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## America Seen: People and Place

Throughout the 1930s and into the early 1950s, many American artists sought an indigenous style of realism that would embody the values of ordinary people in the everyday working world. This search for a national style of art grew out of a wariness of European abstraction and a tendency toward isolationism following World War I. Representative of that era, *America Seen: People and Place* presents more than eighty paintings, photographs and prints drawn from the extensive holdings within the permanent collection of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden. Events and conditions that took place every day during those years provided an opportunity for artists to establish a novel and recognizable art form--to create something that was unique to American culture and could be understood, identified with, and supported by the public.

Those years also saw expansive dreams by artists, opportunities to broaden individual techniques, and experimentation with new ideas, which brought about a complete evolution of style. In the wake of severe economic uncertainty, social upheaval and political shifts that followed the disastrous Great Depression, American artists maintained a commitment to projecting a very personal view. Intent on shunning the influence of European artists and instruction, these artists struggled to establish and maintain their own identity. Much of this work, especially that now known as Social Realism and Regionalism, falls within the larger movement known as American Scene. Revealed here in visual format is a nation slowly moving toward world leadership.

American as American could be, the context of most of this art remained closer to pre-twentieth-century conventions, particularly those of realism, and altogether avoided abstraction, which was significantly less acceptable to local and/or regional tastes. As a result, artists were required to travel to major art centers where they could spend time with modern artists and educators in order to link with national developments. Of great importance was the notion of continuing to serve an audience whose values were traditionally Puritan.

With the recovery of the economy near the end of the 1930s, a new optimism slowly began to emerge. The end of World War II brought the return from Europe of many American artists, along with the immigration of their foreign counterparts, to the New York City area. These events signaled the beginning of a dominance there of the world art scene, and the development of an international leadership role by America that was to be unrivaled for years to come.

Individual artists, as is evident in *America Seen: People and Place*, responded variously to these developments. Some felt obliged to record the

disasters of the Depression, or conditions that followed, the U.S. entry into World War II, and the rise of fascism. Other more optimistic painters saw happier times and chose to "sing America's praises." The enigmatic loneliness of isolation within either urban, or rural, settings was conveyed by many, while others captured the hustle and bustle of a thriving new industrial scene and a flourishing new style of architecture. Each artist, in his or her own right, manifests a simpler, less stressful America than that of today, and upholds a distinctly American commitment to investing a portion of one's own time to a more gentle life.

*America Seen: People and Place* presents a full complement of these American Scene works, but expands the definition to include works that postdate the conventional period and explore the definition of American Scene. *America Seen* contains works that chronologically follow but were not a part of the Ashcan School period, although the realistic depiction of contemporary American life as addressed within this exhibition undoubtedly is derived from the contributions of many of those artists. Central to *America Seen* are works that have usually been identified as American Regionalism, but because of the context of their particular subject matter, they can be surveyed afresh and discussed within an expanded context. Among those that seem to fall within certain categories are some key examples.

#### ■ **Urban/Rural:**

Isabel Bishop's work, *Union Square*, is representative of New York's "14th Street School," whose artists provided a response to urban life and its industrialization. Edward Hopper's *Night Shadows* is a metaphor for an incongruous urban isolation.

#### ■ **Social/Political:**

Realistic art with social/political content was a major component of the American Scene movement. Sheldon's *Phoenix* by O. Louis Guglielmi speaks to "Socialism as salvation for a war-torn and depression-weary world."<sup>1</sup> A somewhat less foreboding but significant and unforeseen obsession with television is conveyed through the plethora of rooftop antennas painted by Manfred Keiler in *The Curse of the Century*. These artists felt an obligation to comment on the human condition, particularly in the 20th century.

#### ■ **Ritual/Ceremony:**

Traditional celebrations of Americana are exemplified in Doris Lee's print, *Thanksgiving*, and in the paintings by Alexandre Hogue, *Procession of the Saint-Santo Domingo*; Ogden Pleissner, *Morning Mass*; and John Martin Socha, *Burial in North Dakota*.

### ■ Domestic/Portrait:

Of particular poignancy are photographic portraits by Ralston Crawford, Dorothea Lange, and Wright Morris. Grant Wood's close friend and colleague is intuitively portrayed in *Arnold Comes of Age*--an allegorical metaphor for the seasons within our own lives--which manifests a style indigenous to America.

### ■ Labor/Leisure:

Works such as Elizabeth Terrell's *Woman Scrubbing* and Edward Chavez's *The Watering Tank* were completed during the Works Progress Administration. The WPA, which was established in 1935 by the U.S. Government, provided funding to many artists who competed for work to decorate public buildings in a variety of media. Some of the murals are still extant in those buildings around the country, while many of the paintings, photographs, prints and sculptures are now in museum collections. These works tend to be inordinately conservative, but should be recognized for their groundbreaking and long-term contributions to both minority and gender issues. Peggy Bacon's *Dance at the League*, Reginald Marsh's *Untitled (Two Girls in Beach Attire)* and Kenneth Evett's *Skating at Tarry Hall* manifest a simpler, less stressful America, but also uphold a distinctly American commitment to an investment of a portion of one's time to a more gentle life. Norman Rockwell's extraordinarily fine example of art as illustration, *The County Agricultural Agent*, conveys a nostalgic and sentimental view of 'the good life,' which becomes in its own distinct way a fabricated sort of portrait reality. In this painting, Rockwell has staged a purely sentimental view of a typical situation that is void of truth or actuality, signalling the end of this type of pictorial art in America. Rockwell's Nebraska counterpart, Dale Nichols, has simultaneously 'sanitized' his farm scenes without conveying the honest labor and smells of them--a truly romantic construction of reality.

Drawn predominantly from the 1930s through the early 1950s, *America Seen: People and Place* investigates the various issues and manifestations of subjects that occurred during those years. The works in this overview are appropriately selected as documentation of particularly significant contributions under an 'umbrella' of the numerous theories, or 'isms,' that have been embraced by traditional interpretations of 20th-century American art. Collectively, these individual works manifest what has been referred to as a 'history of innovations.' This expanded consideration of the genre garners new insight into the broader aftermath that American Scene left, the ongoing tendency among American artists to address familiar people and places in universal terms, and allows us to review America in light of both truth and our perception of ourselves.

*America Seen: People and Place*, was co-curated by George W. Neubert, Sheldon Gallery

Director and Daphne A. Deeds, Former Chief Curator. Special thanks is extended to student interns Cynnamon Jones and Ted Volkmer for research and special assistance.

## References:

1. Daphne Deeds, "Louis Guglielmi," in *The American Painting Collection of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 74.
2. B. Dike and W. G. Otton, *Texas Regionalist Painters, 1930-1950*, exhibition catalogue (Corpus Christi, TX: Art Museum of South Texas, 1995).

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