



Large
Print

**America
after the Fall
Painting in the 1930s**

North Gallery

Do not remove from gallery

Multimedia tour



Main commentary



Descriptive commentary



Stuart Davis, New York-Paris No.3,
1931



Aaron Douglas, Aspiration 1936



Charles Sheeler, American Landscape
1930



Alice Neel, Pat Whalen 1935

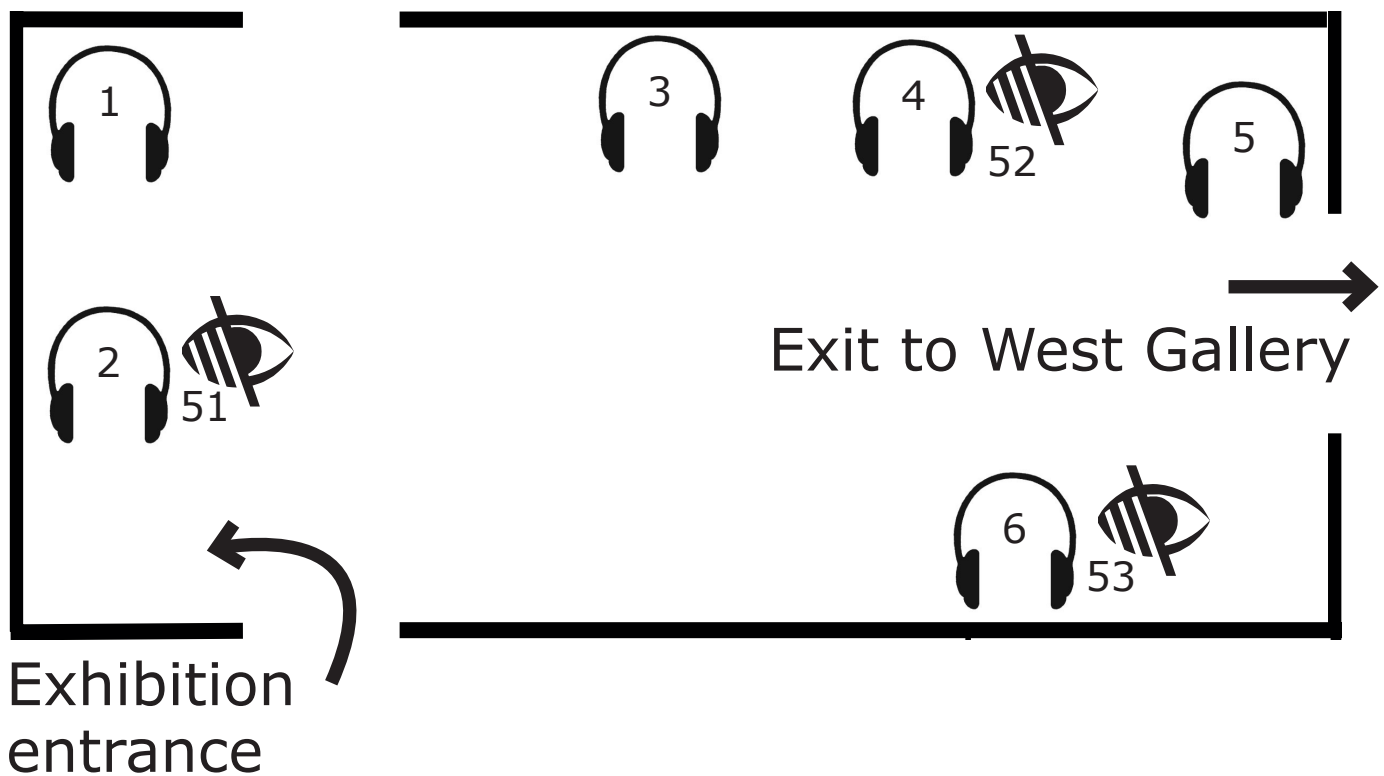
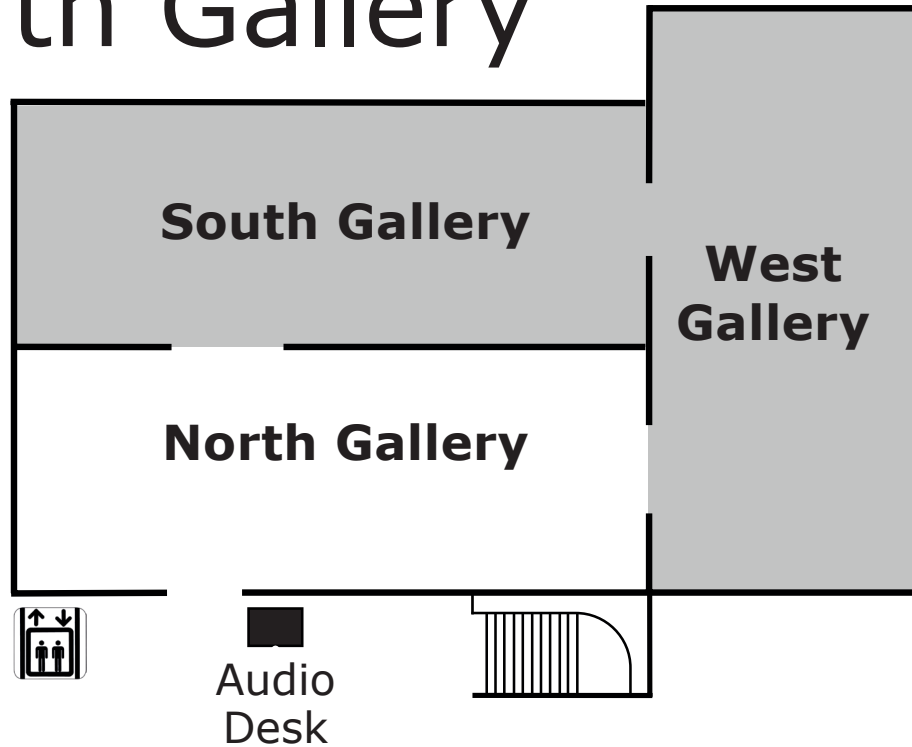


Edward Hopper, Gas, 1940



Reginald Marsh, Twenty Cent
Movie, 1926 and Edward Hopper,
New York Movie 1939

You are in the North Gallery



America after the Fall Painting in the 1930s

In the Sackler Wing of Galleries
25th February - 4th June 2017

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America After The Fall

The 1930s was a critical decade in America. The Great Depression, triggered by the crash of the stock market on 29 October 1929, led to political, social and economic turmoil – the 'fall' referred to in the title of this exhibition.

The period was marked by mass migration. As rising debt threatened the financial viability of small-scale farms, families left rural America in search of greater opportunities in the cities. A prolonged drought and relentless winds rendered the country's fertile prairie farmlands barren.

Millions fled the Dust Bowl, as the devastated region became known: over a million people were displaced in the state of Oklahoma alone.

As the nation confronted these unprecedented challenges, its confidence was shattered.

The character of the nation was changing too. Cities grew to take in those arriving from the countryside but also international immigrants looking for economic prosperity and those fleeing Fascism in Europe and Communism in the Soviet Union.

Between 1890 and 1930 the population of the United States doubled. In a bid to stimulate the economy and relieve the unemployed, in 1933 President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the New Deal.

The programme made the government the largest employer and investor in the country. Its beneficiaries included artists, who were commissioned through the Public Works of Art Project and the Federal Art Project.

The term 'American dream' dates from this period, coined by the historian James Truslow Adams in his book 'The Epic of America' (1931).

The dream was less about the accumulation of personal wealth than the assertion that all Americans, no matter how humble their origins, had the chance to fulfil their capabilities.

From this concept stems the image of the United States as the 'land of opportunity'. 'America after the Fall' charts the diverse ways in which painters responded to the promise and disillusion of the American dream.

The exhibition explores their search for a new visual language that could capture the spirit of these turbulent times.

NEW YORK

During the Great Depression the American city remained a symbol of optimism, arguably none more so than New York, the largest in the country, with a population of nearly seven million in 1930.

That year, in the face of economic uncertainty, the oil magnate and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller undertook one of the world's biggest construction projects. The Rockefeller Center, a complex of high-rises built over nine years on a twenty-two-acre site in Manhattan, came to represent the triumph of hope over adversity.

Living in New York at this time were three very different artists – Stuart Davis, Charles Green Shaw and Aaron Douglas – all of whom had been to Paris, where they had been exposed to the work of such modernists as Fernand Léger, Piet Mondrian,

Joan Miró and Jean Arp. Davis, Shaw and Douglas each developed their own distinctive style, reflecting the broad aesthetic experimentation of the period.

Davis captured the youthful modernity of New York through the vitality and virility of the skyscraper. His rhythmic, jazz-like paintings, also influenced by Cubism and Léger, generated playful images that mixed contemporary American subjects with a European visual language.

Shaw was a proponent of geometric abstraction, a style concerned with colour and form that was well suited to conveying a sense of American confidence and progress.

His bold 1937 painting of Wrigley's chewing gum floating in front of the Manhattan skyline was created for an advertising competition.

The African-American artist Douglas, a key figure in the cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, made 'Aspiration' as one of four panels for the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas in 1936.

The painting acknowledges the contribution to national life made by African-Americans: rising above the shackles that fettered their forebears, they are depicted as the architects of the future, appropriating the Puritan settlers' vision of "a shining city upon a hill".

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Charles Green Shaw

Wrigley's, 1937

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, Restricted gift of the
Alsdorf Foundation

Aaron Douglas

Aspiration, 1936



Oil on canvas

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Museum purchase, the estate of Thurlow E. Tibbs Jr, the Museum Society Auxiliary, American Art Trust Fund, Unrestricted Art Trust Fund, partial gift of Dr Ernest A. Bates, Sharon Bell, Jo-Ann Beverly, Barbara Carleton, Dr and Mrs Arthur H. Coleman, Dr and Mrs Coyness Ennix Jr, Nicole Y. Ennix, Mr and Mrs Gary Francois, Dennis L. Franklin, Mr and Mrs Maxwell C. Gillette, Mr and Mrs Richard Goodyear, Zuretti L. Goosby, Marion E. Greene, Mrs Vivian S. W. Hambrick, Laurie Gibbs Harris, Arlene Hollis, Louis A. and Letha Jeanpierre, Daniel and Jackie Johnson Jr, Stephen L. Johnson, Mr and Mrs Arthur Lathan, Lewis & Ribbs Mortuary Garden Chapel, Mr and Mrs Gary Love, Glenn R. Nance, Mr and Mrs Harry S. Parker III, Mr and Mrs Carr T. Preston, Fannie Preston, Pamela R. Ransom, Dr and Mrs Benjamin F. Reed, San Francisco Black Chamber of Commerce, San Francisco Chapter of Links Inc., San Francisco Chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, Dr Ella Mae Simmons, Mr Calvin R. Swinson, Joseph B. Williams, Mr and Mrs Alfred S. Wilsey, and the people of the Bay Area

Stuart Davis

New York–Paris No. 3,
1931

Oil on canvas

Private collection



Industrial life

Although it had been hard hit by the Great Depression, industry remained a focus of America's aspirations for the future.

Despite a further downturn in the economy in 1937, production and employment slowly recovered, and consumption steadily increased.

The River Rouge Complex, completed in 1927 for Ford Motor Company, was the largest factory in the world. Charles Sheeler was commissioned to record the magnificence of this vast facility: his 'American Landscape' (1930) heralds its muscular strength while imbuing the plant with a quiet aesthetic beauty.

Likewise, Sheeler's 'Suspended Power' (1939) celebrates the acme of the machine age. The sheer scale of the turbine depicted suggests man's seemingly infinite capacity to harness nature's energy.

Charles Demuth also revels in the visual appeal of the modern man-made world in '...And the Home of the Brave' (1931).

Taken from the lyrics of 'The Star-spangled Banner', which was made the official national anthem in the same year, the title of the work is suffused with patriotism and the promise of a better future.

Artists such as Joe Jones and Alice Neel were committed Communists. Their paintings reflect the rise and consolidation of unionised labour, which was partly influenced by the European immigrants who brought left-wing politics into mainstream America.

The Irish-American Pat Whalen was one of a number of prominent union leaders who strove for improved pay and conditions for the industrial workforce. Although Whalen was a slight man, when Neel painted him in 1935 she deliberately exaggerated his build – a sign of his political power.

In his distinctive, highly charged style, the realist Edward Hopper presents an ambiguous scene.

The gas station, the modern equivalent of the traditional stagecoach post, brings to mind the historic settlers and contemporary economic migrants who travelled west across the country in search of opportunity.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Charles Demuth

**. . . And the Home of the Brave,
1931**

Oil and graphite on fibreboard

The Art Institute of Chicago, Alfred Stieglitz
Collection, gift of Georgia O'Keeffe

Charles Sheeler



American Landscape, 1930

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Abby
Aldrich Rockefeller, 1934

Charles Sheeler

Suspended Power, 1939

Oil on canvas

Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Edmund J. Kahn

Alice Neel

Pat Whalen, 1935

Oil, ink and newspaper on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of
Dr Hartley Neel



Joe Jones

Roustabouts, 1934

Oil on canvas

Worcester Art Museum, Gift of Aldus C. Higgins

Edward Hopper

Gas, 1940

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs Simon
Guggenheim Fund, 1943



City life

By 1930 more than half the population of the United States lived in cities. Music venues, dance halls, bars, cinemas, shops, public parks, fun fairs and other forms of urban diversion flourished as cities catered to the demands of their diverse populations.

Reginald Marsh's 'In Fourteenth Street' (1934) represents people pouring out of a New York subway station, eager to hit the surrounding streets.

Dance marathons like the one painted by Philip Evergood were a huge phenomenon during the Great Depression, emblems of the endurance of ordinary people.

As the recently introduced 'talkies' became a national obsession, the 1930s marked the beginning of the Golden Age of Hollywood.

Cinemas were by far the most popular form of urban entertainment. Marsh's painting 'Twenty Cent Movie' (1936) captures the escapism that films offered and the simmering eroticism they promoted.

By contrast, Edward Hopper's 'New York Movie' (1939) reflects the solitariness of the city, its isolated female figure echoing Mark Twain's observation that in New York "the stranger is lonely in the midst of a million of his race".

'The Fleet's In!' (1934) by Paul Cadmus, a bawdy scene of sailors enjoying shore leave in the company of both men and women in New York's Riverside Park, caused a sensation when it was first exhibited. The US Navy demanded that the painting be removed from display.

Meanwhile, William H. Johnson's folk-style portrait of a well-dressed African-American couple enjoying a night out in Harlem, a predominantly black neighbourhood of Manhattan, gestures towards the segregation of the city.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Edward Hopper

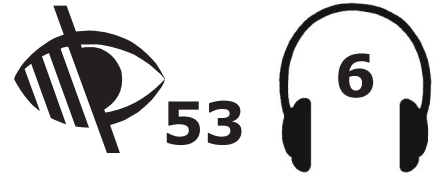
New York Movie, 1939

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously, 1941

Reginald Marsh

Twenty Cent Movie, 1936



Egg tempera on composition board

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Philip Evergood

Dance Marathon, 1934

Oil on canvas

Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at
Austin, Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, 1991

Reginald Marsh

In Fourteenth Street, 1934

Egg tempera on board

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs
Reginald Marsh, 1957

Paul Cadmus

The Fleet's In!, 1934

Tempera on canvas

Collection of US Navy

William H. Johnson

Street Life, Harlem, 1939

Oil on plywood

Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the
Harmon Foundation



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Descriptive commentary



Doris Lee ,Thanksgiving, c. 1935



Grant Wood, Daughters of Revolution,
1932



Alexandre Hogue, Erosion No. 2 –
Mother Earth Laid Bare, 1936



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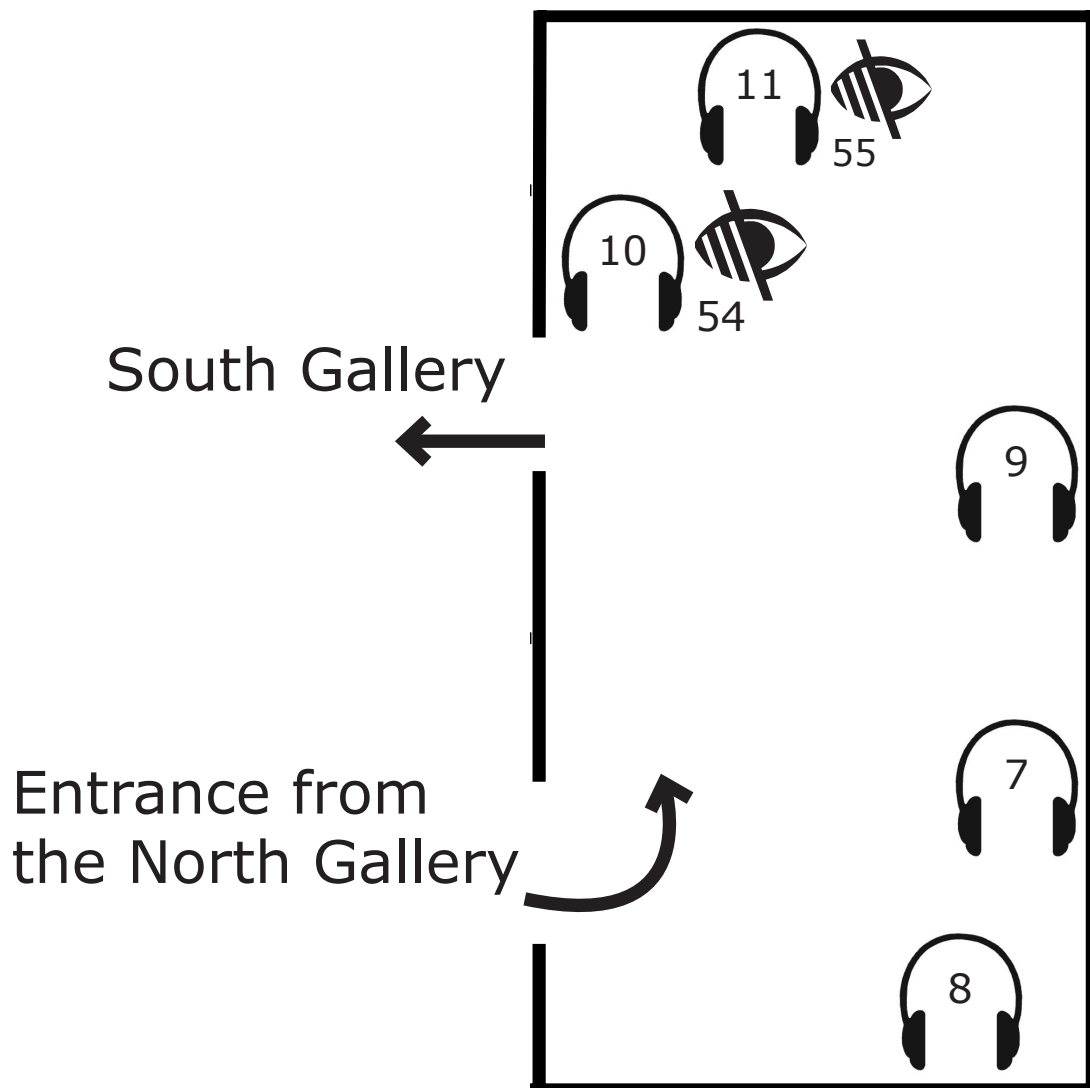
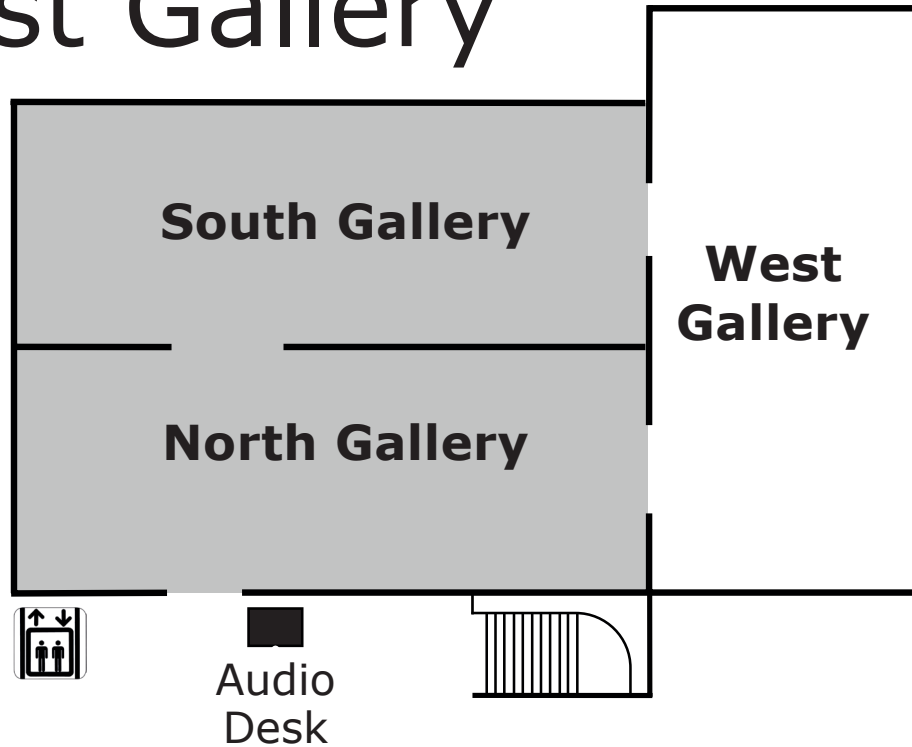
Thomas Hart Benton, Cotton
Pickers, 1945



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Grant Wood, American Gothic,
1930

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Looking To The Past

The year 1932 was the bicentennial of the birth of George Washington, who in 1789 had become the first President of the newly independent United States of America.

Thousands of events commemorated this auspicious occasion, encouraging a reassessment of the nation's history since independence and a collective sense of accomplishment.

The previous 200 years were a source of inspiration because they offered accounts of ordinary Americans confronting adversity. This was a moment to reassert the strength of the country's character. As one of the Founding Fathers John Dickinson wrote in 'The Liberty Song' of 1768: "by uniting we stand, by dividing we fall".

Artists like Grant Wood embraced symbolic historic moments and significant figures. Especially compelling were individuals associated with the American Revolutionary War (1775–83), such as Paul Revere, who raced through New England spreading the news of a call to arms against the British.

Wood's 'Daughters of Revolution' (1932) commemorates an organisation founded in 1890 by direct descendants of those who fought for independence.

Proudly positioned before a reproduction of an iconic painting by Emanuel Leutze, 'Washington Crossing the Delaware' (1851), Wood's prim ladies are stalwart guardians of America's past.

With a bustling farmhouse kitchen scene, Doris Lee celebrates Thanksgiving, a feast associated with the first settlers that is closely woven into the historical fabric of the independent nation.

The domestic interiors depicted by Morris Kantor and Charles Sheeler honour the collecting and exhibiting of American decorative and folk art, including that of the Shakers, a Christian group founded in the eighteenth century who favoured plain, utilitarian furniture.

In such pictures American artists not only looked back on their history but gave new value to the past by making it part of a confident modern American style.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Charles Sheeler

Home, Sweet Home, 1931

Oil on canvas

Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Robert H. Tannahill

Morris Kantor

Haunted House, 1930

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr and Mrs Frank G.

Logan Purchase Prize Fund

Grant Wood

The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere, 1931

Oil on Masonite

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur Hoppock

Hearn Fund, 1950

Grant Wood



Daughters of Revolution, 1932

Oil on Masonite

Cincinnati Art Museum, The Edwin and Virginia Irwin Memorial, 1959.46

Doris Lee



Thanksgiving, c. 1935

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr and Mrs Frank G. Logan Purchase Prize Fund

Paul Sample

Church Supper, 1933

Oil on canvas

Michele and Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts,
Springfield, Massachusetts, The James Philip Gray
Collection

Country Life

The character of the United States continued to change during the 1930s. What was perceived to be the authentic America was fast disappearing under the rise of the chain store, expanded mechanisation and the decline of small family farms. Urbanisation left rural areas with shrinking communities.

In response to these transformations, there was a growing nostalgia for the nation's rural past.

This mood was central to Regionalism, an artistic movement led by Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton, the latter an instructor at the Art Students League in New York who taught Jackson Pollock and Charles Green Shaw.

The Regionalists celebrated life on the land and lamented the disappearance of the settler mentality that had once been embedded in the American psyche.

Despite the devastation of the Dust Bowl and the mismanagement of the land, evoked in Alexandre Hogue's 'Erosion No. 2 – Mother Earth Laid Bare' (1936), nature remained a symbol of hope.

For Grant Wood and Marvin Cone, nature promised renewal and regeneration: their luxuriant, rolling landscapes suggest abundant life, while horse-drawn ploughs and scythes disavow technological advances and the frantic pace of the modern world.

Wood's 'American Gothic' (1930) is arguably the single most important painting of this period. A man and his daughter (modelled on Wood's dentist Byron McKeeby and younger sister Nan) stand in front of a

small homestead, called the Dibble House after its owners, in Eldon, Iowa.

Greatly influenced by painting of the northern European Renaissance, Wood captured the simplicity of rural life and the honesty of an ordinary farming family at a time when such sights were becoming rare. Full of longing for the past, the work is an enduring icon of American art.

List of works (anticlockwise in order of hang)

Alexandre Hogue

Erosion No. 2 – Mother
Earth Laid Bare, 1936

Oil on canvas

Collection of Philbrook Museum of Art



Marvin Cone

River Bend No. 4, 1938

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Grant Wood

Young Corn, 1931

Oil on Masonite

Collection of the Cedar Rapids Community School District, on loan to the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art

Grant Wood

Fall Plowing, 1931

Oil on Masonite

Collection of John Deere Company

Grant Wood

American Gothic, 1930

Oil on beaverboard

The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art
Collection



Thomas Hart Benton

Haystack, 1938

Tempera with oil glaze on linen, on wood panel

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Frank J.
Hevrdejs

Thomas Hart Benton



Cotton Pickers, 1945

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, prior bequest of Alexander Stewart; Centennial Major Acquisitions Income and Wesley M. Dixon Jr funds; Roger and J. Peter McCormick Endowments; prior acquisition of the George F. Harding Collection and Cyrus H. McCormick Fund; Quinn E. Delaney, American Art Sales Proceeds, Alyce and Edwin DeCosta and Walter E. Heller Foundation, and Goodman funds; prior bequest of Arthur Rubloff; Estate of Walter Aitken; Ada Turnbull Hertle and Mary and Leigh Block Endowment funds; prior acquisition of Mr and Mrs Frank G. Logan Purchase Prize; Marian and Samuel Klasstorner and Laura T. Magnuson Acquisition funds; prior acquisition of Friends of American Art Collection; Wirt D. Walker Trust; Jay W. McGreevy Endowment; Cyrus Hall McCormick Fund; Samuel A. Marx Purchase Fund for Major Acquisitions; Maurice D. Galleher Endowment; Alfred and May Tiefenbronner Memorial, Dr Julian Archie, Gladys N. Anderson, and Simeon B. Williams

funds; Capital Campaign General Acquisitions
Endowment, and Benjamin Argile Memorial Fund



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Helen Lundeborg, Double Portrait
of the Artist in Time, 1935



Joe Jones, American Justice, 1933



Philip Guston, Bombardment, 1937

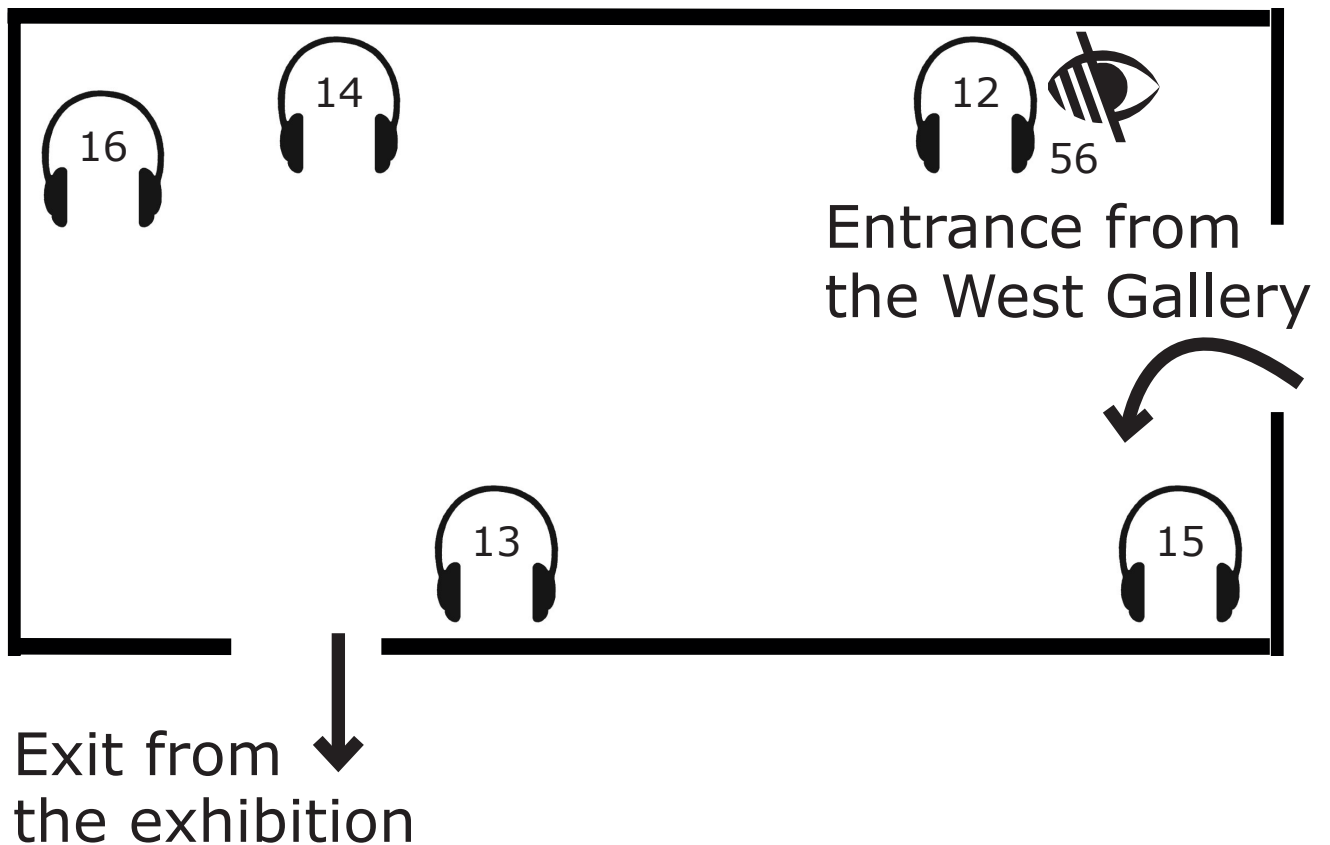
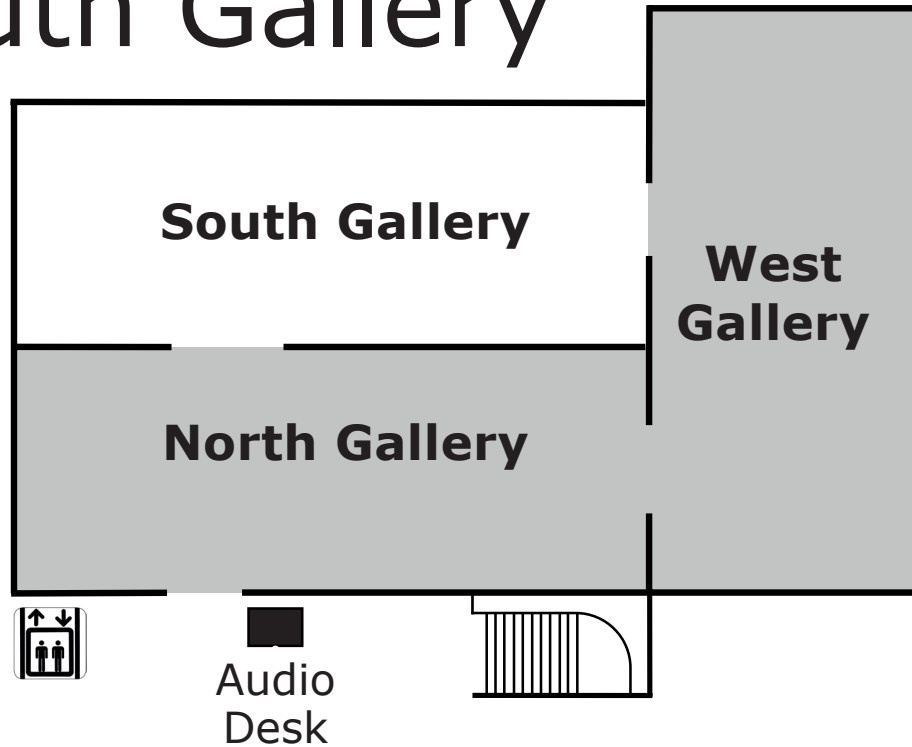


Georgia O'Keeffe, Cow's Skull with
Calico Roses, 1931



Arthur Dove, Swing Music,
(Louis Armstrong), 1938

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VISIONS OF DYSTOPIA

Artists may have depicted hopeful visions of urban and rural life, but the Great Depression caused profound anxiety. The rise of Fascism in Germany, Italy and Spain provoked an atmosphere of imminent doom, exacerbated by the arrival of those fleeing Europe for the sanctity of America.

Philip Guston's 'Bombardment' (1937), with its explosion of dynamic centrifugal forms, evoked the horror of the bombing of Guernica, Spain, an event that signalled the growing might of Francisco Franco.

Surrealism emerged in Paris in the early 1920s and soon found its way to America. The movement's emphasis on the unconscious enabled artists to mediate their unease through dreamlike visions of the world.

They produced tortured images of the self and of unimaginable realities. For many left-wing artists, who were often supported through the New Deal's art projects, Vladimir Lenin remained a hero.

O. Louis Guglielmi depicts the dead Russian Bolshevik leader in a barren industrial landscape, a far cry from the verdant fields celebrated by the Regionalists and Charles Sheeler's muscular factories.

Meanwhile, Peter Blume presents the Italian leader Benito Mussolini as an evil, menacing spirit, his green head looming over the scene.

John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood used metaphors to transmit their feelings of dread. In Curry's rendition of the Garden of Eden, pigs savagely attack a snake, tossing it through the air as they gather for the kill in front of an apple tree.

In Wood's 'Death on the Ridge Road' (1935) a car hurtles towards a lorry cresting a hill in the opposite direction – an impending fatal collision that we are unable to prevent.

Leaving New York for the sparsely populated wilds of New Mexico, Georgia O'Keeffe saw the precariousness of life on the frontier.

Her painting of a bleached cow skull with calico roses, which were used to decorate graves because cut flowers cannot survive the intense desert heat, expresses the fragility of existence in this era.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Georgia O'Keeffe



Cow's Skull with Calico Roses, 1931

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, Alfred Stieglitz
Collection, gift of Georgia O'Keeffe

Ivan Albright

Self-portrait, 1935

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, Mary and Earle Ludgin
Collection

Grant Wood

Death on the Ridge Road, 1935

Oil on Masonite

Collection of Williams College Museum of Art,
Williamstown, Massachusetts, Gift of Cole Porter

47.1.3

John Steuart Curry

Hogs Killing a Snake, c. 1930

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, Restricted gift of an
anonymous donor

Joe Jones



American Justice, 1933

Oil on canvas

Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, Museum Purchase,
Derby Fund, from the Philip J. and Suzanne Schiller
Collection of American Social Commentary Art
1930–1970

Philip Guston



Bombardment, 1937

Oil on Masonite

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Musa and Tom
Mayer, 2011

O. Louis Guglielmi

Phoenix, 1935

Oil on canvas

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska-
Lincoln, NAA-Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial

Peter Blume

The Eternal City, 1934–37

Oil on composition board

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs Simon
Guggenheim Fund, 1942

O. Louis Guglielmi

Mental Geography, 1938

Oil on Masonite

Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth

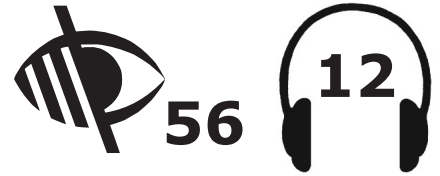
Federico Castellón

The Dark Figure, 1938

Oil on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Helen Lundeberg



Double Portrait of the Artist in Time, 1935

Oil on fibreboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum
purchase

Walt Kuhn

Portrait of the Artist as a Clown (Kansas), 1932

Oil on canvas

Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

A number of artists moved away from figuration in the 1930s, certain that abstraction was the most appropriate style to convey the rapidly changing times.

Indeed many were interested in forging a consciously new, American artistic language – one that could embrace advances in technology and capture the sense of a world driven forward by youthful optimism and the promise of a better, more equitable future.

For George L. K. Morris, the foundations of such an art lay in the rich history and symbols of indigenous cultures, which were incontestably American in origin.

Ilya Bolotowsky's mural study, on the other hand, reflects his interest in the work of

European abstract artists, particularly the biomorphism of Joan Miró and the abstraction of Piet Mondrian.

Meanwhile, Arthur Dove created smaller, more lyrical paintings – sensitive pictures in which he endeavoured to distil the very essence of landscape and music.

The early work by Jackson Pollock here drifts between figuration and abstraction, registering the influence of his teacher Thomas Hart Benton and the Mexican David Alfaro Siqueiros in the decade before Pollock made the decisive switch to pure abstraction with his drip paintings.

As these diverse artists suggest, the 1930s were a crucial period in the development of American art, in which the groundwork was laid for the emergence of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and Pop Art in the 1950s.

By mid-century the United States was firmly in the grip of the Cold War as it contested for global supremacy with the Soviet Union.

The 1930s – in society and art – announced the end of the 'age of innocence' in America.

List of works (anticlockwise in order of hang)

Ilya Bolotowsky

**Study for the Hall of Medical
Sciences Mural at the 1939
World's Fair in New York,
1938/39**

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, Wilson L. Mead Fund

Arthur Dove



Swing Music

(Louis Armstrong), 1938

Emulsion, oil and wax on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago,

Alfred Stieglitz Collection

Jackson Pollock

Untitled, c. 1938/41

Oil on linen

The Art Institute of Chicago, Major Acquisitions
Centennial Fund; estate of Florene May Schoenborn;
through prior acquisitions of Mr and Mrs Carter H.
Harrison, Marguerita S. Ritman, Mr and Mrs Bruce
Borland, and Mary L. and Leigh B. Block

Arthur Dove

Tree Trunks, 1934

Oil on canvas

Phillips Collection, Acquired 1934. Acc. No.: 1585

George L. K. Morris

Indian Composition No. 6, 1938

Oil on canvas

Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Laura L. Barnes and gift of Mr and Mrs Allan D. Emil, by exchange and the Dick S. Ramsay Fund, 2006.42

Your feedback, please

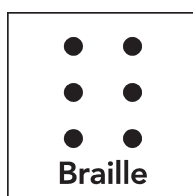
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We also offer one-to-one audio descriptive tours of the exhibitions with trained volunteer audio describers.

Wheelchair users can also benefit from our volunteers, who can assist with taking you around the galleries so you can enjoy our exhibitions at your leisure. With prior notice we can arrange these at a time that fits in with your schedule. Contact me for further information.

Thank you.

Molly Bretton, Access Officer



InTouch at the RA

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