Shaping America | Selected Works from the Permanent Collection of American Art

The Gallery Experience
March 22, 2013 – March 24, 2018

The familiar adage, “A picture is worth a thousand words,” applies to the artworks in this exhibition. They reflect the cultural values of their day and shape our understanding of our nation, its history, and ourselves as a people.

The Brigham Young University Museum of Art has a fine collection of American art made possible by the gifts of many donors over decades. It includes representative examples from many, though not all, periods in American art history. As arranged in this exhibition, works from the collection tell a fascinating story of cross-cultural pollination in the creation of America.

Out of the 80+ works in this exhibition, over half have never been shown in past American shows. Furthermore, many works have never been exhibited at the MOA, several are new acquisitions, and a number of works have been conserved specifically for this exhibition.

We encourage you to think about the multicultural currents and exchanges that play out in the artworks and how the images determine the way we view our nation. Ideas and influences from around the globe have come together to shape our America.

Victor Habbick (1830–1919), Pocahontas and John Smith (detail), Oil on canvas, 1870. Gift of Dixon Limited (Dean Larson)
Globalization and the New Nation

Today “globalization” most often refers to international exchanges in the expansion of a worldwide economy. It also applies to the interchange of cultural ideas and products. Global exchanges are not new, however. They were vital to the young United States in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when American artists employed European painting styles and subjects. Their works encouraged Euro-Americans to see themselves as extensions of their mother countries.

ART AND ARTISTS

Although the artist for this piece is unknown, the work clearly indicates a distinctive blending of European and native traditions. In the 1700s, Spanish and Flemish artists brought European painting styles and Catholic subjects to New Spain, where indigenous styles and motifs melded with the European to create Spanish colonial art.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This Mexican colonial painting dates from the 1700s when the American Southwest was part of Mexico. Images like this are still found in Southwest missions and churches today. In Catholic representations, archangels can be either male or female. Spanish and Flemish works generally depict Michael in a plumed helmet, knee-high boots, and armor—often holding the palm of victory, as in this piece. The Latin inscription, Quis uis deus, or “Who like God?” on the scroll running up the cross identifies the figure as Michael.

**LOOK MORE CLOSELY**

- Michael, no longer an earthbound mortal subject to terrestrial law, is shown against a heavenly backdrop of billowing clouds and radiant sky. Notice Michael’s demeanor and facial expression. One would expect this warrior angel’s attitude and body language to be more forceful and aggressive, considering the final battle that will be waged before the coming of Christ. Yet, her hand rests gently on a palm branch, a symbol of triumph that was once used to herald Christ as King when he entered into Jerusalem a few days before his death. Her radiant white face (a European, rather than indigenous influence) is gentle and inviting, adorned with an almost imperceptible smile. Perhaps this work reveals Michael after the battle has been won—victorious and at peace.

- A multitude of Western artists have depicted Michael fulfilling his role of leading the armies of God against the forces of evil. As a true warrior, Michael—whether male or female—is usually portrayed wearing armor. The symbol of the sun and moon on the pectorals of the armor, however, is a distinctly Spanish Colonial phenomenon. In Christian iconography, the sun and moon are often symbols of Christ and Mary, respectively. In this work, they also show the distinctive influence of the indigenous North and Central American cultures, who frequently used these astronomical bodies in their visual representations.

- Throughout the history of Christian art, certain colors have taken on specific meanings. For example, red is traditionally symbolic of blood, passion, aggression, and war. Blue suggests peace and tranquility, whereas green is a symbol of growth, renewal, and rebirth. How have these colors been employed in this painting, and to what effect?
One of the primary roles of museums throughout the world is the care and preservation of their collections. At the BYU Museum of Art, the decision to restore a work of art is primarily exhibition driven. As a curator generates his/her object checklist for a particular future exhibition, the museum registrar examines each of the works individually to ensure that it is stable and ready to be exhibited in its current condition. If conservation is needed, the MOA collections manager sends the work to one of several conservation labs in the U.S., depending on their area of specialization—whether it be the conservation of paintings, sculpture, paper, or photographs.

The degree of restoration may range from a simple surface cleaning to major damage repair, and the cost reflects the amount of work required—possibly days or weeks of continuous labor. Conservators generally prefer treating and altering the original work as minimally as possible. Conservators also fastidiously document every facet of the intervention.

Saint Michael the Archangel needed significant conservation before it could be shown in the Shaping America exhibition. Restoration was performed at the Western Center for the Conservation of Fine Art in Denver. At some time in its distant past, before the Museum of Art acquired Saint Michael, the painting had been glued to a plywood panel from which the canvas had to be painstakingly removed. There were several bulges that needed repair, caused by canvas extensions attached to the original canvas. Significant paint loss and abrasions had also occurred over the years that required filling, and the old, discolored varnish and surface grime were removed. After several weeks of careful treatment, the work was wrapped and placed in its travel frame for return shipment.
Benjamin West was a renowned American historical scene painter and close friend of Benjamin Franklin, whose portrait he painted. Born in Pennsylvania, West studied in Italy, moved to England in 1763, and never again returned to America. He was the second president of the Royal Academy of Arts in London and painted religious works for King George III.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

In contrast to the Catholic Spanish colonial image of Saint Michael the Archangel with its mystical symbols, this eighteenth-century Protestant painting portrays a historical narrative from the New Testament using only the traditional symbol of the dove. Here, John the Baptist, bearer of the Aaronic Priesthood through the lineage of his parents, Zacharias and Elisabeth, who was chosen to prepare the way for the Messiah and make ready the people to receive Him, has the honor of baptizing the Savior, himself.

**LOOK MORE CLOSERLY**

★ Early American artists frequently viewed their new nation as heir to the great artistic traditions of Western culture, particularly those of classical Greek and Roman antiquity. Likewise, Benjamin West was greatly inspired by the forms of ancient classicism. In this painting, John the Baptist’s traditional contrapposto stance and chiseled physique bears a striking resemblance to the ancient sculptural renderings of Greek and Roman gods—the Apollo Belvedere, for example. 

★ In what ways has West deviated from the traditional representation of this event? For example, whereas Christ is generally the primary focal point in artistic depictions of his baptism, here John the Baptist is the central figure with Christ partially concealed in shadow as he emerges from the River Jordan. Also unconventional is the more theatrical setting for the event. We usually envision Christ’s baptism as taking place in the light of day against the relatively lush, serene backdrop of the Jordan River. Here, however, the high contrasts of light and dark dramatically accentuate the main figures and contribute to the holy fire that brilliantly illuminates the scene.

★ Which of all of the figures in this composition has the largest stature? Although Christ is not the central figure of the painting, his disproportionate size serves to make him more prominent. This artistic device is known as hierarchical scale and was used anciently in Mesopotamian and Egyptian art—as well as in the art of the Middle Ages—to identify the most important character in the scene.

★ The dove, symbol of the Holy Ghost, was the pre-appointed sign by which John would identify the Savior. How does John react to this marvelous epiphany? What are the responses of the other witnesses?

**ART AND ARTISTS**

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ART AND ARTISTS
A British painter who immigrated to America, Shaw was enthralled with its scenery and became one of the earliest American landscape painters. Traveling in South Carolina, he painted scenes on the Reedy River, a site of Revolutionary War skirmishes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
The American Indians in this skirmish were aiding the British forces at the onset of the Revolutionary War. The American Indian in the foreground is holding a musket rather than indigenous weaponry, indicative of this temporary alliance.

As we contemplate this scene, we have mixed emotions. On one hand, we cheer the American troops in the background as they fight for their freedom. And yet, we feel deep compassion for these Native Americans as they witness the end of an era—their way of life slowly being eradicated.

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LOOK MORE CLOSELY
- Shaw captures this tragic scene for the viewer from almost the same vantage point as the American Indians in the foreground. Interestingly, the artist shows only the faces of the two people that are dead: the faces of those living are turned away from us toward the battleground. One Indian perches with a rifle, while another, perhaps mortally wounded, reclines among the deceased with upraised arm grasping at something unseen.

- It is a scene of death and carnage, with a bloody scalp in the foreground reminding us that those on both sides of the conflict have suffered greatly. Notice the symbolism of the dead branches of the tree reaching out from the rich foliage and pointing toward the battle in the distance. Beyond the branches, a patch of light radiates from the smoke-filled sky. What might this symbolize? Heaven accepting the spirits of the dead? A poetic foreshadowing of victory for the Patriots?

- Although a distinctly American subject, the work is clearly influenced by European artistic traditions. Characteristically, the trees on either side frame the composition, and a waterway runs through the center of the work. Compare the similarities between Shaw’s composition and the seventeenth-century landscape by Poussin on the left.
Notice that Chief Powhatan, Pocahontas’ father, is shown with mulberry red paint on his face. This facial paint was commonly used among American Indians in association with war and aggression.

Nehlig painted this early seventeenth-century historical event after the time of the Civil War. This was a period of national pride in American history, and many artists turned to histori
cal events for their subjects. Notice, however, that the artist did not strive for perfect historical accuracy. Chief Powhatan is wearing a nineteenth-century Plains Indian hide shirt rather than the style of dress that would have been worn by the Indians of Virginia over 250 years before. Perhaps this points to the white man’s tendency to generalize American Indians rather than to recognize their distinctive geographic and tribal differences.

Furthermore, Pocahontas is looking at the warrior with a deadly weapon points towards the chief. At the same time, the luminous white smoke behind Powhatan—the emblem of the story—catches our attention. Furthermore, Pocahontas is looking at the warrior with the weapon, who in turn is focused on John Smith. We, as viewers, are caught up in the complexities of shifting allegiances that occur in the drama, so it is difficult to allow our eyes to rest on one single point of action.

ART AND ARTISTS
Nehlig, a Frenchman, received his art training in Paris. While living in the United States, he painted the mythic seventeenth-century American episode of the Indian maiden Pocahontas saving the life of the Englishman John Smith. Here, Nehlig fulfilled two aesthetic mandates of the nineteenth-century Parisian art academies—first, the representation of historic subject matter; second, the focus on the human figure rendered with anatomical precision. The traditional Native American dress also allowed Nehlig to demonstrate his considerable talent in depicting the magnificence of the human physique.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
The life of Pocahontas, an American Indian woman in Virginia in the early seventeenth century, has been romanticized in art, literature, and Hollywood movies. Her most legendary feat was that of saving Englishman John Smith from death at the time of his captivity by her father, Chief Powhatan. According to the story, when the warrior raised his club to execute Smith, Pocahontas placed her head over Smith’s to absorb the blow, instead. In 1613, she was captured by the English, ultimately converted to Christianity, and adopted the name Rebecca. Soon thereafter she married tobacco farmer Thomas Rolfe and became somewhat of a celebrity. Two first ladies, Edith Wilson and Nancy Reagan, are her descendants.

A note of national pride entered American art in the nineteenth century. The American Art Union was founded in 1844 to encourage the production and reception of a national art with American subjects. Similarly, the United States government sought to adorn the Capitol rotunda with paintings of American themes. Although American scenery and American history were deemed particularly worthy subjects, even the most nationalistic art still relied on European techniques and styles.
ART AND ARTISTS
Although raised in the East, Remington’s love of outdoor adventure contributed to his enthusiasm for cowboys and soldiers. In his late teens and early twenties, he saw and sketched the authentic West for himself, visiting Montana and New Mexico. He honed his artistic skills at the Art Students League of New York and became a highly successful illustrator, painter, and sculptor of the Old West whose images have endured for decades.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
Remington blends heroism, mythology, and romance in the figure of the American mountain man, whose heyday was in the 1830s. It is estimated that over 3,000 mountain men—both Anglo and Indian—roamed the rugged wilderness of the West in search of adventure and a livelihood of fur trading. These trappers were also instrumental in guiding pioneers to new territories and teaching them to survive the dangers en route. Knowing American Indian traditions and language, mountain men also occasionally served as interpreters for securing treaties.

The life of a mountain man was dangerous, with constant threats from hostile tribes, wild animals, and illness. Those who could weather the harsh lifestyle learned remarkable survival skills and developed keen senses. The romanticized, Hollywood version depicts these men as loners dressed in buckskin with a coonskin cap and bushy facial hair. Actually, many trappers traveled in companies for the sake of safety and companionship.

This Mountain Man I intend to be as one of those old Iroquois trappers who followed the fur companies in the Rocky Mountains in the 30’s and 40’ties.

—FREDERIC REMINGTON

LOOK MORE CLOSELY

★ One of the distinctive characteristics of sculpture, as opposed to the two-dimensional arts, is its ability to be viewed in the round. As you examine this work from multiple angles, you can gain new insights with each unique vantage point.

★ Notice the manner of dress and the various provisions the mountain man carries on his journey—the fringe of his clothing, his paxts, axe, traps, rifle, etc. What does this tell you about the nature of his daily life in the wilds of the untamed West? Might you have enjoyed such a life?

★ How does the artist portray the danger of this mountain man’s descent? Notice that he’s leaning back at an extreme angle with the horse almost vertical, holding on tightly both in front and back, cinching his knees into the horse’s sides, his feet pushing hard on the stirrups. Can you imagine any other scenario for horse and rider that would inspire such theatricality and arouse such nail-biting drama?
ART AND ARTISTS
Jay Hambidge, a Canadian born American artist, was fascinated with ancient classical architecture. His study of the geometry and proportions of ancient Greek structures such as the Parthenon led him to develop a theory to explain the perfection of classical forms. He studied at the Art Students League in New York and became a pupil of William Merritt Chase, the renowned American impressionist painter.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
Hambidge’s dramatic illustration for Nicolay’s 1906 book portrays Lincoln’s assassination, which took place during a performance at Ford’s Theater on April 14, 1865. Famous stage actor John Wilkes Booth, a Southern sympathizer, shot Lincoln in the back of the head at point-blank range. As Booth landed on the stage in his attempt to flee the scene, his riding spur became entangled in the flag that decorated the President’s box, causing him to break his leg. Booth escaped on horseback but was apprehended and shot twelve days later on a farm in rural Virginia.

The horror of this event in our history is indelibly imprinted on the psyches of all Americans. The shocked look on the man’s face in the lower right of this painting mirrors our sentiments even now. As with the assassination of Lincoln, certain national events seem to transcend time—like Kennedy being shot, man walking on the moon, or 9/11.

Jay Hambidge (1867–1924)
The Assassination of Lincoln (Booth Vaulted to the Stage), Oil on canvas, c. 1905
Purchase/gift of Mahonri M. Young Estate

[Booth] opened the box door, put the pistol to the President’s head, and fired…. Then, rushing forward, Booth placed his hand on the railing of the box and vaulted to the stage…. He would have got safely away, had not his spur caught in the flag that draped the front of the box.

—HELEN NICOLAY, THE BOYS’ LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN, 1906

LOOK MORE CLOSELY

- It seems unusual that the artist would choose to convey such an important historical event in monochromatic tones. Perhaps influenced by the development of photography, Hambidge was attempting to capture a single moment in time, just as the flash of a camera would.
- With the awkward perspective and almost claustrophobic spacing of the composition, Hambidge conveys the actual confined space of Ford’s Theater. Due to this intimate setting, it was possible for Booth to jump from one of the boxes onto the stage. The tall Corinthian columns also add to the awkwardness of the vantage point from which we witness the scene.
- Instead of showing Booth in the act of shooting the President—seemingly the dramatic climax of this historical narrative—the artist chose to depict the moment immediately afterward with Booth still floating in the air before reaching the stage. How does the artist reflect the emotional chaos of the scene?
- The bizarre perspective and compressed space makes the identification of a focal point somewhat challenging: is it the American flag, the man above it, the shocked individual in the lower right, or the shadowy figure of Booth making his escape?
In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Aesthetic movement flourished in America. It aimed to refine taste and promote beauty, spawing the City Beautiful movement, its public parks and monuments, and a rise in consumerism. Reformers believed that beautiful surroundings would elevate the masses. They emphasized beauty in home decoration and named women as the nation’s cultural guardians.

Reformers also embraced the British emphasis on handicrafts as a way to bring joy to the laborer through the making of beautiful objects. The traditional boundaries between art and craft blurred, and objects crafted by American Indians were sought after and collected by Euro-Americans.

In the most literal sense, in 19th-century bourgeois culture, beauty was defined as feminine.

—BAILEY VAN HOOK, ANGELS OF ART: WOMEN AND ART IN AMERICAN SOCIETY, 1876-1914, 1996

ART AND ARTISTS
This painting of his sister, Carrie, provided Weir with an opportunity for artistic experimentation. Having been initially repulsed by the “new” impressionistic style of this era, Weir came to fully embrace most of its tenets to become a leading American impressionist painter. As he gradually departed from his traditional academic training, Weir developed his own brand of impressionism—often a more tonalist blend of blurred lines and muted shades rather than the dazzling colors of French impressionists such as Renoir.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
Paintings of idealized women appeared everywhere in American art at the turn of the twentieth century. Most Euro-American painters of the era had been trained as figure painters in Europe and cultivated the French emphasis on the female form. Moreover, as culture became synonymous with privileged tastes and refinement, the role of cultural guardian was assigned to women.

The Aesthetic Era was characterized by a focus on beauty and simple elegance—a championing of “art for art’s sake.” Influences from the Orient prevailed, especially Japanese art (japonisme). The age also witnessed a rise in consumerism and a “city beautiful” movement inspired by the notion that attractive surroundings would create more refined citizens.

I went across the river the other day to see an exhibition of the work of a new school which call themselves “Impressionists. I never in my life saw more horrible things.

—JULIAN ALDEN WEIR IN FRANCE, TO HIS PARENTS IN NEW YORK, APRIL 1877

The connection between a fertility goddess (Flora) and a woman wearing a modest white gown is ironic. White, of course, is traditionally a color of holiness, chastity, and purity, not of fertility and abundance. Many American impressionists, such as James McNeill Whistler, explored the possibilities of using various shades of white, experimenting with its infinite variety and inherent reflective qualities.

This work reveals a rich blend of transatlantic exchanges, from the classical mythology reference to the influence of both European academic painting and impressionism. Furthermore, the European silver vessel on the table was a birthday gift for Anna, Julian’s fiancé. The work itself also crossed the Atlantic in 1883 to be exhibited at the Paris salon, where it was then viewed by honeymooners (Julian and Anna).
This Mountain Man I intend to be as one of those old Iroquois trappers who followed the fur companies in the Rocky Mountains in the 30’s and 40’s.

—FREDERIC REMINGTON

The term “grand manner” paintings originally referred to large historical paintings but was later applied to portraits as well. In such portraiture, sitters are rendered life-size in an elegant setting that conveys their elite status. Sargent used certain standard features for his grand manner portraits. For example, the portrait of Mrs. Goetz is remarkably similar to that of Ellen Peabody Endicott, a 1901 portrait also by Sargent. Note the parallels in clothing, pose, setting, contrasts of light and shadow, and the simple tonal range of limited colors.

Note how brilliantly Sargent has captured the various textures throughout the painting, such as Mrs. Goetz’s translucent shawl and the sparkling jewels of her buckle and ring. Although Sargent’s academic training in Paris would have required careful initial drawings and copious under painting, Sargent favored the alla prima (literally, “at first attempt”) approach also employed by Diego Velazquez 250 years earlier. Sargent’s fluid, spontaneous brush technique was the result of working directly on the canvas without preliminary sketching.

Mrs. Edward Goetz  
Oil on canvas, 1901  
Purchased with funds provided by Jack R. and Mary Lois Wheatley

ART AND ARTISTS

Sargent was born to American upper-class expatriate parents in Europe and did not visit the United States until he was twenty-one. For twenty years, beginning in the 1880s, he painted portraits of the elite on both sides of the Atlantic. His magical brush captured details with few strokes and enhanced the loveliness of his women sitters in an era when women’s beauty was thought to purify and elevate the world around them.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This work is one of the finest paintings in the MOA permanent collection. Created one month before the death of Mrs. Goetz, her elegant attire and regal pose attest to the ease and refinement of her privileged life. Mrs. Goetz was an amateur pianist and composer who held a musical salon at her Hyde Park Terrace home in London. The fact that she could afford to have the renowned Sargent paint her portrait confirms her affluent status.
Millet was an American painter, sculptor, and writer who died on April 15th, 1912 on the ill-fated Titanic. Millet painted this mural from his English home in the Cotswolds. Models included his neighbors, Mrs. Lawrence Alma-Tadema, and the American actress Mary Anderson.

A French-trained artist, Millet also had studios in Rome and Venice. After the Civil War, American artists, including some from Utah, traveled in droves to study in Munich, Paris, and throughout Italy. Paris soon became the art capital of the Western world, and few artists could expect to succeed without the credential of a European education. The work they produced became a synthesis of their academic training and the inspiration of impressionism.

Millet’s painting embraces the classical ideals of America’s founders, who saw the nation as continuing the democratic principles of ancient Greece and Rome. The pageant represented here—an ancient festival honoring the Greek goddess of agriculture, Demeter—can be considered as a parade of America’s ancient forbearers to whom homage is paid as the creators of Western civilization and the originators of democracy.

Look More Closely

- Notice the manner of dress—the women adorned in white like their female counterparts in the Aesthetic era. The laurel wreaths on their heads are symbols of victory and glory often associated with the Olympic games. The musical instrument being played for the procession is an aulos, a double-reed instrument used in association with the cult of Dionysus, god of fertility and celebration, out of which the theatrical arts arose.

- Unlike the parades of today, with the pomp of colorful floats and celebratory spectacle, Millet faced the challenge of providing visual interest while representing a relatively sedate procession of primarily tall, statuesque women dressed in white. He accomplished this, partially, by his humorous depiction of one of the women bending down to fix her sandal in the midst of the stately pageant.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This is a finished sketch for a large mural in the Bank of Pittsburgh. In the Aesthetic era, allegorical figures of women in white adorned the walls of state capitals, court houses, hotels, and banks.

America has been fascinated with the styles and ideals of ancient Greece since its inception as a nation. The Greek Revival style had emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, espoused by Thomas Jefferson and greatly influencing the style of architecture in the nation’s capital. Ancient Greek architecture engenders a sense of authority, power, and permanence, a fitting style for the government buildings of Washington, D.C. Note that even the frame surrounding Millet’s painting simulates the Corinthian order on the temple façades of ancient Greek and Roman architecture.

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Note that even the frame surrounding Millet’s painting simulates the Corinthian order on the temple façades of ancient Greek and Roman architecture.
Mr. Knight selects what is beautiful and pretty in the peasant, and avoids all that is hideous and unsightly.

—THEODORE CHILD, HARPER'S MONTHLY MAGAZINE, SEPTEMBER, 1889

ART AND ARTISTS

This sentimental painting of two young French peasant girls displays Knight’s early 1860s Parisian training in depicting the human form. He came home to enlist in the Union army, and in 1871 he went back to France. He never returned to America, although his works were collected by the wealthy on both sides of the Atlantic. The American wealthy class that emerged from the Civil War emulated European tastes, and artists felt compelled to learn French styles to prove that Americans could compete culturally with their European counterparts. Knight mastered the French academic style and won several accolades in the French salons for his peasant paintings. Premier chagrin was accepted into the 1892 Salon and was honored as one of the few works to be illustrated in the catalog.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Paris Salon was the official art exhibition of the Académie des beaux-arts and one of the most important artistic competitions, drawing about 23,000 people per day. The conservative judges, who favored realistic renderings of historical and mythological subjects, could make or break an artist’s reputation. The artists whose works were not deemed proficient enough for the Paris Salon—such as impressionist painters Edouard Manet, James McNeill Whistler, and Claude Monet—exhibited instead in Salon des Refusés, where they could display works contrary to the strict rules of the Paris Salon.

Sentimental peasants like those of Premier chagrin were among the most popular subjects in the French salons at this time—pure, innocent beauty untainted by industrialization or urbanization. What do you find visually compelling about this depiction of peasant life?

Ironically, although the work appears to maintain strict observance to the Salon’s rigid dictates—light brushstrokes and intricate detail, for example—Knight actually employs a painterly background more stylistically aligned with the new impressionist movement so vigorously rejected by the Salon.

How do you think the title of this piece reflects the implied narrative? How does the work capture the heartbeat of first love and the emotional bonds of friendship?
ART AND ARTISTS
After studying at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, Couse lived in France for many years. His two large portrayals of American Indians at the Paris Salon were well received because of the exotic subjects and Couse’s academic skill in rendering human anatomy. Couse’s depictions of Native Americans actually began with his early paintings of the Chippewa Indians near his home in Saginaw, Michigan. In 1902, Couse began summering in Taos, New Mexico, where he captured the life and culture of the Taos Indians, a Pueblo tribe in New Mexico.

Couse was elected as first president of the Taos Society of Artists in 1912. Almost all of the Taos school artists were already mature and well-trained in the academic style when they arrived in the area. Many were given free railroad passage if they would, in turn, donate some of their Taos paintings to the railroad companies to place in train stations—a propaganda tool to encourage people to travel to the West.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
The painters who settled in Taos, New Mexico at the turn of the nineteenth century were drawn to the stunning landscapes and local cultures. These artists saw the Southwest landscape and people as fresh subject matter for a distinctly American art genre. They considered the Pueblo culture to be a people who lived their lives in harmony with nature—a striking contrast to the fast-paced, competitive industrial culture beginning to dominate the rest of the country. The Taos artists recognized that they were capturing a way of life that was gradually being replaced by cities, towns, and fences. Today the influence of the Taos art colony is present in the flourishing art trade there and in Santa Fe, both popular tourist attractions.

The development of the Taos School coincided with a widespread favor in the United States for collecting Native American art. Wealthy collectors created “Indian corners” in their homes to flaunt their purchases. In an age of consumerism and the blurring of boundaries between art and craft, the Indian craze served the needs of both Euro-American collectors and native artisans. Tribal peoples gained income with their handcrafted native arts, and white purchasers could use the pieces they bought to create conspicuous displays of their ability to consume.

EANGER IRVING COUSE (1866-1936), The Lovers, Oil on canvas, 1909, Gift of Janet Southwick

LOOK MORE CLOSELY
- Couse studied in Paris at the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts, where he became familiar with impressionistic techniques. What impressionistic stylistic characteristics are apparent in his Lovers?
- Couse employed Pueblo Indians for models but also depicted clothing from several indigenous tribes, thus helping to create a universal Indian mystique that added to the popularity of Native American communities as tourist attractions. The work can be read as a wedding portrait, but posing for such a painting was foreign to Native American culture.
- How does the artist convey the romantic overtones of the courting couple? Do you think artistic depictions of romance have universal characteristics, or do they vary according to cultural norms and rituals?
Across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, immigration, global trade, cross-cultural exchanges, and transnational negotiations of every kind have grown at an increasingly rapid pace. International business and the world-wide web have accelerated the process of multicultural networking that has contributed to the globalization of America.

American art now embodies a new cultural hybridity. Euro-Americans, indigenous peoples, African, Hispanic, and Asian Americans have multiplied along with transnational exchanges. Art from the late twentieth century to the present demonstrates an explosive proliferation of multicultural influences. We are pleased to exhibit examples of this phenomenon from our collection.
***We are received in blankets, and we leave in blankets. The work in these rooms is inspired by the stories of those beginnings and endings, and the life in between. . . . I am interested in human stories and rituals implicit in everyday objects. Currently I am exploring the history of wool blankets. I find myself attracted to the blanket's two- and three-dimensional qualities: On a wall, a blanket functions as a tapestry, but on a body it functions as a robe and living art object. Blankets also serve a utilitarian function. As I fold and stack blankets, they begin to form columns that have references to linen closets, architectural braces, memorials (The Trajan Column), sculpture (Brancusi, for one), the great totem poles of the Northwest, and the conifer trees around which I grew up.***

**ART AND ARTISTS**

Watt’s mother is Native American from the Seneca Nation and her father was raised on a Wyoming ranch. She calls herself “half Indian, half cowboy.” Her tower recalls totem poles from the American Northwest and the association of Native Americans with blankets. It also reminds us of linen closets and our personal connections with blankets. Several blankets in this tower were donated by members of our local community, with attached tags recording their personal “blanket stories.” Via sound panels in the gallery, you can hear these stories told by their donors as you approach the work.

When Marie Watt visited the MOA in March 2013 to install her blanket tower in this exhibition, she also organized a two-day sewing circle. Members of the community as well as BYU students worked hand in hand with her on a sewing project that will be exhibited in Santa Fe in 2015. She welcomed the variety of stitching styles, seeing them as personal signatures of each individual participant.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Watt’s art is closely linked to her Native American roots. She explains: “In Native American communities, blankets are given away to honor people for being witnesses to important life events—births and comings-of-age, graduations and marriages, namings and honorings. For this reason, it is considered as great a privilege to give a blanket away as it is to receive one.”

Since Watt has moved to Brooklyn from Portland, Oregon, she now finds another cultural association with her blanket towers—that of skyscrapers, so overwhelmingly abundant in her new location.

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**Marie Watt**

**Blanket Stories: Ancestor, Baron Woolen Mill, and Hill People, (detail)**

Wool blankets and cedar base, 2013

Purchased with funds provided by Curtis Atkisson; and David and Bianca Lisonbee in memory of Rita Palmieri Elkin

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"Marie Watt feels that her blanket towers are almost organic, since people’s stories remain alive in the piece. As you view her installation, the description on the right above—in Watt’s own words—will help you appreciate her personal vision and the meaning and transcendence of her work."
With this open composition and closely cropped picture plane, Dixon invites us to participate in the ceremony. Rather than being mere spectators, we can vicariously take part in the dance. How might this personalize the work for us, as viewers?

Dixon’s simplified forms and bright colors create a magical ambiance as the Taos Indians engage in their ritual dance. Although a purely representational depiction, to what extent might the flat planes of color and streamlined shapes indicate a stylistic movement toward abstraction?

The music of the round dance centers on the beating of various sized drums. To what extent do the vibrant colors, rhythmic patterns of the decorative costumes, and alternation of light and dark values conjure up a sense of the pounding, infectious beats of the percussion instruments?

The flickering light from an unseen fire adds to the mystery of the nocturnal ceremony and seems to reveal American Indians as timeless entities who have transcended the changing world around them. Why do you think Dixon chose to portray them in this manner? As Americans, claiming varying ancestries, how do we maintain and honor the enduring influences of our own cultural heritage?
This blocky, simplified style of painting was embraced by many American artists during the Depression Era, who turned away from European modernism and academic art toward social realism. The lack of distinctive, individualized features also points to the universality of every man’s plight during this chapter in world history.

Here we see the alienation of urban society and disillusionment with the American dream felt by many citizens in the 1930s. Forgotten Man presents a poignant view of a hopeless, lonely transient sitting on the curb of a busy street in some unidentified city. How has Dixon employed the visual elements to convey this man’s desperate circumstances?

Notice the use of light and dark values. With the exception of one leg and the crown of his head, the forgotten man is largely cast in shadow. How does this serve to reinforce his sense of dejection and despair?

The muted earth tones, characteristic of social realism, suggest the insipid attitude of this marginalized, unemployed citizen. The dull blue color of the forgotten man’s coat further emphasizes his “blue” disposition, also projected by his hunched shoulders, limp hands, and defeated posture.

The diagonal trajectory of the curb extends pessimistically downward, and the fact that the forgotten man sits in the gutter underscores his hopelessness. How might the disembodied feet moving behind him point to his utter isolation?

To what extent does this vision of the forgotten man resonate with viewers today? Do such scenes still occur amidst our twenty-first-century urban landscapes?

ART AND ARTISTS

In 1932, as Maynard Dixon and his photographer wife, Dorothea Lange, drove from Taos to their home in San Francisco, they were struck by the numbers of destitute, homeless people walking along the roadides looking for work. This experience helped them realize that they had a vital role to play in visually communicating the human tragedy of the Great Depression. Both Dixon and Lange employed their art to document and protest this dismal economic crisis and the devastating impact it had on individual citizens.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the years immediately preceding the creation of Dixon’s Forgotten Man, the world-wide Great Depression had forced American unemployment to 25%, financially crippling over 13 million people. More than 25,000 families and 200,000 youth wandered throughout the country seeking food, clothing, shelter, and jobs. Dixon had previously produced mainly Western paintings, but the Great Depression inspired the “social realism” phase of his artistic output.

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ART AND ARTISTS

Henri was the most influential modern American artist at the turn of the nineteenth century. Leader of the Ashcan School, Henri largely shunned the tenets of American impressionism, employed darker, muted tones, and captured the "real," non-idealized aspects of New York City life—prostitutes, boxers, bars, etc. Although not a formally organized movement, Ashcan School artists subscribed to the notion of representing the gritty truths about the poorer neighborhoods and underbelly of urban life. Other Ashcan School painters include William Glackens, Everett Shinn, John Sloan, and George Luks.

Henri, like most artists of his generation, spent time abroad absorbing the techniques and spirit of the great masters. Among these historical giants, Henri especially admired the paintings of Diego Velazquez and Franz Hals, who inspired the dusky tonalities and loose brushwork seen in many of his works.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Robert Henri was a passionate theater goer at the time he asked this aspiring young actress to pose for him. Henri painted this portrait of actress Fay Bainter just as she was beginning to make a name for herself on Broadway. Bainter subsequently enjoyed a successful career in the movies, often playing the role of mother or faithful wife. She was also the first woman to receive Academy Award nominations for best actress and best supporting actress in the same year—1938.
LOOK MORE CLOSELY

Minerva Teichert’s Immigrants to New York City (Jewish Refugees) reinforces the idealized vision of America as embracing immigrants and offering liberty and justice for all. Teichert allows us to experience—from the same vantage point as these Jewish immigrants—the New York skyline and the Statue of Liberty welcoming us into New York Harbor. After their long, arduous journey, what do Teichert reveal about how these individuals are responding to the prospect of their new life? Do their feelings appear to vary according to age and circumstance?

The people on the ship have undoubtedly made great sacrifices in leaving behind their homes, worldly possessions, and perhaps even family members. If you were compelled to leave your home, never to return, what items might you take? What objects would you consider so valuable that you simply could not leave them behind?

How do the following elements in the work contribute to the vision Teichert is attempting to portray: the misty city skyline, the Statue of Liberty, the patched handbag in the lower right-hand corner, a mother protectively watching over her children, the girl with her hands raised in excitement or praise, a musical instrument accompanying the man on the far left, an older man bent with age looking out over the guard rail? What might this scene tell us about the astounding diversity of people that came to America at this time?

Although the work is painted primarily in cool colors, notice the splashes of red—Teichert’s favorite color—that highlight and energize the piece.

ART AND ARTISTS
Fused with the fluid, loose spontaneity of Teichert’s brush is her keen ability to tell the story of her times and heritage. Teichert studied with Robert Henri at the Art Students League of New York and dedicated her subsequent career—as she raised five children on a ranch in Cokeville, Wyoming—to the portrayal of women, the depiction of the pioneer movement and Mormon story, and the lively representation of American Indians. Her over 400 mural paintings reveal an uncanny knack for transplanting the spirit of both pageants and cinema onto a two-dimensional surface.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
Teichert shows the New York skyline and Statue of Liberty welcoming Jewish immigrants to New York Harbor. Between 1933 and 1939, 90,000 German-Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler’s regime immigrated to the United States. The largest number came in 1938, the year this work was painted.

Ironically, although this painting perpetuates the idea of America as a land of refuge, at this time eighty percent of Americans opposed increasing immigration quotas to receive more refugees. Despite the vast numbers of immigrants arriving from war-torn Europe in the late 1930s, those leaving America paradoxically outnumbered those entering—for the first time in America’s history.

“I have to paint. It’s a disease.”

Minerva Teichert (1888-1976)
Immigrants to New York City (Jewish Refugees)
Oil on canvas, 1938
Brigham Young University Museum of Art
LOOK MORE CLOSELY

ART AND ARTISTS
Contemporary Utah artist Valerie Atkisson has exhibited her family-history-based art in many venues, including art galleries in New York City. In this hanging, cascading sculpture, each triangular piece of rice paper has a name, beginning with Atkisson’s own name at the top and continuing through 2,000 years of her ancestry. She describes her motivation for the creation of this piece:

“I feel like the heart of my work is the global family and the value of each life. . . . the family history work has been the metaphor [through] which I communicate that.”

—VALERIE ATKISSON

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
As a child, Valerie Atkisson’s family frequently moved from place to place. When asked where she was from, she replied “everywhere.” Her perceived lack of true identity and sense of roots were the inspiration for this piece, and indeed, much of her art. “What began as an interest in my ancestors has turned into an insatiable desire to know as much about them as possible . . . . [My work] is a continuation of them, not just that my flesh and blood are a part of them, but the remembrance is also an extension of their life.”

—VALERIE ATKISSON

• Generally, family genealogies are shown visually on paper in a fairly nondescript, lackluster fashion with a variety of names on a graph leading from one generation to the next. Atkisson’s piece, however, is a sculptural representation of her heritage. Consider the literal and symbolic components of the work:
  – The piece is vertical, almost organic, like a tree with its roots flowing up from the ground to the very zenith, which is the artist herself.
  – The individual names are written on more than 4,000 pieces of rice paper and go back almost two millennia. Atkisson has represented each individual as a triangle, perhaps indicating mother, father, and child.
  – The lighting of the work casts shadows, just as each generation transmits its influence upon the next through both genetics and deeds.
  – This piece effectively summarizes the deeper, symbolic meaning of the Shaping America exhibition as it applies to each one of us. We’ve witnessed the myriad influences on America as a nation, and now we have the opportunity to examine the way in which transnational and multi-generational influences have shaped us as individuals. Exploring this work encourages us to personalize the exhibition—by considering the powers that have molded us into unique people with our own distinct cultural lineages.