America’s immigration policies during World War II and the U.S. response to the Holocaust

More to think about

With the Degenerate Art exhibition, the Nazis openly criticized artists who expressed differing political viewpoints or challenged artistic traditions with modernist experiments. Why do you think totalitarian governments would think it necessary to censor and suppress the work of modern artists?

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Minneapolis Institute of Art

Newark Museum

National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts

Philadelphia Museum of Art
1942
Wartime alienation in Edward Hopper's Nighthawks

Hopper gives us a window into the urban isolation and anxiety of WWII-era New York.

Wartime alienation, Hopper's *Nighthawks*

A window into the urban isolation and anxiety of WWII-era New York

by **CHRISTINE ZAPPELLA**
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.

![Figure \(\PageIndex{93}\): Edward Hopper, *Early Sunday Morning*, 1930, oil on canvas, 35 3/16 x 60 1/4" (Whitney Museum of American Art)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

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.

Key points

- *Nighthawks* was painted in 1942, at the height of the Second World War. The painting reflects the fear and anxiety of the time, as well as the emptiness of many urban areas as both men and women went overseas for the war.
- The use of warm light inside and cold light outside helps foster a sense of separation and alienation, as does the use of strong geometric shapes and lines. The geometric shapes frame the figures but also emphasize that we are not a part of their lives. We can only speculate about their stories and what they are doing in the diner.
- Images of loneliness and isolation in urban spaces occupied Hopper for his entire career. In *Nighthawks*, Hopper has used small details like the lone cash register seen in the shop across the street, or the carefully-rendered napkin holders in the diner, to create a sense of familiarity. We know this urban space even as we do not know what specific place it is based on.

Go deeper

- [This painting at the Art Institute of Chicago](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

More about Edward Hopper at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

- [Hopper: The Supreme American Realist of the 20th-Century at Smithsonian Magazine](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

- [Fear of the city 1882-1967: Edward Hopper and the discourse of anti-urbanism](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)

More to think about

*Nighthawks* is one of the most parodied works of art. If you were going to make a parody that addressed current feelings
of isolation, who would be there? How would you change or alter the surroundings? What other details would you use to communicate your meaning?

A sense of isolation in modern urban areas is not unique to the American experience. European artists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner explored the feeling of being alone in a crowded urban setting in paintings of bustling streets. Compare *Nighthawks* to *Street, Dresden* by Kirchner. How can we compare Kirchner and Hopper’s methods of communicating their ideas?

**Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:**

![Nighthawks by Edward Hopper](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/14%3A_Art_that_brings_U.S._history_to_life/14.06%3A_New_Page)
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1948
A Harlem street scene by Jacob Lawrence, Ambulance Call

Lawrence captures the vitality of Harlem and highlights the issues around access to medical care for Black Americans in the U.S.

A Harlem street by Jacob Lawrence

African Americans and the price of discrimination

by DR. JENNIFER PADGETT, CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART and DR. BETH HARRIS
Test your knowledge with a quiz
START

Key points

- From the 1920s until the 1940s, Harlem was the epicenter of African American culture. Known as the Harlem Renaissance, this period of cultural richness and collaboration redefined how the African American experience was expressed in art, music, and literature. In this painting, Jacob Lawrence evokes the vibrant sense of community and energy in Harlem, even without depicting the city itself.

- After World War I, during what is known as the Great Migration, millions of African Americans relocated from agrarian regions in the southern states to cities in the North. Hoping to escape the brutal racism and violence of the Jim Crow South, they were attracted by the economic opportunities provided by the growth of industry in the northern states. The range of people included in Lawrence’s painting speaks to the diverse backgrounds that were brought together in neighborhoods such as Harlem.

- African Americans in the North continued to face racism and systemic discrimination. Lawrence’s painting speaks to one of the inequities they suffered: the lack of access to quality healthcare. Harlem Hospital was insufficiently staffed for the size of the local community and although the ambulance attendants and paramedic shown here are black, there were few job opportunities for African Americans in the medical field.
Go deeper

See this painting in the collection of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Read the transcript of a 1968 interview with Jacob Lawrence

Find out more about Jacob Lawrence’s work The Migration Series.

Listen to an interview with Isabel Wilkerson about her book on the Great Migration

Read more about the Harlem Renaissance

Learn more about the Harlem Renaissance using primary sources

Read more about the history of Harlem Hospital

Find out about the murals commissioned for Harlem Hospital through the Federal Works Progress Administration (WPA)

Learn more about the history of African Americans in the medical profession

More to think about

Consider how Lawrence communicates—in his painting and his words—the sense of vitality and connection that he observed among people living in Harlem. Do you feel like you belong to a community, either in your school, in your neighborhood, or as part of an organization or group? What specifically makes you feel connected to that community?

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National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution
1960
Abstract Expressionism in Cold War America, Rothko, No. 210/No. 211 (Orange)

Spirituality and transcendence were important postwar themes expressed in Rothko’s work.

Transcendence and Cold War

Mark Rothko, No. 210/No. 211 (Orange)

by DR. MARGARET C. CONRADS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video: Mark Rothko, *No. 210/No. 211 (Orange)*, 1960, oil on canvas, 175.3 x 160 cm (Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art). Speakers: Dr. Margi Conrads and Dr. Steven Zucker

**Key points:**

- *No. 210/No. 211 (Orange)* is an Abstract Expressionist painting that uses color relationships to evoke a general spiritual feeling. Rothko painted the orange in areas of varying density and transparency over the purple so that the relationship between the colors is explored in many variations.
- The painting is meant to elicit deep human emotion. Rothko was concerned throughout his career with the relationship between art and the spiritual, and how to evoke a spiritual response with a modernist visual vocabulary.
- 1960 was poised between the post-World War II era that confronted questions about humanity’s brutality and the dawning era of the Civil Rights movement; it is possible the color choices are meant to reflect that.

**Go deeper**

This work at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Mark Rothko at the National Gallery, Washington DC

PBS’s American Masters series episode on Mark Rothko

**More to think about**

Mark Rothko used relationships between colors and simple geometric shapes to create paintings meant to feel spiritual
but not be attached to any specific religion. How does Rothko’s work compare with James Turrell’s *Skyspace: The Way of Color*?

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- Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts
- Philadelphia Museum of Art
- Portland Art Museum
- Smithsonian American Art Museum
- Terra Foundation for American Art
- Toledo Museum of Art
- Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

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**1962**

The art of a Cold War atomic scientist, Jess, *If all the World Were Paper and All the Water Sink*

From the Manhattan Project to nursery rhymes, a collision of art and science.
If All the World Were Paper...

Imagining the unthinkable, the art of a Cold War atomic scientist

by EMMA ACKER AT THE FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO and DR. BETH HARRIS

Test your knowledge with a quiz

START

Key points

- The August 1945 nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the American military announced the beginning of the Atomic Age, a period of anxiety that escalated into the decades-long Cold War with the USSR.
- Beginning in 1942, the American government sponsored the top-secret Manhattan Project to develop atomic energy and weapons. After World War II, many scientists (including Jess, the artist) continued to work at centers across the country, such as the Hanford Atomic Energy project in Washington State.
- Jess worked for the Manhattan Project and Hanford Atomic Energy before coming to believe that these technologies would destroy the world. Turning to a career in art, Jess used symbols to create multiple levels of meaning in his paintings. Works like If All the World Were Paper and All the Water Sink suggest the possibility of apocalypse, but also leave much to the viewer’s own interpretation.
Go deeper

See this painting at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Read more about Jess (Burgess Franklin Collins) from FAMSF

Read about the circle of poets, writers, and artists surrounding Jess

Learn about the Cold War and 1950s anxieties about the Atomic age

Learn more about the Manhattan Project and the atomic bomb and explore primary sources about it

Read more about the life of Robert Oppenheimer and nuclear technology after WWII

Listen to oral histories by people involved with the Manhattan Project

Explore the construction of the Hanford and the people who were displaced in the process

Read about the Hanford Site today

Explore the 17th-century book that inspired the title of this painting

More to think about

Our society celebrates advances in technology (the newest phone camera, or the latest social media channel) but it's clear that technology also causes us great anxiety. Movies depict robots that threaten our existence, recent developments in genetic engineering raise the specter of artificially-created human beings, and enough atomic weapons exist to end all life. Can science and the development of technology lead us too far from our humanity?

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1965
Marisol Escobar, The Party

At this party, everyone has the same face and seems profoundly alone.

Fashion & alienation in 1960s New York

Marisol's *The Party*

by DR. HALONA NORTON-WESTBROOK, TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{14}\): Marisol Escobar, *The Party*, 1965-66, fifteen freestanding, life-size figures and three wall panels, with painted and carved wood, mirrors, plastic, television set, clothes, shoes, glasses, and other accessories, variable dimensions (Toledo Museum of Art, © artist’s estate). Speakers: Dr. Halona Norton-Westbrook, Toledo Museum of Art and Dr. Steven Zucker

**Test your knowledge with a quiz**

START

**Key Points**

- The booming economy and mass media of the 1950s popularized an American ideal of the middle-class lifestyle, where conspicuous consumption promised happiness and status. Yet, many women were increasingly frustrated by expectations to conform to socially constructed gender roles.

- Marisol’s *The Party* suggests a social gathering, but emphasizes a sense of disconnect and isolation. The blocks of wood confine her figures and suggest an overpowering loneliness, even as they are gathered together and surrounded with convivial details. Marisol used her own face for each figure, wanting to create a larger social commentary without criticizing specific people.

- Marisol has been overlooked by art history, in part because her work is difficult to place within any specific style or movement. Working at the height of Abstract Expressionism, she opted to focus on the human figure. Her bright colors and recognizable subjects are similar to Pop Art, but her social critique and emphasis on the personal and handmade stand apart.
Go Deeper

This sculpture at the Toledo Museum of Art


Learn more about Marisol’s connection to Andy Warhol and Pop Art in the 1960s.

Learn about Betty Friedan’s 1963 publication The Feminine Mystique that described the discontent experienced by many women in the late 1950s.

What is second wave feminism?

Learn more about the Equal Rights Amendment through primary source documents

Read about the current status of the Equal Rights Amendment

More to think about

Norman Rockwell’s Rosie the Riveter, which was painted in 1943, shows a woman who has broken from traditional gender norms. How does Marisol’s depiction of the female figure in The Party—made 20 years later—differ from Rosie?

Figure \(\PageIndex{95}\): 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 \(\PageIndex{96}\): More Smarthistory images...

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- Newark Museum
1986
The HIV/AIDS epidemic, Masami Teraoka, American Kabuki

Teraoka draws on Japan's brilliant history of art and kabuki theatre to create beauty from heartrending tragedy

American Kabuki

Creating beauty from the heartrending tragedy of the AIDS crisis

by EMMA ACKER AT THE FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{15}\): Masami Teraoka, *American Kabuki (Oishiwa)*, 1986, watercolor and sumi ink on paper mounted on a four-panel screen, 196.9 x 393.7 x 3 cm (de Young Museum, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco), © Masami Teraoka, a Seeing America video. Speakers: Emma Acker, Associate Curator of American Art, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Steven Zucker

Test your knowledge with a quiz

START

Key points

- The nearly nonexistent government response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic during the 1980s was largely due to prejudices against the most critically impacted communities. Activists worked to raise public awareness and reduce the stigma around the disease, leading eventually to improved medical care and research, but not before the death of tens of thousands of people.

- Masami Teraoka, who grew up in Japan, draws on the traditional format of the folding screen (byobu) and kabuki theater for this piece. Popular during the Edo period, kabuki had been a popular form of theater that often used historical narratives to offer covert commentary on contemporary politics during a period of censorship and suppression. Similarly, the artist uses traditional symbols, including the blackened teeth and makeup of the female figure, to speak to the personal and universal tragedies of HIV/AIDS.

- This screen is modeled in the style of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. Masami Teraoka uses a strong, violently undulating line to add drama and tension to both the figures and the waves that threaten to overcome them. He depicts a struggle against an overwhelming destructive energy, echoed in the calligraphic text inscribed on the panels.
Go deeper

See this object at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Read about the history of HIV/AIDS in the U.S. and worldwide

Explore the politicized response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s

Watch the artist, Masami Teraoka, discuss painted Japanese folding screens

Learn more about kabuki theater

Read about ukiyo-e woodblock prints, the Edo period, and explore thousands of examples

Learn about the process of making woodblock prints

Learn more about traditional Japanese screens

More to think about

Since I always had been fascinated by Ukiyo-e wood block print and its beautiful vocabulary coming from Japanese cultural background, what if I use my favorite vocabulary to create my work. I could make comments on Japanese culture and US culture in Ukiyo-e style work.

—Masami Teraoka, “Bridging Life and Art,” interview with Mike Foldes, Founder and Managing Editor,” Ragazine (November-December 2014)

The artist drew on his own cultural heritage to make this work of art about modern American and Japanese society. If you were to try this, what could you borrow from your own family’s cultural heritage?

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Brooklyn Museum
Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled (Woman Feeding Bird), from The Kitchen Table Series

Weems confronts identity, family, and the myth of home in this iconic series of photographs.

Carrie Mae Weems, Kitchen Table Series

Identity, family, and the myth of home

by LAUREN HAYNES, CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Carrie Mae Weems has carefully staged the photographs in this series to suggest moments of everyday life, but also uses symbolism, lighting and props to create deeper levels of meaning.

Weems suggests that the familiar, unremarkable domestic kitchen is actually important as an epicenter of family life and human drama.

Unlike in so much art through history, the everyday lived experience of a woman, as opposed to a man, is central here.

**Test your knowledge with a quiz**

**START**

**Key points**

- Carrie Mae Weems has carefully staged the photographs in this series to suggest moments of everyday life, but also uses symbolism, lighting and props to create deeper levels of meaning.
- Weems suggests that the familiar, unremarkable domestic kitchen is actually important as an epicenter of family life and human drama.
- Unlike in so much art through history, the everyday lived experience of a woman, as opposed to a man, is central here.

**Go deeper**

- Find out more about this work on Carrie Mae Weems’s website
- See Weems’s entire series on the National Gallery of Art’s website
- Listen to Weems discuss this series in a 2018 lecture at the National Gallery of Art
Read how Weems has influenced other artists’ work

Read how people from the fields of theater, photography, and art history to reflect on this body of Weems’s work

More to think about

Visit Carrie Mae Weems' website to see all of the photographs in The Kitchen Table Series. Choose one and discuss the story the image suggests to you. Compare it to Untitled (Woman Feeding Bird) considering some of these questions: How does Weems use the same setting to create different moods and emotions? How does Weems use formal elements (light/dark contrasts, shapes, lines, composition) in her photograph to engage the viewer and enhance its meaning? What broader themes about women, family, and contemporary society can be found in both of these photographs?

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National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Portland Art Museum
Smithsonian American Art Museum
Terra Foundation for American Art
Toledo Museum of Art
2017
Turning Uncle Tom's Cabin upside down, Alison Saar, Topsy
A Greek myth and the American anti-Slavery novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin are combined to upend our own contemporary myths.

Turning Uncle Tom’s Cabin upside down

Alison Saar's Topsy and the Golden Fleece

by DR. HALONA NORTON-WESTBROOK, TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART and DR. BETH HARRIS

Video: Alison Saar, Topsy and the Golden Fleece, 2017, wood, tar, steel, ceiling tin, wire, acrylic paint and gold leaf, 35-1/2 x 11-1/2 x-8 1/2 inches (Toledo Museum of Art, ©Alison Saar). Speakers: Dr. Halona Norton-Westbrook, Toledo Museum of Art and Dr. Beth Harris

Test your knowledge with a quiz

START
**Key Points**

- Although Harriet Beecher Stowe supported the abolitionist movement and her novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, was an effective component of that campaign, her story also created stereotypes of African-Americans that have persisted in popular culture. In particular, Topsy, often considered the embodiment of wickedness and wildness, was widely caricatured and dehumanized and became an image of ridicule. Amid rapid social changes, Vietnam War protests, debates on gender roles, and civil rights, the stability of middle class American life during the 1950s gave way to a period of disillusionment and uncertainty by the 1970s.

- In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Topsy is powerless. Not only is she a slave, but her character is a passive vehicle for other people’s feelings, a stereotype created to contrast with the Christian spirit of Eva. (The gift of a lock of Eva’s hair, given from the young girl’s deathbed, then becomes a catalyst for the redemption of Topsy.) In *Topsy and the Golden Fleece*, Alison Saar reimagines Topsy as an empowered and angry force who has seized a blood-streaked Golden Fleece and now controls her own destiny.

- Alison Saar combines elements of two mythic narratives, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Jason and the Golden Fleece, to dismantle an African-American stereotype and give her a new sense of power and authority. Saar may be reacting to the continuing racial inequalities and contemporary tragedies that have prompted the Black Lives Matter movement.

**Go deeper**

- [This sculpture at the museum](#)
- [Read more about Alison Saar and her work](#)
- [See an interview with Alison Saar and other videos from the Topsy Turvy exhibition](#)
- [Explore the complicated issues surrounding Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* through primary sources and an annotated text](#)
- [Read more about the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece](#)
- [Watch an interview with the feminist and sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom on stereotypes of black women that persist today](#)

**More to think about**

In *Topsy and the Golden Fleece*, Alison Saar reimagines the life and story of a literary character, reclaiming Topsy from her role as a passive stereotype. Think about a character from another story who lacks control or power in his/her life, or a figure that has been used as a popular cultural stereotype. How could you reimagine their story and write a different ending for them?

What are some negative stereotypes that you’ve encountered? Consider how they are reinforced, or challenged, through depictions in the media and popular culture. What strategies do you think are most effective for calling out such negative stereotypes in society?

**Selected Contributors**

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2017
Titus Kaphar, The Trail of Tears, Titus Kaphar's The Cost of Removal

Kaphar takes a violent history and renders it visible in this modified portrait of Andrew Jackson.

The Trail of Tears and The Cost of Removal

The morality within Titus Kaphar's portrait of Andrew Jackson

by LAUREN HAYNES, CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART) and DR. BETH HARRIS
Video: Titus Kaphar, *The Cost of Removal*, 2017, oil, canvas, and rusted nails on canvas, 274.3 x 213.4 x 3.8 cm, © Titus Kaphar (Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art). Speakers: Lauren Haynes, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art) and Dr. Beth Harris

Test your knowledge with a quiz

START

Key points

- Portraits often represent leaders as heroic, noble, and deserving of respect and admiration. Such images, however, fashion an incomplete historical narrative that may not acknowledge the problematic or even violent aspects of their legacies.

- Signed by Andrew Jackson in 1830, the Indian Removal Act authorized the president to grant unsettled lands west of the Mississippi in exchange for Indian lands within existing state borders. Native Americans were forcibly removed by the U.S. government, including 4,000 Cherokee Indians who died on what became known as the “Trail of Tears.”

- Copying and altering Ralph Earl’s 1836 portrait of Andrew Jackson is one way that Titus Kaphar calls our attention to the power of art and museums in writing a history that is, in his words, “at best incomplete, and at worst fiction.” The viewer is reminded of who is typically included in this telling of history and who is typically excluded.

Go deeper

Learn more about this work from the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art
See primary sources at the Library of Congress related to the Indian Removal Act of 1830

Learn about the removal of Cherokee and other Indian tribes as part of the Trail of Tears

Watch Titus Kaphar’s 2017 TED Talk, “Can art amend history?” and his interview for the 2018 MacArthur Fellowship

Read a 2015 interview with Kaphar

See online resources and exhibitions at The Hermitage (Andrew Jackson’s home, now a museum)

Learn about Andrew Jackson’s presidency through primary source documents

More to think about

Read the comment below by Titus Kaphar, which was quoted in the video. Based on your own experience and academic study, do you agree that our understanding of history is inherently incomplete or idealized? What are some ways we might improve our knowledge to better understand the past?

“I feel very strongly that most of the history we have been taught is at best incomplete, and at worst, fiction. The more I read history, I realize that all depictions are to some degree fiction... We lose something in the interpretation, and as I realized that painters throughout history have embraced this idea of fiction, I have felt complete freedom to address these paintings in a way that made sense to me.”

Selected Contributors

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