

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN PAINTING

Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

Overview From the beginning, North American art has been characterized by a combination of practicality, creative self-expression, and a desire to use art to embody the values and beliefs of their culture and society. Identity has been at the heart of the art of America, as well as the idea that painting is one of the most important ways to capture a world view and to allow the viewer to see through the artist's own eyes and thus communicate in a way that transcends words. While 20th-century art was perhaps most overt in its insistence that art transmits philosophical and cultural ideas, that notion can be found in North American painting in all time frames.

ANCIENT PERIOD

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): The Clovis cultures did not paint, but they were prodigious tool-makers, and fashioned spear points, blades, drills, needles, and scrapers, which they used in foraging for plants, hunting small animals, and fishing. They carved lines and shapes into the walls of caves (petroglyphs), but very little has been found as yet.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): The Pueblo Indians painted their dwellings and also used sand paintings in their ceremonies. Hohokam rock art can be found in the valleys in southern and south-central Arizona, which they turned into an agricultural center by means of irrigation canals. The rock art of the Hohokam included both petroglyphs (designs chipped away on the rock) and pictographs (designs painted on the rock). The designs include abstract art (circles, crosses, spirals, and meandering lines) and also representational art, with birds, snakes, mammals, and humans. It is believed that the art was created in conjunction with ceremonies.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): The Algonquin, Mohawk, Seneca, Abenaki and others of the Northeast decorated their clothing and their wampum belts (belts made of beads shaped from shells). The Eastern Algonquian peoples of Canada and the northern U.S. painted flowers, abstract designs, and figures of people on their belts and clothing.

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): The Mound dwellers of the Mississippian painted the inner rooms of their dwellings, and also the walls of caves. Very little is known about these architects of the Mississippi River Valley because by the time that the Europeans visited their lands, there was little left except their abandoned structures. Their pottery was painted, generally with geometric shapes, but also in the shape of animals.

Colonial (Early Modern)

Colonial: Portraiture influenced by Dutch and Flemish. Example: John Singleton Copley, *Paul Revere* (c. 1768-70). Landscape and tableaux of important historical events: Benjamin West, *The Treaty of Penn with the Indians*, 1771-72.

Revolutionary War Period: War scenes and heroic portraiture. Lighting used to indicate heroic actions and the moment of sacrifice. John Trumbull, *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec*, 1775.

Federal Period: Nation-building portraiture, following the techniques of European artists who painted the aristocracy and heroes. Edward Savage, *The Washington Family*, 1789. Scenes of ordinary life (influenced by Dutch and Flemish painters). Gilbert Stuart, *The Skater*, 1782.

Nineteenth Century

Early Republic: Portraiture and scenes of early life. Rembrandt Peale, *Rubens Peale with a Geranium*, 1801. Myth-making and heroic visual narratives. Thomas Sully, *Passage of the Delaware*, 1819.

Antebellum Era: Exploration of American ways of life. George Caleb Bingham, *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, 1845. George Catlin, *An Indian Ball-Play*, 1846 – 1850. Colors are vivid and there is a focus on ethnographic authenticity.

Hudson River School: Albert Bierstadt, *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, 1863. Thomas Cole, *Gelyna (View near Ticonderoga)*, 1826-1828. Frederic Edwin Church, Thomas Doughty, an Edenic vision of nature, with dramatic use of light and color, with a sense of divine illumination.

American Barbizon School: Most of the painters in this school were trained in Europe and influenced by the French Barbizon School artists such as Jean-Francois Millet, and then later by the impressionists. Mary Cassatt was influenced by European Impressionists while Childe Hassam's landscapes and depictions of wildflowers create a sense of motion and sunlight. Examples include Childe Hassam's *Celia Thaxter's Garden* (1890) and Horatio Walker's *Watching the Turkeys*. Other artists include Winslow Homer, William Morris Hunt, George Inness.

Photography: In the last half of the nineteenth century, technical improvements made it possible to take photographs of historical situations, landscapes, and portraits. Mathew B. Brady documented the Civil War and is known as the father of photojournalism. Ansel Easton Adams photographed the American West, and George Grantham Bain was known for his photography of the Mexican Revolution, celebrities, parades, and more.

Portraits: James McNeill Whistler – portraiture; John Singer Sargent – contrasts of colors, light and shadow, brush strokes and texture demonstrate Impressionist influence, and informal poses capture a sense of spontaneity. Some of the painters were untrained such as Ammi Phillips, while others trained in the European tradition, which include Thomas Sully, G. P. A. Healy. The work of Thomas Eakins evokes images from everyday life, and an emphasis on texture. Henry Ossawa Tanner was the first African-American acclaimed portrait painter.

Realism: Raphael Peale was well-known for his realistic still-life and trompe-l'oeil. Examples include *Cheese with three crackers* (1813), *Melons and Morning Glories* (1813), and *Venus Rising from the Sea – A Deception* (1822).

Twentieth Century

American Impressionism: Beginning in the 19th century, and continuing into the 20th century, American Impressionists were known for their bright palettes and energetic brush strokes. Artists include Childe Hassam and Mary Cassatt.

Ashcan School: Realism returned with the “Ashcan School” which focused on social change through art and literature by painting scenes of everyday life in middle and working class settings. Examples include George Bellows, Everett Shinn, and George Benjamin Luks.

Harlem Renaissance: The 1920s and 30s Harlem Renaissance was a literary and artistic movement which brought together music, poetry, prose, and painting. The techniques were influenced by music, and known for their bright colors and cultural elements. Examples include Romare Bearden, Palmer Hayden, and Jacob Lawrence.

Socialist Realism / New Deal art: Thomas Hart Benton is perhaps the best-known of the artists commissioned by the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) established during the Great Depression. Influenced by the Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera, the artists brought together myth and populist movements. Examples include Grant Wood, Reginald Marsh, and Thomas Hart Benton.

Abstract Expressionism: After World War II, artists in New York took the minimalism and modernist painting many steps further than the famous New York Armory Show of 1911, where Cubism and other abstract works were shown. Abstract Expressionism was characterized by experimental paint application and dramatic brush strokes. Examples include Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Robert Motherwell, and Alexander Calder.

Color Field: Color Field painting focused on large canvases with paint applied in unique ways, including dripped from a stick or poured directly from the can. Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko were the first, and in the 1960s, color field painting continued with Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Helen Frankenthaler.

Mixed Media Pop Art: Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein incorporated everyday objects of popular culture and also blended photos, newsprint, comic strips and discarded objects. Their goal was often satiric commentary on American life, and in particular, consumerism.

Discussion/Questions

1. The earliest inhabitants of North America created artifacts that were highly utilitarian such as finely crafted awls, blades, and spearpoints, and they used their tools to carve glyphs in the walls of caves and on rocks. When we consider that their religion was shamanistic, and it often involved assuming the attributes of an animal. Given the convergence of art and religious beliefs, what are some of the possible ways that art was used in the early civilizations before the arrival of the Spaniards, English, Dutch, and French?
2. Art in colonial America was very much influenced by European traditions. And yet, it was clear that the artists in America were eager to differentiate themselves from their European counterparts. To begin, the subject matter was often different, as were the landscapes and scenery. What were some of the ways in which art in Colonial America was different than art in Europe?
3. In the 19th century, American artists truly embraced the notion of American identity, American exceptionalism, and utopian visions. They did so not only with their landscapes but also with portraiture and still life. Please describe 5 or more works that exemplify how artists sought to use painting to depict America as a unique place with its own identity.
4. The 20th century began with a break from the values, hierarchies, and techniques of the past, and in regular succession, sought to break with its immediate forebears, even if they were only a decade or so in use. Describe the early 20th century artworks in America and explain how they represented a break from the past and a commentary on America. Then, follow up and create a timeline in the 20th century that links art movement with an underlying philosophical or aesthetic idea or ideal.

Readings

Berlo, Janet Catherine. (2014) *Native North American Art. 2nd edition*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Craven, Wayne. (2002) *American Art: History and Culture*. Saddle River, NJ: McGraw-Hill.

Doss, Erika. (2002) *Twentieth-Century American Art*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Groseclose, Barbara. (2000) *Nineteenth-Century American Art*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Hughes, Robert. (1991) *The Shock of the New: The Hundred-Year History of Modern Art – Its Rise, Its Dazzling Achievement, Its Fall*. New York: Knopf.

Wright, Tricia. (2007) *Smithsonian Q&A: American Art and Artists: The Ultimate Question and Answer Book*. New York: Harper.