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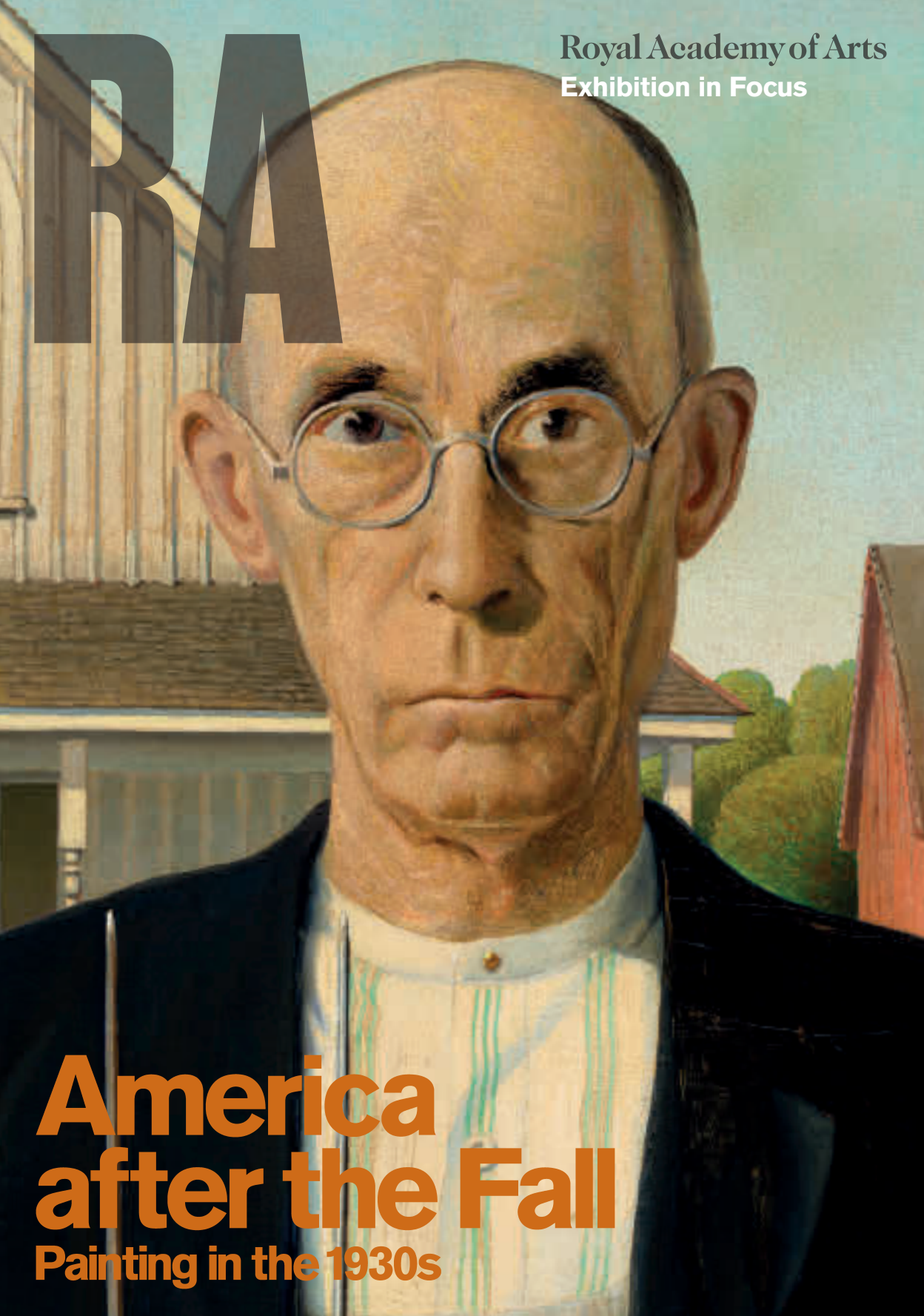

America after the Fall

Painting in the 1930s

An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

Written by Ben Street
For the Learning Department

America after the Fall: Painting in the 1930s

The Sackler Wing of Galleries
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FRONT COVER **Cat. 47, Grant Wood,** American Gothic, 1930 (detail)

Royal Academy of Arts

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Designed by Isambard Thomas, London. Printed by Geoff Neal Group

Introduction: Being American

Once I built a railroad,
I made it run
Made it race against
time
Once I built a railroad,
now it's done
Brother, can you spare
a dime?
Once I made a tower
up to the sun
Brick and rivet and lime
Once I built a tower,
now it's done
Brother, can you spare
a dime?
E.Y. 'Yip' Harburg and Jay Gorney, 'Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?', 1930

What does it mean to be American? This was the central question American artists of the 1930s attempted to address – a question to which there was no single answer. On 29 October 1929, the United States stock market crashed as a consequence of wild speculation throughout the 1920s. A boom in industrial supply and a severe drop in public demand caused the prices of crops and goods to sink dramatically. This was the beginning of the Great Depression, an economic slump from which the country only started to recover ten years later, at the onset of the Second World War. By Christmas 1929, the number of unemployed Americans had gone from fewer than 500,000 to over four million, and by 1933, fifteen million people were out of work. Many Americans, especially in the rural south, lived in conditions of abject poverty. Unable to afford rent, many families lived in shacks built of discarded wood and boxes; the communities they built on the outskirts of cities around the country were known as Hoovervilles, after the then-President Herbert Hoover, who was largely blamed for the economic crisis. The Depression's devastating impact on the American workforce was a profound blow to national confidence, and ushered in a period of disillusionment with American progress. In desperation, many turned to radical political movements as an alternative to a democracy they saw as irrevocably broken. Both Fascism and Communism found followers across the United States.

The American population doubled between 1890 and 1930, largely thanks to a huge influx of European immigrants seeking labour in the rapidly industrialising cities. By 1929, one in ten Americans had been born abroad or was the child of an immigrant. The sheer number of suddenly unemployed people forced the government to act, and in 1933 the new President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, instigated the New Deal, a wide-reaching attempt to restore national economic confidence. One of Roosevelt's programmes, known as the Works Progress Administration (WPA), provided employment on projects aimed to improve American infrastructure and public amenities, including schools, hospitals, roads and airports. Artists, too, found employment during the Depression as part of the WPA: many were commissioned by the government's Federal Art Project to create art for new public buildings, or worked on art projects for public spaces and were given work as art teachers. The experience politicised many artists, whose works, made in the aftermath of economic disaster brought on by rampant capitalism, began to reflect left-wing ideals. By the end of the decade, hundreds of thousands of jobs had been created and American production of materials for the war in Europe (which the US joined in 1941) meant that America emerged from the Second World War as a hugely powerful urban economy.

Fig.1
Dorothea Lange
Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936
Gelatin-silver print, 28.3 × 21.8 cm

Cat. 13
Aaron Douglas
Aspiration, 1936
Oil on canvas,
152.5 × 152.5 cm

O, let America be
America again –
The land that never has
been yet –
And yet must be – the
land where every man
is free.
The land that's mine
– the poor man's,
Indian's, Negro's,
ME –
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood,
whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the
foundry, whose plow
in the rain,
Must bring back our
mighty dream again.
Langston Hughes,
'Let America be America Again', 1938

In artistic circles during the 1930s, the notion of Americanness was a matter of fierce debate. Industrialisation and the huge boom in urban living had weakened American agriculture: those unable or unwilling to relocate to a city found their way of life under threat. During the Depression, artists known as American Scene painters focused on a naturalistic approach to depicting rural and urban life. Some, known as Social Realists, focused on the transformation of life in the modern city, painting images of modern entertainment as well as the labour of longshoremen and construction workers. Others, the Regionalists, showed rural workers in Midwestern states, whose association with the landscape harked back to the agricultural origins of America; one example of this is Grant Wood's *American Gothic* [p.15]. Some found their idealised approach backward-looking and conservative, while others saw it as patriotic, positive and optimistic. By contrast to these artists, painters in urban centres such as New York responded to the innovations of European modernists and fused the approaches of Cubism and Surrealism with a distinctly American subject matter. Jackson Pollock's *Untitled* [p.21] is a good example of this artistic fusion. Contesting notions of Americanness led to antagonism between these two camps. This diversity provides insights into the complex question of what it means to be American.

Aiming High

Cat. 13 *Aspiration* by Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) is the last in a four-part cycle of paintings he made for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas. His four paintings were designed to reflect the overall ethos of the Exposition that was staged to demonstrate the cultural and social progress of the state of Texas, which only a hundred years before had gained its independence from Mexico as a separate country (the Republic of Texas) before becoming a state of America. *Aspiration*, along with its three companion paintings (only one of which still exists), was placed in the Hall of Negro Life, an area of the Exposition that used art to celebrate the achievements of African-Americans in the state's history. Ironically, the Exposition, like other public spaces across the United States at the time, was segregated. In fact, the Hall of Negro Life was only included in the Exposition after fierce lobbying by the local black community, whose right to participate had initially been denied by the white organisers.

Three silhouetted figures – two male, one female – dominate the centre of *Aspiration*. Because they lack personal signifiers, they come to stand for a confident, ambitious African-American Everyman and -woman, rather than specific individuals. All three have their backs to us and look towards a distant hilltop city with a characteristically modern skyline of skyscrapers and factory chimneys. Each figure holds an object that identifies them as educated – a compass and set square, a chemistry beaker and a book – and emphasises education as a means to achieve success. A globe depicted alongside them symbolises knowledge of the world.

Below their pedestal are a series of upraised hands, manacled together – a reminder of the history of slavery and the progress made by African Americans since those times. *Aspiration* shows the culmination of the dream of emancipation and self-realisation after the nightmare of slavery depicted in the earlier panels. *Into Bondage,* the other surviving panel, shows shackled figures being marched towards slave ships.

Aaron Douglas was a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance, an intellectual and cultural movement in literature, music and the visual arts that had emerged in New York City in the 1920s. *Aspiration* presents the abstracted and stylised aesthetic that reveals Douglas's innovations as an artist and came to characterise the work of key visual artists in the Harlem Renaissance, including Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000), Augusta Savage (1892–1962) and Hale Woodruff (1900–1980). Looking to Ancient Egyptian art for the sense of powerful outline visible in the profile of the seated female figure, the artist was also influenced by the then-fashionable Art Deco aesthetic seen in new architecture and design. Douglas's painting also reflects the influence of European modernist painting then on display at museums and galleries in New York: the simplified forms and stylised space might recall the Cubism of Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) or Georges Braque (1882–1963). The star within a circle, by the female figure's shoulder, radiates out across the painting, creating an abstract pattern that is both modernist and perhaps a tribute to Texas itself, whose nickname is 'The Lone Star State'.

Discuss the way Aaron Douglas evokes the idea of success and achievement in *Aspiration*. How effectively does the painting convey these ideas?

Compare this painting to works by other Harlem Renaissance artists, such as Jacob Lawrence and Hale Woodruff, images of which you can find online. What characteristics do these works of art share?

Face of the Struggle

Cat. 36 Alice Neel (1900–1984) trained as a painter at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women and in 1932 moved to New York, where she became associated with a group of radical left-wing artists and writers. In 1933, Neel enrolled in the Public Works of Art Project, part of Roosevelt's New Deal, for which she was paid to produce paintings on canvas, with American life as their theme, to be hung in public buildings. In April 1934, she was removed from the Project for producing a painting the PWAP committee deemed 'inappropriate'. However, the following year she joined the new Works Progress Administration, which continued to support her financially until 1942.

Alice Neel joined the Communist Party in 1935, the same year she painted Pat Whalen's portrait. Her studio, not far from the city docks, gave her an insight into the lives of the workers there, and bolstered her empathy for their situation. Although many artists of the time had leftist sympathies, very few were members of the Communist Party, preferring instead to express their politics through social protest and engagement with popular culture.

Alice Neel met Pat Whalen through her partner Kenneth Doolittle, a sailor and Communist activist. Whalen was an Irish-American man who worked primarily as a longshoreman, a manual labourer on the docks, loading and unloading cargo from ships. He was an active labour unionist who fought for the rights of his fellow workers by organising strikes and demonstrations. Whalen embraced communism wholeheartedly, deplored racism and fascism, and actively campaigned to have

'The country was in a severe depression and there was no welfare or social security so people just starved or were evicted from their homes. All the artists were on the Project. If there had been no such cultural projects there might well have been a revolution.'
Alice Neel, 1977, Parsons School of Design exhibition of WPA art, catalogue

Cat. 36
Alice Neel
Pat Whalen, 1935
Oil, ink and newspaper on canvas, 68.6 × 58.4 cm

Nazi insignia removed from German ships docking in New York harbour. Neel painted Whalen twice: in the first version, which she painted over with another composition, he was shown tearing Nazi flags down from the masts of ships. This quieter, more contemplative version of the same sitter nevertheless captures Whalen's intellectual character and ideals in a forceful and convincing way.

Neel depicts Whalen in a plain interior, seated at a simple wooden table. She shows him only from the waist up, allowing us to better consider his head and hands, which are brightly lit and outlined in a dark tone to emphasise their importance. Clearly absorbed in thought, Whalen is not looking out at us. His furrowed brow and intense expression imply deep concern, perhaps brought on by what he has read in the newspaper. His hands, which seem exaggeratedly large and meaty, are bunched into fists, set with conviction on the desk. They suggest both manual labour and the Communist salute, a fist raised in the air.

The newspaper is the Communist Party publication, the *Daily Worker*. Neel affixed an actual copy of the newspaper to the painting, then painted over it. The headline reads 'Steel, Coal Strikes Set For June 16'. Although Whalen was not involved with those industries nor the strike itself, the reference evokes the sense of a national labour movement galvanised by activists such as Whalen at a time when, in the crisis of the Great Depression, certain radical political ideals seemed like solutions. Whalen was, in fact, a slight and unprepossessing man, but Neel's painting casts him as physically powerful and energetic, a man of physical action as well as a literate, intelligent figure. She idealises her subject, presenting Whalen as a modern hero, willing and able to lead America into a fairer future for all.

Discuss Neel's representation of Pat Whalen as a political figure, and compare this representation to other images of unionists and politicians.

Could this painting be considered a propagandistic image? If so, how effective is it as propaganda?

The Great Escape

Cat. 23 During the Depression, cinemas became a place of solace for the huge numbers of unemployed people needing somewhere warm to pass the time. It was cheap enough to go multiple times a week. For general audiences, too, the cinema represented an escape from the grim realities of the world. In 1939, the year *New York Movie* by Edward Hopper was made, *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* were released to great popular acclaim. A welcome relief from real life, such films depicted fantasies of the antebellum South (before the US Civil War) and a Technicolor dreamland in stark contrast to the drab, reality of the world. The painter Edward Hopper (1882–1967), too, went to the cinema, especially when he felt stuck for ideas or frustrated with his work. Hopper saw the cinema as a microcosm of the isolation of modern urban life. In *New York Movie*, the depicted cinema is not an escape from the bleak experience of the Depression, it is an intensification of it.

'It's probably a reflection of my own, if I may say, loneliness. I don't know. It could be the whole human condition.'
Edward Hopper, interview with Aline Saarinen, 'Sunday Show', NBC-TV, 1964, transcript, p. 3

Hopper frequented the Palace Theatre in New York, which was his inspiration for this painting. He accurately depicts the detail of its elaborate architecture and the usherette's uniform. The composition is divided into two parts: on the left we see just a glimpse of the screen, rows of red seats with two visible occupants – a man and a woman sitting on separate rows – and some highly decorative light fixtures and columns. The soft light of the screen, showing a black-and-white film, gently illuminates the interior from the left. On the right side, by contrast, the light is much sharper. The focal point is the usherette leaning against the wall, her hand on her chin. Hopper's wife, Jo, posed for this figure, as she did for all the female figures in the artist's work. Wall-mounted lamps illuminate the small carpeted area where she stands and just beyond her, visible between the red curtains, a set of stairs leads up to the more expensive seats in the cinema. Every part of the painting reinforces the sense of isolation: the focus on the usherette idly waiting for the film to end (evidently, she's seen it before), the audience members off-centre who sit alone in different rows, the stairs leading up to a separate section, and the film itself, which depicts a different location, resembling snow-capped mountains, is widely thought to be Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon*, 1937.

Hopper spent almost all his life in the United States, apart from a study trip to Paris during 1906–07 and two short European trips in 1909 and 1910. In Paris, he was impressed by the work of painters such as Édouard Manet (1832–1883) and Edgar Degas (1834–1917), who depicted scenes of modern life and created compositions with the cropped effect inspired by the new technology of photography and an interest in Japanese prints. In *New York Movie*, Hopper selects and edits the interior space of the cinema in order to create a melancholy atmosphere. The usherette not watching, nor seeming at all interested in the film intensifies the overall sense of futility. Hopper's depictions of modern urban life contrasted to the works of other painters. His teacher, Robert Henri (1865–1929), a leading light of the Ashcan School, portrayed the city as a place of vibrant, dynamic interactions, as did other artists of the time, such as Reginald Marsh, whose works such as *Twenty Cent Movie*, 1936, (fig. 2) depict cinemas as places of entertainment and pleasure. For Hopper, the city stood for loneliness, interiority and isolation.

Fig. 2
Reginald Marsh
Twenty Cent Movie, 1936
Carbon pencil, ink and oil on composition board, 76.2 × 101.6 cm

Compare the painting *New York Movie* with other images of the cinema from Hopper's time, such as Reginald Marsh's *Twenty Cent Movie,* 1936. How does Hopper's vision of modern entertainment and the modern world differ from those depicted by his contemporaries?

Consider the way Hopper manipulates the composition of the cinema interior for emotive effect. How might the effect of the painting have been changed if Hopper had chosen to 'edit' his composition differently?

Cat. 23
Edward Hopper
New York Movie, 1939
Oil on canvas,
81.9 × 101.9 cm

Whose America?

Cat. 51 *Daughters of Revolution* depicts three women, shown from the shoulders up, whose detailed clothing, fine hair and radiant, slightly wrinkled skin is all rendered with painstaking care. The artist has simplified their features in a way that suggests caricature, perhaps especially the mole-like face of the figure on the right. And yet all three women meet our gaze in a way that, despite the left-hand figure's faint smile and the central figure's raised teacup, is slightly tense, unsettling even. The women stand in a plain interior that is dominated by a large, framed print of one of the iconic paintings of American history: *Washington Crossing the Delaware,* 1851, by Emanuel Leutze (1816–1868). The inclusion of the print alludes to the celebrations taking place in 1932, the year the painting was made, to honour the bicentenary of the birth of George Washington, the first President of the United States.

The women Wood portrays in this painting are members of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), a society founded in the late nineteenth-century for individuals directly descended from soldiers who fought in the struggle for American Independence. The group is a patriotic organisation committed to the study and preservation of genealogical roots. Wood made a brief trip to Germany in 1927, where he oversaw the production of a stained-glass window he had designed for the Veteran's Memorial Building in his home town of Cedar Rapids in the state of Iowa. The local DAR group in Cedar Rapids objected to the manufacture of the window in Germany; for them, it was simply too soon after the First World War. The DAR campaigned against it and, as a result, the window was not installed until after the artist's death.

Wood's painting subtly dissects the group's claims of entitlement and superiority: it can be viewed as a satirical retaliation for their opposition to the window. The teacup held aloft is an heirloom, an English teacup, evidence of their ties to the original thirteen colonies at the time of the American Revolution (1765–1783). And yet its design quite clearly derives from Chinese porcelain. And the Leuzte painting of the first President, George Washington, a symbol of DAR's ideas of the superiority of their own bloodline, was in fact painted by a German artist in Germany. Wood's painting was a huge success in its time, and travelled the country under the title *Daughters of Revolution* – Wood had amended the group's name in a clear attempt to avoid legal action.

'I don't like to have anyone set up an aristocracy of birth in a republic.'
Anonymous clipping, Grant Wood Scrapbook 1

Cat. 51
Grant Wood
Daughters of Revolution, 1932
Oil on Masonite, 50.8 × 101.4 cm
Cincinnati Art Museum, The Edwin and Virginia Irwin Memorial, 1959.46

Among the artists referred to as Regionalists – Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry (1887–1946) and Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) – Wood was the only one who actually lived in rural America. Aside from his trip to Germany, Wood remained in Iowa for his entire career and his subjects were the people and the land of his birthplace. The influence of German and the northern Renaissance paintings by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and Hans Memling (1430–1494) is apparent in Wood's meticulous depictions of skin, clothing, hair and objects. Wood was also committed to a form of modern American art that engaged with rural subjects: in his words, he wanted an 'art expression to grow from the soil itself'.

In what ways is the painting *Daughters of Revolution* satirical?

In this painting, Grant Wood explores the contested territory of American history. Compare *Daughters of Revolution* with other images of national history made around the same time, such as Wood's *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,* 1931. What are some notable differences?

Cat. 38
Georgia O'Keeffe
Cow's Skull with Calico Roses, 1931
Oil on canvas, 91.5 × 61 cm

'Nothing is less real than realism. Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things.'
Georgia O'Keeffe, 1922

Ancient and Modern

Cat. 38 Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings are intimately associated with a specific kind of American landscape: the rocky, sun-blasted expanses of rural New Mexico, far from bustling urban centres. *Cow's Skull with Calico Roses*, though not a depiction of a landscape, nevertheless strongly evokes a specific kind of setting, where the bones of long-dead animals, bleached by the sun, might be found lying on a hillside. The painting depicts a skull adorned with two artificial flowers made of calico, a basic cotton fabric of the sort that would be laid on graves in New Mexico. The bone and cotton, whose crinkled and curved shapes reflect one another, are set in front of a plain cloth background. A brown surface bisects the composition vertically, an uneven stripe that continues in the crack behind the skull. By reducing the visual information to basic relationships of colour, tone and texture, O'Keeffe alludes to a simple way of life associated with the land, a lifestyle the artist herself would go on to adopt.

Despite the rural content of so much of her work, O'Keeffe's career began in New York City, where she soon found fame due to her radical modern aesthetic. Despite having little contact with the abstractions of artists working in Europe, O'Keeffe developed a style that was just as innovative as theirs, by painting fully abstract works that evoked music, such as *Music – Pink and Blue No. 2*, 1918, or finding abstract forms within real things, most famously flowers, as in *Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1*, 1932.

Her first sight of the landscape of New Mexico in 1917 had led her to return there annually, making sketches and collecting objects. Back in New York, she used their forms as inspiration for paintings that bridged modernist abstraction and subject matter drawn directly from the American landscape. She disdained urban American artists who focused on European modernism and were constantly in search of what she called 'The Great American Thing' – be that a novel, play, poem or painting – without engaging with their own national identity. O'Keeffe's series of paintings of cow skulls were a deliberate attempt to capture the essence of Americanness; one, *Cow's Skull: Red, White and Blue*, even used the colours of the flag. For O'Keeffe, organic objects, simple crafts and the effects of the elements added up to an America that was both timeless and, crucially, not European.

Consider how O'Keeffe's painting evokes the landscape without actually depicting it. How and why do you think O'Keeffe did that?

How well do you think O'Keeffe's painting achieved its intention of capturing a sense of Americanness, and why?

The Faces of America

Cat. 47 One day, while driving through the small town of Eldon, Iowa, Grant Wood caught sight of a small white cottage with a pitched roof and a pointed window in the Gothic Revival style of the late nineteenth century. As he put it, 'This gave me an idea. The idea was to find two people who by their severely straight-laced characters would fit into such a home.' After making a small oil sketch of the house, he began work on this composition. Back in his studio, he dressed his two models – his sister, Nan, and his dentist, B.H. McKeeby – in clothing appropriate to such a location.

The resulting painting, *American Gothic*, has become one of the icons of American art because of the values it seems to embody: the family unit, the nobility of labour, and the importance of the landscape to the American national identity. Two figures dominate the canvas. Trees, just visible beyond the architecture, reinforce its rural setting. By pushing the figures to the extreme foreground of the painting, their shoulders reaching beyond its edges, Wood underscores the proprietary narrative of the painting – the figures stand like guards between us and their home. The painting is divided along standard gender lines, too. The man meets our gaze, sternly, and holds a pitchfork in his fist like a potential weapon. The woman, whose smaller form takes up less of the painting, looks at the man with comparable severity, though she does not look out at us. The Victorian styling, especially in Nan's primly drawn-back hair (her own style at the time was rather more fashionable), stood for timeless values, of which these figures are fine exemplars. Their white clapboard house appears between them, but on her side we see pot plants and a window, a reference to the home and domestic chores, and on his a detached red barn, standing for the world of labour, a sign of masculinity. Both figures are dressed in their Sunday best, he in a black jacket over denim dungarees and a striped shirt, she in a demure dress and overall apron, with a classical-style cameo, possibly a family heirloom, as her only jewellery. The painting depicts a conservative world of plain living, family loyalty and hard work. Whether Wood intended the painting to celebrate or to satirise these values is a moot point.

Within months of its making, *American Gothic* was bought by the Art Institute of Chicago, where it remains to this day. When it was first exhibited it was a huge success, since it showed a world that for many city-dwellers was as exotic and fascinating as life on another planet. Others read *American Gothic* as a celebration of the independent yeoman farmer of the sort that settled in the American landscape, coming to the mid-west in the nineteenth century to settle and moving farther west to the Great Plains. Some Iowans, meanwhile, found the painting offensive, seeing it as a one-sided caricature of their way of life. Despite this ambiguity, the painting became and has remained one of the symbols of American national identity.

Discuss the *American Gothic* image as an icon of America. What values does it seem to endorse, and how does it express these endorsements?

Compare this image to Grant Wood's *Daughters of Revolution.* Which of the two seems more sympathetic to its subject, and why?

Cat. 47
Grant Wood
American Gothic, 1930
Oil on beaver board,
78 × 65 cm

The Art Institute of Chicago, friends of American Art Collection, 1930.934

'The term "rugged individualism" has been seized upon as a political catchword, but it suits the farmer's character very well.'
Grant Wood, 'Revolt Against the City', *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* by James M. Dennis, 1935

Cat. 5
Peter Blume
Eternal City, 1934-37
Oil on composition board,
86.5 × 121.6 cm

'I made the red lips clash with the green of the head, the colour of the head strident and like nothing else in the picture: antithesis, dissonance. It hurt me to paint the head, but no compromise was possible. I felt that in doing this picture the question of harmony was superseded by other considerations.'
Peter Blume, quoted by James Thrall Soby in *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art,* Vol. 10, No. 4, 1943

A New Nightmare

Cat. 5 *Eternal City*, the title of this work, is the nickname given to Rome, and the painting itself combines several iconic views of that city with fantastical, hallucinatory elements to comment on contemporary, rather than eternal, themes. Peter Blume was born in Russia (in what is now Belarus) and emigrated to the United States aged six. After studying painting in New York, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed him to travel through Europe in 1932 and 1933. Walking through the Roman Forum in January 1933, he noticed 'a strange light illuminating the ruins', which became the seed of this complex composition. In the left foreground, an old woman, sitting on a pile of broken antique marble statuary, begs for money, as, on the opposite side of the painting, a huge jack-in-the-box with an enormous green head springs towards her, glaring aggressively. The features of the toy's head are clearly based on those of Benito Mussolini, leader of the Fascist Party and then Prime Minister of Italy. Beneath him are the underground corridors of the Colosseum, as they are today. At the front, beneath Mussolini, a suited capitalist and a leering Fascist 'Blackshirt' look up at their leader, grinning.

Behind these villainous characters, figures representing the people of Italy rush away from their oppressors to scramble into daylight. On the left side of the painting, in a lighted shrine within a semi-ruined building, the figure of Christ sits in a pose associated with his torture, surrounded by contemporary military symbols: gold and silver epaulettes, ceremonial swords and jewels. Further back, in the centre of the painting, the people of Italy battle against mounted Fascists in the Forum; on the right, monks flee along an elevated balcony, while a tourist looks on, captivated. In the far distance, the picturesque hillside towns and mountains of central Italy underscore the location of Blume's surrealistic nightmare.

The *Eternal City* took nearly three years to paint, and caused huge controversy when first exhibited in 1937 at Julien Levy Gallery, New York, because its vision of the horrors of Fascism was seen as unpalatable. Two years later, the painting was excluded from the Corcoran Biennial in Washington DC, which in turn sparked protests by fellow artists and writers, who saw the move as redolent of the censorship of art in Fascist countries. Blume certainly intended his painting to confront the sensibilities of his audience. The grotesque green head, based on a huge papier-mâché head of Mussolini that Blume had seen at the 1932 Decennial Exhibition in Rome, was deliberately painted as a jarring element, its bright red lips clashing with its green skin. There is no mistaking the dystopian, despairing tone of Blume's painting. Even the sculpture in the foreground, once a kiss between lovers, has been smashed into fragments.

Discuss the way Peter Blume's *Eternal City* fuses allegory, realism and fantasy for political effect.

Which of the concerns raised in this painting could be seen as distinctly American, despite its obviously European content?

A Modern Terror

‘The irrepressible impulse of Art may upset the whole Fascist programme […] The time has come for the people who love life and culture to form a united front against them, to be ready to protect, and guard, and if necessary, fight for the human heritage which we, as artists, embody.’
Lewis Mumford, speech at First American Artists’ Congress, New York, February 1936

Cat. 19 Combining a traditional round format with a specifically modern subject, Philip Guston’s *Bombardment* is an example of the political intent of some American painting during the 1930s. Guston (1913–1980), who was born in Montréal, Canada, and raised in Los Angeles, was deeply politically committed and used painting as a means of raising public awareness about significant current issues. Large-scale mural paintings, which had the ability to communicate with a broad public, were of great interest to Guston. In 1934, he worked for a period in Mexico where he painted a huge mural entitled *The Struggle Against Terror* sponsored by the Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974). The following year, encouraged by his old high school friend Jackson Pollock, he moved to New York City. There, he joined the growing community of artists employed by the government’s Works Progress Administration programme, where he made murals for public buildings and deepened his interest in leftist political ideas.

Bombardment shares much in common with the work of the Mexican muralists that Guston admired: compare it with Siqueiros’s *The New Democracy* (**fig. 3**), made in 1944 but characteristic of his style in the 1930s. Although on a much smaller scale, *Bombardment*’s powerful contrasts of light and dark, distorted figures and sense of dramatic, powerful movement are evidently inspired by Siqueiros and others. Its political intent also seems indebted to the Mexican artists. Guston began *Bombardment* after reading about atrocities in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), perhaps especially the bombing of Guernica, a town in the Basque country, by Nazi allies of General Franco’s nationalist government, on 26 April 1937. With the collusion of Franco, Germany’s Nazi government used the bombing as a rehearsal for later bombing raids in Europe. Within two and a half hours, over 1,600 residents had been killed, hundreds more injured, and the city lay in ruins.

Guston’s painting is an emotive protest against such acts of destruction. To emphasise the chaos and terror of an aerial bombardment, the artist made use of a circular format known as a tondo, associated with Renaissance paintings by Raphael (1483–1520) and Michelangelo (1475–1564). The centrifugal force of a bomb exploding at the centre of the painting pushes everything outwards. At the top right, two naked males are sent flying; beyond them, an ordinary street diminishes into the distance as figures of varying ages flee from the blast. In the

Fig. 3
David Alfaro Siqueiros
The New Democracy, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City

Cat. 19
Philip Guston
Bombardment, 1937
Oil on Masonite, 106.7 cm

foreground, various figures appear to be shooting out into our space. From right to left are a figure in a gas mask, a shirtless man, a mother and child, and a figure in a billowing yellow shirt. Beneath them, the street seems to be cracking open. Nothing in the painting seems stable. Guston distorts the figures, dramatically foreshortening them, tapering their limbs to the point of the explosion, all emphasising the destructive energy of war. By including a mother and child, Guston draws attention to the innocent victims of war, just as Pablo Picasso did in *Guernica*, his painting on the same subject, also made in 1937. *Bombardment* was widely seen, first in an exhibition organised by the League Against War and Fascism in New York and, in 1938, on the pages of *Look* magazine, which was distributed across America as a powerful warning against Fascism.

How effective do you think the painting *Bombardment* is as an anti-war statement? Why?

Discuss Philip Guston's use of composition, perspective, colour and tone in this painting. How do they contribute towards the emotional content of the work?

Cat. 39
Jackson Pollock
Untitled, *c.*1938–41
Oil on linen,
56.5 × 127.5 cm

The Next Step

Cat. 39 Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) is best known for the abstract paintings composed of paint dripped and poured onto large canvases, which he made in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Leading up to that point he had worked through the influence of a range of artists, starting with his teacher Thomas Hart Benton. Pollock, who was born in Cody, Wyoming, in 1912 and moved to New York City in 1930, began his artistic career under Benton, who taught at the Art Students League. Benton's work, such as *Cotton Pickers*, 1945, is characterised by Regionalist subjects, akin to the work of Grant Wood, with distorted, exaggerated forms. Pollock's earliest independent paintings are evidently indebted to his teacher's example, but by the late 1930s he was moving in a radically different direction that would prefigure his more famous abstract work. This painting represents a step towards that later style – and is a forerunner of the next phase of modern art in America.

This painting is at first hard to read. Amid a flurry of powerful, swooping black lines, the form of a bull is discernible, its head to the left of the composition, a

curved back with visible ribs at the top, and back legs reaching to the opposite side. An inverted head can be seen just beneath the bull's, as though a human is being crushed by the animal's weight. But it is impossible to confidently distinguish between man and animal. And Pollock's use of colour – intense, blood-like red, a cool turquoise, and greys, blacks, greens and blues used across the entire surface of the painting – is far from the naturalism of Benton's work, and gives the painting an almost abstract quality.

The influence of David Alfaro Siqueiros, and the other Mexican muralists, such as José Clemente Orozco (1883–1943), is evident in this painting. In 1936, Pollock worked as a studio assistant to Siqueiros, who had opened a workshop in New York City. Siqueiros's powerfully dramatic aesthetic, with clashing colours and strong, forceful lines (see fig. 3), clearly influenced Pollock, and this *Untitled* painting is a good example of what resulted from it. Other artists, too, clearly affected Pollock, most notably Pablo Picasso. Jackson Pollock's complex depiction of the faces, where several viewpoints seem to coexist, recalls Cubism; and his interest in the image of a bull could also be a reference to Picasso, many of whose paintings feature the animal as a symbol of violence or masculinity.

Both Pollock and Benton agreed that America would produce its own important art, separate from European modernism. For Benton, the epitome of American art would be representational and profoundly nationalist, depicting American scenes where man and land worked in harmony, and celebrating the rugged, physical labour of the rural worker; while European modern art was to be avoided. In contrast, Pollock thought modern American art should embrace European innovations, such as Surrealism and Cubism, in the service of developing a uniquely American modernism. For Pollock, that meant scale.

Stand before one of Pollock's large-scale abstract paintings from the 1950s and the sensation of facing a vast, open, distinctly American landscape is pronounced.

Compare this *Untitled* painting with *Cotton Pickers* by Thomas Hart Benton and *The New Democracy* by David Alfaro Siqueiros. In what ways do you think each of these artists has inspired Pollock's painting?

Consider the difference of opinion between Pollock and Benton about the future direction of modern American art. Which of the two do you most agree with, and why?

'We can no longer turn away from the significance of the subject-matter of art. America lies before us, stricken with economic pains […] Shall we face the situation like honest workmen, or shall we hide in the dark tower and paint evasive arabesques on ivory walls?'
Thomas Craven, *Modern Art: The Men, the Movements, the Meaning,* 1934

We're in the money,
we're in the money;
We've got a lot of what it
takes to get along!
We're in the money, that
sky is sunny,
Old Man Depression you
are through, you done
us wrong …
Al Dubin lyrics to 'We're in the Money' from the film *Gold Diggers of 1933,* 1933

Conclusion

The Great Depression threw the concept of America itself into sharp relief. In a period of national crisis, the country needed to redefine itself. Artists sought to determine the shape of a modern American art – one which would encompass the shifting and diverse definitions of America itself. Which is the more American: Grant Wood's gently satirical image of the humble farmer, or Georgia O'Keeffe's almost abstract still life of bones and flowers? Peter Blume's fevered fantasy of Europe collapsing under the Fascist threat, or Edward Hopper's vision of the melancholy and dislocation of the modern city? All of these works, each in its own way, evoke the atmosphere of a country which after a great financial crisis, felt less sure of itself. No one approach seemed more American than any other.

US involvement in the Second World War brought about the end of the Depression. As it engaged internationally, America could no longer afford to be as isolationist as it had been in the 1930s. The economic boom of the mid-1940s and 1950s transformed the country, and the changes in working and living conditions were even more dramatic, at least for white Americans. For African Americans, however, conditions remained much the same as before. The influx of refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe had once again altered the population of the country, and after the war helped to establish New York as the Western world's pre-eminent cultural centre. Naturally, modern art reflected these changes. Some artists – such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko (1903–1970) and Clyfford Still (1904–1980), who had all begun as realist painters – moved away from representational art and towards a form of large-scale abstraction that would come to be known as Abstract Expressionism. America's more globalised economic perspective led to a reduction in realist images of life of the country, and to a greater interest in abstraction which, after all, is a non-specific visual language, as comprehensible in Europe as it is in America. Figurative art certainly continued, but attracted far less of an international following than did the Abstract Expressionists. And yet, even though other countries were beginning to exhibit American art, this new form of abstract art still seemed quintessentially American in its scale, attitude, and emphasis on the individual. These are characteristics that can be seen in the art of the 1930s, when artists forged a new kind of American art for a new economic, cultural and social landscape. This was an art born out of crisis and insecurity, which nevertheless, with the benefit of hindsight, looks like one of the most creatively fertile, diverse and dynamic periods of art history, and one whose concerns and questions continue to haunt the country to this day.

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Cat. 38 detail
Georgia O'Keeffe
Cow's Skull with Calico Roses, 1931

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