

Lesson 15: Art in America

Late 19th - Early 20th Century

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will explore the influence of eastern art on American art.
- Students will recognize symbolism and meaning in the use of light, weather and landscape features in American landscape painting.
- Students will research the geographic problems facing an American architect and the ideology that led him to resolve the problems.
- Students will examine an American portrait painter's details for honesty.

Time & Place

The states had united against the British and won independence, having paid with the lives of 4435 men. Revisit the founder's intentions at 1776 Declaration. By 1820, most white males could vote, in more emotional than thoughtful elections.

America focused on real estate. Settlers started west, partly on the mistaken belief that there was an easy east-west passage for trade. As they settled some of the more hospitable sites, the newly united states sought to acquire those sites for expansion. By negotiation, intimidation, or sometimes outright war, the new state federation, the United States of America, acquired more and more territory - from Mexico (Texas), Spain (Florida), Britain (Oregon), and France (Louisiana). The American natives, considered "primitive" and thus barely human, lost most everything.

In the 1840's alone, the United States grew by nearly 60%, and in the next decade it spanned the continent from Atlantic to Pacific. To keep order in this diverse territory, the central government had to become stronger. In 1861, under President Lincoln, the U.S. government declared the keeping of slaves illegal, prompting the southern states to withdraw from the union. The Civil War lasted until 1865, slavery was abolished, and the strong central government was established. As late as 1912, new states (AZ and NM) continued to enter the United States of America.

Everything was possible in America, the land of the strong and the brave. Refugees from oppression and poverty around the world fled to the shores of hope. (Mussolini's fascists had taken over the Italian government, 1922, and Hitler came to power, 1933.) Refugees sought work and the promise of fair treatment in the democracy of America . They brought with them an expectation of freedom.

Huge factories soon drew millions seeking lucrative work to the cities. Urban neighborhoods overflowed with people of different languages and customs. Schools struggled to unite these diverse people into a cohesive nation.



Earnestness was in the air. Everything was new, vast new land to be settled and new conveniences to be invented. Even the workings of the mind became a frontier with the work of psychology, especially Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939), as he explored the mysteries of the unconscious and the irrational. Things got bigger and even faster, as the car roared past the frightened horse. There was more and more of everything.



It could only get better - at least until the dark wing of that unthinkable nightmare, World War I, "The Great War", cast its shadow over the dream.

Religion & Philosophy

America remained a nation of churchgoers offered the freedom to worship, but philosophical pragmatism also took hold. American philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) was brought up in a religious household but made pragmatism an educational concept. Pragmatists argue that truth should be tested by how well a belief actually works in the real world. The reason for thinking at all, they claim, is to guide actions. Dewey urged educators to prepare children to live with enthusiasm and skill in a democracy, to prepare them for action, rather than fill them with facts.

Art content

American artists first painted what they saw, the beautiful and vast landscape and the newly gathered American people. America embraced immigrants (including artists) from around the world; the result was a rich mix of subject matter, points of view, and skills.

Reality, in fast growing America, was ever-changing. Following the shocking devastation of World War I, non-objective art (art having no recognizable subject matter) and abstract art became the hallmark of the times. Innovation was the key to pleasing patrons of the art galleries, and art styles changed in every direction trying to keep up with the fickle buyer.

Materials and Technology

By 1920, there were regular **radio shows** and by 1928 some regular television broadcasts. Radar had been invented and **atomic fission** was demonstrated in 1942. The discovery of penicillin (1929) changed the world's demographics when introduced for public use in the 1940's, by preventing countless deaths to infections. Not only did more children survive childhood, but soldiers were cured from wounds.

Art Styles and Contributions

American artists sailed from North America in droves to study art in Europe (photo of Atelier de Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris). Many came back home again. European artists also fled to the safety of America's shores. As the art pack rounded the bend into the 20th century, Paris was in the lead, but America, inspiring the world with its vibrant democracy, was beginning to move toward the front.

Some of the attention that had almost always been placed on Western Europe began to move across the Atlantic to North America.

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Martin Johnson Heade's *Thunderstorm on Narragansett Bay* (above, 1868) is an example of work by an artist of the Hudson River School.



Albert Bierstadt's *Emigrants Crossing the Plain* (above) draws us into the "fire" of this sunset and captures the formidable terrain ahead of the humans who are dwarfed by it.



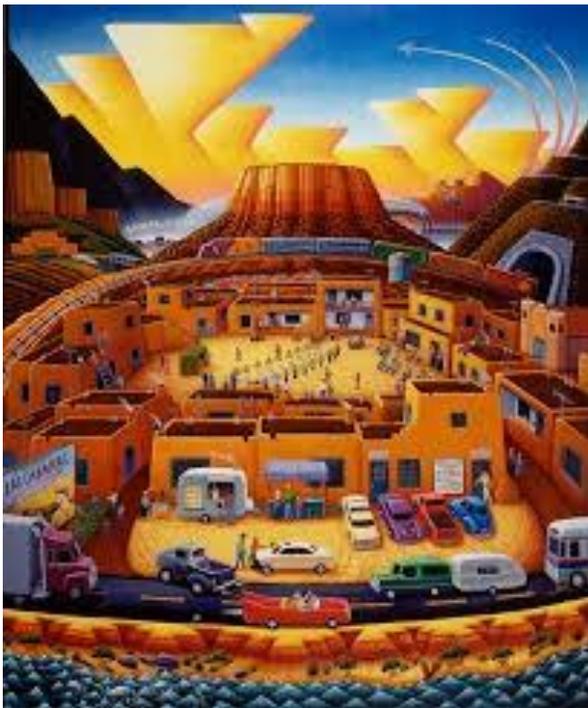
Realism

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The Ashcan School (1908-1913) was formed by a group of newspaper artist called The Eight who chose to paint everyday life in the cities. They formed the Armory Show of 1913, which changed the course of American art by bringing the new art of Europe to America. The show traveled to Boston and Chicago and nowhere received an enthusiastic welcome. But the door to the new art had been opened.

Today, the artistry of those displaced by the western migration of Europeans, the Native American people, is entering the mainstream of American art.





Architecture

America built to accommodate its growing population and industries; homes, factories, warehouses and offices cropped up everywhere. Many were neither innovative or attractive, but a few architects broke the mold with innovative design.

Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) used ornamentation designed from nature, rather than history, as we see in his Merchant's Bank, Grinnel, Iowa. Instead of stressing the stacked appearance of most multi-storied buildings, he emphasized the vertical upward thrust, as in The Schiller Building. He believed that architecture in America needed to reconcile nature and democracy, instead of borrowing from the past. He argued that **form follows function**, or in other words, that if a building serves its function perfectly, it will naturally be beautiful.

Hired and ultimately fired by Sullivan, American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) rewrote the book on building design by using the building site to **organically** inspire and embrace the building, perhaps reflecting America's fascination with her landscape. Wright believed that form and function were one. His style is called **Organic Architecture**. He argued that the land should guide the building, unhindered by past traditions or notions about the present or future. Common sense, he said like a true pragmatist, should lead

In Fallingwater, Wright designed a house for a wealthy merchant family, the Kaufmann's, in the rugged Appalachian mountains of western Pennsylvania. The owner's love of the land, particularly the waterfall, inspired Wright to incorporate the waterfall right into the house, with the planes of the house matching the rugged planes of the rock outcrop it sits upon. Wright said, "I knew well that no house should ever be put on a hill or on anything. It should be of the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together each the happier for the other."



Painting

Thomas Eakins (1844 - 1916) studied realism in Europe from artists descended from the great David. There Eakins developed extremely refined skills as a painter. But Eakins remained thoroughly American in his honesty. Life in America was good as it was. Even as a portrait painter, he remained unwilling to show things in a better light. He refused to flatter his subjects and stuck to the honest truth - not always popular with vain clients.

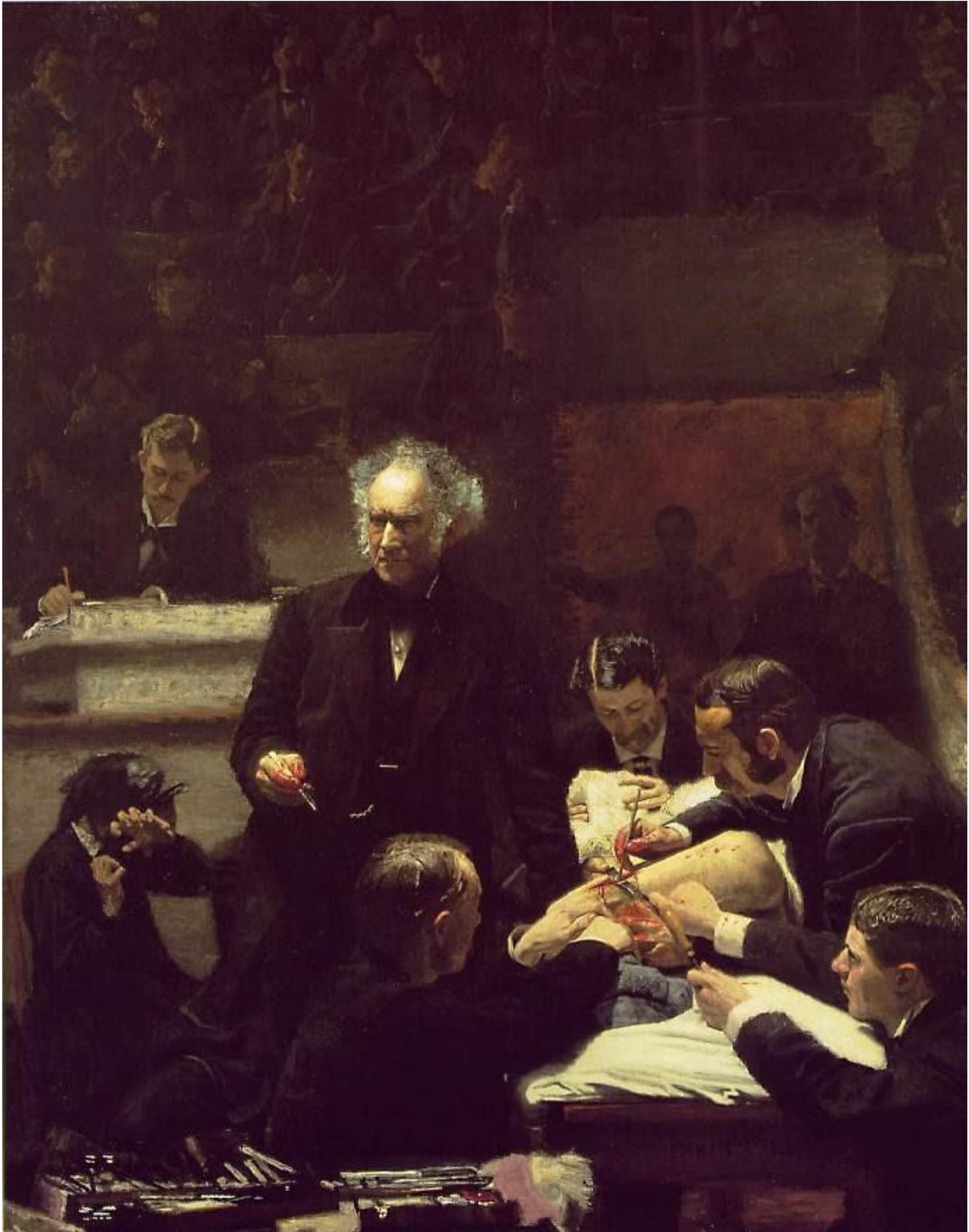
We see a beautiful, well-dressed woman in *Miss Van Buren* (1890), but the slumped posture, the lost gaze, the limp fan, drain her of anything the viewer could envy. Like a true realist, Eakins has not posed a mythical beauty but an aging beauty weighted with human troubles and cares. Eakins paints her gown with an almost agitated stroke, but her skin is smooth as alabaster. *Miss Van Buren* is still beautiful. The brilliant sunlight coming through an unseen window, however, reveals a faint frown on her brow, a few gray hairs, and those hauntingly vacant eyes. The flirtatious fan lies forgotten in her limp hand.

This portrait of his great and famous friend Walt Whitman shows Whitman almost diffused into the background shadows.



Only the light of his intelligence seems to beam forth, illuminating and then fading into the surrounding gray. The loose brush strokes seem to echo those of the Spaniard whose works he so admired, Velasquez. Eakins believed America could produce serious art, and he proved this to be true. (Some American artists who studied in Europe, chose to stay abroad.)

His Portrait of Dr. Samuel Gross (1875) shocked American critics for its unflinching portrayal of the famous doctor demonstrating for medical students his technique of saving lives by scraping away infected bone. The medical students watch from the darkened gallery as the patient's mother flinches in horror. Using dramatic chiaroscuro, Eakins brings our attention to the blood and gore of the surgery itself with the light on the blindingly white site, and on the bloody hand and scalpel of the doctor. Surgery then was performed in the day to take advantage of bright daylight. Eakins also **illuminates** the noble head of Dr. Gross, affirming his intelligence and wisdom. Although a popular image today, this painting was refused admission to the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 because of its literal nature. Although he was unfailingly truthful, Eakins never robbed his subjects of their human dignity.



Winslow Homer (1836-1910) lived a solitary life on the Maine coast, and it shows. Increasingly his painting, which began telling stories of man vs. nature, as in *The Lifeline*, (1884) became more and more about the pure forces of nature, as in *West Point, Prout's Neck, Maine* (1900). After all, this was the story of America.



West Point, Prout's Neck, Maine

Canoe in the Rapids (below, 1897) is an example of Homer's use of water color, which he brought skillfully to importance in the art world. Watercolors are finely-ground pigments bound together with gum arabic and thinned with water. Unlike oil paint, water color is handled quickly and managed by the relative wetness or dryness of the surface, making it ideal for outdoor work.



It is by nature, like water, transparent. Not only can colors be seen through (rather than at) but the color of the paper becomes an important

ingredient, creating a luminous quality up through the colors laid over it.

Mary Cassatt studied art in Pennsylvania before moving on to Paris, where she met Degas. She mostly painted women and children, gently rendering them in a soft impressionistic light. Cassatt brought womanly subjects to a male-dominated art world. She preferred to capture moments of motherly affection, as in her pastel *Mother and Child*, (below, 1900), to continuing the figurative tradition of painting naked women.



Edward Hopper (1882-1967) is likely America's most venerated Realist of the last century. He studied with Degas in Paris and William Merit Chase in America, then earned his living as an illustrator. Somehow he ventured into fine art and developed a reputation for a gripping loneliness growing deep in the heart of vibrant America.

In *Nighthawks* (below, 1942), he shows an empty early morning urban scene. The viewer looks through the coldly illuminated diner and past the solitary cook and his three disengaged patrons into the vacant darkened street. They are helplessly vulnerable there, coldly illuminated in the dark night. Without forcing, he allows his viewer to experience, with a shiver, an all-too-familiar chill of alienation and loneliness.



Hopper captured the loneliness of travel in a restless America . In *Hotel Lobby*, (1943) Hopper again uses a strong diagonal, with the carpet running up the canvas toward a doorway. But just as in *Nighthawks*, with its strong diagonal diner cutting through the canvas, the tension goes nowhere. It is as if something should have happened, or something is going to happen. But nothing does, and we're left with that vague feeling of uneasiness.

That sense of existential loneliness shows up even in subjects essentially happy in nature, such as *Second Story Sun* (1960) The sun somehow doesn't feel warm. The sky has a hard look, and the figures are somewhat dwarfed by the dark trees rising up on the right. The house is turned away from the viewer, as if to note that the sun will soon be turning away, too, the preening bather and the reader will retreat indoors and light a lamp against the growing dark.

Film

The movies took over the entertainment world, moving from silence to sound and from black and white to color. Silent film star **Charlie Chaplin** rose to fame with *The Gold Rush*, (1925) in which he invites America to look at herself - and laugh.



By 1934, Hollywood was in full swing. The idea of the Hollywood star was born and the movie companies like MGM and Warner Brothers were producing movies under the direction of such greats as Fritz Capra (It Happened One Night), John Ford (The Grapes of Wrath) and Victor Fleming (The Wizard of Oz).

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Imogen Cunningham studied in Germany and returned to America to work as a portrait photographer, but she broke ground as an art photographer and is remembered for her innovative photographs of plant forms.

Writing

Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) 1835-1910, wrote **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**, **The Adventures of Tom Sawyer** and more. His honest accounts of life in the new nation were unflinchingly honest, but so filled with pathos and humor they have come to define the nation. For a taste of his genius, go to [A True Story Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It](#)

The short and brilliant star of novelist Thomas Wolfe, (**You Can't Go Home Again**, **Time and the River** and **Look Homeward, Angel**) rose and fell in America.

Optional Activities

If you were to try a landscape painting, what would you emphasize? How much of your composition would be devoted to humans or human things like buildings, cars, etc. and how much devoted to nature? You can visit artist William [Scott Jennings web site](#) to paint along with a modern landscape painter. Don't worry about not being original. Copying is a classic way for art students to learn the skills needed to begin their own paintings later.

Visit this web site for [more resources](#) on selecting materials, mixing color, designing compositions, etc.

Grading Rubric:

Grading for this lesson:

- **To get a 10:** In the first submission, assignment questions are completed, responses are thoughtful and answered thoroughly. All details are corrected to the teacher's specifications.
- **To get a 9:** In the first submission, answers are sparse or incomplete. After prompting, all corrections are made in revisions. Final answers are thorough, thoughtful, and detailed.
- **To get an 8:** Lesson objectives are met, but one answer remains incorrect or is lacking sufficient detail.
- **To get a 7:** Lesson objectives are met, but two answers remain incorrect or are lacking sufficient detail.
- **To get a 6:** Lesson objectives are met, but three answers remain incorrect or are lacking sufficient detail.
- **To get a 5:** Plagiarism, purposeful or mistaken, which will lower your final grade for the course (so be very careful when posting your work!) OR lack of effort, disrespect, or attitude (we are here to communicate with you if you don't understand something). Lesson requirements have not been met.

Assignment:

Do not submit text that you have copied from sources, including websites. All of your work should be in your own words. Using copied text would be considered plagiarism. For more information, review our page on [Plagiarism and Citation](#).

1. Why did critics say **The Armory Show** of 1913 was a "crisis"? Was it a crisis or something else?
2. Compare [The Boating Party](#) (1893-94) by Cassatt with the Japanese print by [Tokokuni III](#) (1852).
3. Go to Frank Lloyd Wright's [Fallingwater](#). Please describe how Wright believed man should relate to nature in a building.
4. In this landscape painting by the American **Thomas Cole** (1801-1848), he shows us a view from [Mount Holyoke](#). He shows us the scene experiencing two different weather conditions, on the left a retreating thunderstorm and clearing weather on the right. [You can click to enlarge areas of this painting and move around it with your cursor.
 1. a. Look closely at this painting and discuss what the weather changes signify in Cole's landscape, and what he is saying about life in early America, by showing the weather this way.
 2. b. If you look closely you can see a human in the landscape. Why does Cole make the person so small and the landscape so large?

3. c. If you were a painter, how might you show the weather in America today? Would you make the humans in your painting small, as Cole has? Please briefly explain both of your choices.

5. Pretend that you are none other than [William H. MacDowell](#) and you are finally unwrapping your portrait by none other than the famous painter Thomas Eakins. Please write a letter to Mr. Eakins telling him how you feel about the job he did. If you aren't pleased, please tell him what to change. If you are pleased, tell him what you like. (And it's okay to be a little of both.)

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