

Fifty years of American art

The American Century: Art & Culture, 1900-1950, an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, April 23 to August 22, 1999

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The Whitney Museum in New York is offering a two-part exhibit this year on American art of the twentieth century. The first installment is presently at the museum through August 22; the second will run from September 26 until January 23 next year.

It would have been good enough, in my view, if the exhibit's organizers had felt no compulsion to justify their work at all, or if they had simply said: the calendar is running out on the twentieth century and here are the most beautiful, evocative or, when necessary, representative works we could locate. Unfortunately, the show in its own way demonstrates to what extent concepts like nation and patriotism have re-established themselves in the art world. The choice of "American century," a phrase coined by publisher and pro-imperialist Henry Luce in 1941, as title is revealing enough. Those in the know may interpret the epithet with a degree of irony. For the general public, however, it will constitute another affirmation of the "global leadership" of the United States.

In regard to the period 1900-50, the final paragraph of the exhibit's catalogue, authored by Barbara Haskell, declares: "During this fifty-year period, American artists had mirrored the nation's changing sense of itself and its people and, in the process, helped construct myths of national identity. By identifying the symbols and images through which people revealed what they thought and felt about their world and their experiences, art served as a barometer of cultural values—a visual embodiment of the assumptions and ideologies of its age. It thus provided a frame of reference for understanding the nation and its changing sense of self. Ultimately, the quest for national and personal identity is a search for meaning and value; in this search, art has been an indispensable tool."

It is not my intention to respond to what I consider a platitudinous and essentially false conception of what art is about. (Except to say that whatever *the most serious* art may be, I think in the 20th century it has been the opposite of "an indispensable tool" in "the quest for national ... identity.") I simply cite the passage to indicate that whatever merits the Whitney show possesses, there is one element its organization undoubtedly lacks: inspiration. That the exhibit is largely free of the "radical" postmodern jargon that has bedeviled the museum in recent years is no doubt one of its strengths, but a kind of dull, semi-nationalistic, evenhanded liberalism is not, one hopes, the only possible alternative.

In any event, the 600 objects on display take up the museum's top four floors, divided into five sections: *America in the Age of Confidence, 1900-1919*; *Jazz Age America, 1920-1929*; *America in Crisis, 1930-1939*; *Wartime America, 1940-1945*; and *Postwar America, 1945-1950*.

The first thing one feels, walking up the stairs and getting some sense of the exhibit as a whole or standing and gazing out at the first floor of the show, is pleasure at the sheer quantity and variety of the pieces—paintings,

sculptures, photographs, film clips, posters, book covers, ceramics, furniture and more. The differences in style, material, texture and tone from era to era, artist to artist and piece to piece, bring home to the spectator the capacity of the human imagination to deal with life in a vast number of forms. And this is only the art of a single country within half a century.

When one plunges into the individual chronologically-ordered sections, a certain disappointment sets in. A great deal of the art on display has more of an historical or sociological significance than an aesthetic one. Confronted with such work, one learns something about the given historical moment and the attitude of the artist toward American society and his or her fellow creatures at that moment, but of the more complex and long-standing issues in life, relatively little.

Then one begins to make judgments, searching out the artists who produced pieces that seem to offer "a vista stretching away ... and out of sight," as a critic once demanded of painting. Whether one proves eventually to be right or wrong, one permits oneself to be drawn into an adventure with certain artists. In the final analysis, this is the only experience that truly counts.

Painting and sculpture make up the bulk of the work, and they reveal, first and foremost, the relative weakness of American efforts in that sphere in the first half of the century. There is very little at the Whitney that can compare with the most advanced work of Picasso, Kandinsky, Miró, Matisse, Malevich, Brancusi, Giacometti and other European artists.

Of the older generation of American painters working around 1900, Thomas Eakins stood out, but the only work on display here, *The Thinker: Portrait of Louis N. Kenton* (1900), is not among my favorites. There is something a little provincial about giving that title to this portrait of the artist's brother-in-law looking down at his shoes. The subject is too self-consciously acting serious to be taken entirely seriously. *Mrs. Fiske Warren (Gretchen Osgood) and Her Daughter Rachel* (1903) is fairly typical of John Singer Sargent, a talented and fashionable portrait painter, but lacking internal combustion.

The first pieces at the exhibit that strike one as "modernist" are, in fact, photographs, specifically Paul Strand's, from 1915-16 (*Wall Street; New York, City Hall Park; Man in Derby Hat; Blind Woman*). Much of the effect of these photos is gained, first, by the scrapping of the inessential and the ornamental. Furthermore, Strand seems to combine an eye for the arrangement of forms (not to be confused with the picturesque), a feeling for the physical and intellectual contradictions of urban life and some degree of social insight. One might compare George Bellows' approach in his lively painting of the street kid *Paddy Flanigan* (1908) to Strand's photograph *Blind Woman*. In the latter, there is far greater use of the particular medium and a more complex attitude—sympathetic, critical,

appalled—expressed by the artist.

It can hardly be accidental that in the US, a nation whose modern history is so obviously bound up with revolutionary developments in industry and technique, some of the most remarkable images in the 20th century were created by artists equipped with mechanical devices, still and motion picture cameras. In addition to Strand, the work of Lewis Hine, Alfred Stieglitz, Man Ray, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and a number of others stands out. It seems entirely appropriate, in fact, that a *photographer*, Stieglitz, at his gallery “291” in Manhattan, acted as the primary stimulus for modern *painting and sculpture* in the US in the first decade of the century, showing the works of Rodin, Lautrec, Matisse and Picasso, as well as those of American artists who had assimilated the most advanced international approaches.

Cinema too makes its presence felt at the Whitney. A television monitor on which Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917) is playing proves irresistible. Mesmerizing in their own right are clips from Depression spectacles such as *Gold Diggers of 1933*, deliriously choreographed by Busby Berkeley, and *Top Hat*, with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Call them escapist or whatever you like, these absurd and dreamlike musicals set off all sorts of mental and emotional fireworks.

Another extraordinary figure, also engaged in a certain kind of mechanical operation, is represented by photographs and drawings of his work. Art historian Meyer Schapiro, in an article I shall refer to a number of times, termed Frank Lloyd Wright the “one American artist of world importance” working at the turn of the century. The exhibit includes a perspective elevation for *Fallingwater, Bear Run, Pennsylvania* (1935-36), the house built over a waterfall, one of Wright's most remarkable achievements.

Among the painters, there are certainly those who impress. Italian-born Joseph Stella comes across as a serious figure, both in his early representational work and his later Futurist and abstract works. Between the painting of the Realist *Portrait of an Old Man* (1908) and the Futurist *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras* (1913-14) had come a trip to Paris, a city he later termed “the Mecca for any ambitious artist in search of the new verb in art.” I don't know that Stella ever organized all his best qualities into a single picture, but his evolution is an interesting one.

In a very different vein, Edward Hopper captured something truthful about loneliness and isolation and alienation in America in a number of his paintings (*Automat*, 1927; *New York Movie*, 1939; *Early Sunday Morning*, 1930). It is possible to grow tired of his mostly single women sitting in diners, standing on city streets or leaning against the walls of movie theaters, but not before they have impressed something real and anguished about themselves on the viewer.

The remarkable and reclusive New York artist Joseph Cornell is represented by one of his obsessive box constructions (*Habitat Group for a Shooting Gallery*, 1943), this one complete with a bullet hole and paint-splashed background, suggestive of the war. The work of Mondrian and Miró initially inspired sculptor Alexander Calder to invent the mobile, a wire construction suspended in air, which Schapiro described as “a personal style of international interest.” Several of his works are on display.

I recognize that Willem de Kooning's *Queen of Hearts* (1943-46) must owe a great debt to Picasso, but it is still a lacerating work. The painting suggests, all at the same time, a semi-recognizable woman in a yellow dress seated in a room with green panels; a disintegrating playing card; a woman with her hands cut off; and a martyr whose fading eyes appear wide open but sightless.

There is a strong piece by Arshile Gorky (*The Betrothal, II*, 1947), but the works by postwar painters Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko seem relatively minor. The Whitney curators must be saving up for the second part of the exhibit later this year, because not all that much is made here of the Abstract Expressionists and the oft-

trumpeted TRIUMPH OF AMERICAN PAINTING in New York City, which we know was the POSTWAR ART CAPITAL OF THE WORLD.

Other American schools (the Realists of the pre-World War I period—Henri, Luks, Sloan, Shinn, Glackens, Bellows—and the abstractionists of a later period—Hartley, Marin, Maurer, Weber, Davis, Demuth), well represented at the Whitney show, produced lively and intelligent work, but nothing, it would seem, of earthshaking significance. A painting like John Sloan's *Sunday, Women Drying Their Hair* (1912), for example, which depicts three young working class women relaxing on a roof, among chimneys and laundry lines, with a city skyline in the background, is a likable work. The “rapid, sketchy, illustrator's style” (Schapiro) was meant as a deliberate rebuke to the academic school, and it has its charms, including a certain spontaneity. But it also seems somewhat shallow and undemanding from the aesthetic, social and psychological points of view.

One tendency within American (as well as European and Soviet) painting and photography that flourished in the interwar period, now generally termed Precisionism in art historical circles, glorified “simplified, hard-edged forms, impersonal paint handling, and geometric structure” (Barbara Haskell in the exhibit catalogue). Charles Sheeler both painted and photographed industrial sites, including famously the mammoth River Rouge Ford plant. By painting *My Egypt* in 1927, a picture of a modern factory, Charles Demuth equated the accomplishments of American industry with the building of the pyramids in ancient Egypt. Numerous painters and photographers, including Louis Lozowick, Margaret Bourke-White and Lewis Hine, joined in the celebration of technology and “The Machine Age” in the years immediately preceding the great Wall Street Crash. This trend uncritically adapted itself to the apparent invincible strength of American industry, “detaching,” in Schapiro's words, “the technical from the fuller context of subjection and suffering, and surrendering the spontaneity of the person for the sake of an impersonal outward strength that comes to look inhuman.”

The impact of the world economic crisis of the 1930s on American artists was a complex one. There was no doubt a sharp shift to the left in their political leanings. How that was manifested in their art and how it should or might have been is another issue. It is impossible to leave out of the equation the degeneration of the Communist Party and, by the end of the 1930s, its rapidly decreasing appeal to the more farsighted intellectuals.

In literature, under the Stalinist banner of Proletarian Culture and later the even more wretched Socialist Realism, a good deal of rubbish was produced in the US, now almost entirely forgotten. The more sincere and talented writers, despite their best efforts, found it impossible to adhere to these totalitarian and anti-aesthetic guidelines. In painting the Stalinist efforts were even more negligible. After all, American painters had waged a struggle for two decades to break free from the limitations of photographic or Impressionist-style realism. They were not willingly going to turn back to it. Figurative painters like Ben Shahn, the Soyer brothers and Reginald Marsh, all of whom are represented in the current exhibit, were certainly not slaves to Socialist Realism.

One of the painters who had relations with the Stalinists in the early 1930s and with whom there may have been at one point something of an intellectual and aesthetic bond, interestingly enough, was the American regionalist painter and muralist, Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. Benton had talent and vivacity, but as the numerous works on display at the Whitney exhibit demonstrate, he could not get beyond a certain populist obviousness. His surface emotionalism, bordering at times on hysteria, was more excessive than expressive, in my view. It is worth noting that Benton, who found common cause for a time with the proponents of proletarian art, also attacked “Parisian aestheticism” and, in an anti-Semitic outburst, the supposed predominance of European-oriented

Jewish radicals in the New York art scene.

American photography of the Depression era is deservedly well-known. Walker Evans did some remarkable work in the 1930s, including the photos for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a photo-documentary essay about the Southern poor, with a text by James Agee. The most striking piece of Evans' work on display at the Whitney, however, is *Couple in Car, Ossining, New York, 1932*. An elementary principle of artistic life may be at work here. We expect to see a pained expression on a poverty-stricken man or woman. Recording it may be an honorable and socially responsible act and it may serve to deepen the spectator's feelings about social problems, but it does little to shake our basic assumptions about life. There is something quite shocking, however, about the consternation and anguish one reads on the face of the attractive, well-dressed young woman seated in the car in Ossining three years into the Depression.

The Whitney exhibit encourages one to think about the development of American painting in the early 20th century. Schapiro discussed some of the peculiarities of this process in the piece I have been citing, *The Introduction of Modern Art in America: The Armory Show* (in *Modern Art: 19th & 20th Centuries*, George Braziller, New York, 1979), written in 1952, and it might be worthwhile considering some of the broader issues he raised.

(The Armory Show, held in New York City, Chicago and Boston in 1913, was a major art exhibit that displayed, alongside contemporary American works, a large number of modernist foreign paintings and sculptures. The Show introduced US audiences to Cubists, Expressionists, Fauvists, Symbolists and others in a somewhat eclectic and haphazard fashion. Marcel Duchamp's cubo-futurist *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) caused a particular sensation. The Armory Show is considered to have represented a watershed in the history of American art.)

Schapiro notes that in the reception to modern art in America, "we are struck by a singular play of provincial backwardness and a generous disposition towards the most advanced forms." The United States did not have an official Academy, with its relatively rigid traditions and standards, as did a number of European countries. A pseudo-classical style did not develop in the US until quite late (a school for American art students was not founded in Rome until 1905) and never attracted serious adherents. "The United States had not known the great artistic struggles of the last century in Europe; Romanticism, Realism and Impressionism were introduced from abroad," writes Schapiro, "with little conflict and without the accompanying political implications."

There was no deeply-rooted native style to defend against a foreign mode, and no great leading figure among the painters to lead such a struggle. "If the absence of a powerful authority made it easier for painters to consider the new in art, the lack of an intense tradition with examples of high creativeness made the acceptance of the new often shallow or passive."

Schapiro describes the "real lag" in American art during the two decades before the Armory Show in 1913. The so-called Ashcan painters (Henri, Sloan, Luks and others) were lively and confident artists, but they were using the methods of advanced French painting of the 1860s and 1870s. Americans had largely ignored the post-Impressionists: Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat and late Cézanne.

This "lag" was compounded by the art-collecting choices of American industrialists and financiers. Whereas previous generations had purchased paintings by Millet, Courbet and Manet, the wealthy collectors of the 1890s turned markedly to an art "detached from the problematic present," to Italian late medieval and Renaissance work, and to other trends (Whistler, Pre-Raphaelitism, Far Eastern art) that seemed in consonance with the latter. Reacting "against American vulgarity" (and perhaps as well against threats lurking in contemporary conditions), the collectors "lost touch with the vital elements in both European and American

culture. ... The culture of these patricians [and their advisers such as Bernard Berenson] was often broad, curious, and finely discerning, but it ignored the most vigorous contemporary ideas and was easily corrupted into snobbery and preciousness."

These circumstances encouraged the relative backwardness of the American painters. "What raised the best of the new Europeans above the American artists was their greater seriousness about the qualities of painting; they probed the medium more deeply and were more inventive in their means. Their feeling for the objects they represented was also more imaginative."

Schapiro notes that the American artists in the pre-World War I period who were closest to the Europeans in style and technique (Whistler and Sargent) lacked originality and robustness, while the more vigorous American Realists were "unimaginative and often crude." He then provides what I consider to be a brilliant definition of the finest modern art: "The Armory Show introduced Americans to a tradition of European painting in which a vernacular directness is allied with a great and aristocratic seriousness about artistic problems." [Emphasis added - DW] He goes on: "After 1913 we discover more often in this country a type of artist who is both an inventive, scrupulous artist and a tough. In literature still more clearly, the polarity Henry James-Mark Twain is replaced by the artist-type of Hemingway and Pound."

This, Schapiro suggests, corresponded to a change in the position of the artist in American society, which now, as in Europe, became distinguished from that of the artisan, professional or man of affairs. "[H]e lived in a world apart, most often poor, struggling, uncertain of the future, and sustained by his devotion to ideal ends that were generally respected by the public in the great artists of the past ... but were not recommended in the present to the young of the middle class."

In a later decade, during the radicalization of the 1930s, Schapiro continues, modern art was criticized for being too narrow and incapable of expressing broader social values. In response artists attempted to create links between aesthetic modernism and their political sympathies. The eventual disillusionment with Stalinism, the effects of the war, the postwar boom and the growing role of the state in the 1940s "reduced the appeal of this criticism." The artists then faced new dilemmas.

With the benefit of hindsight, one has a clearer idea today of how unfavorable the conditions of creation for American artists, or those anywhere, had grown by 1950, the point at which the exhibit ends. On the one hand, the fate of the Russian Revolution—the growth of a monstrous, murderous bureaucracy still proclaiming itself to be acting in the name of "socialism"—had done enormous damage to the confidence of artists in the possibility of transforming social life. (It ought to be recalled that many of the Abstract Expressionists were leftists in the immediate pre-war period. Pollock had trained with Benton and, for a short time, with the Mexican Stalinist muralist, David Siqueiros, and inhabited the fringes of the Communist Party in the late 1930s.) Furthermore, the horrors of the Holocaust and the war years, including the detonation of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, deepened a general despondency about the human condition.

On the other hand, there was the apparent triumph of the American economic model, with its accompanying anticommunism, consumerism and stifling conformism. How could anyone, aside from a relatively small number of socialists, consciously reject a society that was so obviously an unequivocal success? It is hardly surprising that the most sensitive souls, cut off from any historical grasp of the transitory character of the "American century" (or of Nazism and Stalinism, for that matter), should take a look around them and plunge *inward*. Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Rothko, Motherwell and others produced some beautiful work and made an heroic, but ultimately doomed effort to maintain their opposition to the status quo, if only on the psychic level.

Barbara Haskell, in the exhibition catalogue, puts it this way: "Vanguard

painters wishing to express the unsettling realities of the contemporary world seemed to have fewer options. ... A new artistic language was clearly needed to convey the existence of powerful irrational forces in the human psyche. This new art had to be global, apolitical, and expressive of the horror and fear that engulfed the mind. ... The collective unconscious [argued for by Jung] and its memory bank of primordial symbols offered a possible solution. By harnessing this storehouse of collective experience, they could express the uncertainty of their time without forfeiting universality.”

Haskell seems to be making a virtue out of necessity. Writing in 1952, Schapiro looked at the difficult, indeed somewhat tragic situation in which the contemporary American artist found him or herself with different eyes: “Artists today who would welcome the chance to paint works of broad human content for a larger audience, works comparable in scope to those of antiquity or the Middle Ages, find no sustained opportunities for such an art; they have no alternative but to cultivate in their art the only or surest realms of freedom—the interior world of their fancies, sensations, and feelings, and the medium itself.”

The lack of the “sustained opportunities for such an art” is a problem that has haunted us over the intervening half-century. A critical study of the materials on display at the Whitney might encourage artists and others to consider how we have arrived at the present state, and what new points of departure might be found in the art itself.



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