

REGIONALIST PAINTING AND AMERICAN STUDIES

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Regionalism in American painting brings to mind immediately the period of the 1930's when the Middlewesterners John Steuart Curry, Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton enjoyed great reputation as the painters of American art. Curry, the Kansan; Benton, the Missourian; and Wood, the Iowan, each wandered off to New York, to Paris, to the great world of art, but each came home again to Kansas City, Cedar Rapids and Madison, Wisconsin. Only one of the three, Benton, is still living. At the recent dedication of his "Independence and the Opening of the West" in the Truman Library the artist declared it was his last big work, for scaffold painting takes too great a toll on a man now 72.

Upon this occasion he enjoyed the acclaim of those gathered, but as a shrewdly intelligent, even intellectual man, he may have reflected that Wood and Curry, both dead for close to twenty years now, are slipping into obscurity except in the region of the United States which they celebrated. Collectors, whether institutional or private, who have the means and the interests to be a part of the great world have gone on to other painters. There are those who will say so much the worse for them, but I am content not to dwell on that issue but to speculate instead about art in our culture and the uses of art in cultural studies.

I will explain that I am not convinced by those who hold with the conspiracy theory of art history, whether it be a Thomas Craven of yesterday or a John Canaday of today. I doubt that fashions in art are determined solely by dealers and critics. Reputations in art do rise, fall, and sometimes rise again. Nevertheless, art does express at least some aspect of a culture, so that it must be something more than a great hoax fostered by the unscrupulous upon the unintelligent. I shall simply accept here the fact that in 1961 attention is fastened on abstract-expressionists, action, New York school painters, call them what you will, rather than those painters of the 1930's who were dubbed the "regionalists."

What significance is to be attached to the acceptance of the regionalists in the 1930's and their neglect today? At the risk of seeming contradictory I will say that the past acceptance was in part the result of publicity. While their chief journalist, Thomas Craven, denounced the attention paid to the abstract painters of his day, he wrote strenuously about the importance of his

regionalist painters. For Craven, Thomas Hart Benton was in supreme position. Today Craven's book Modern Art is a curious document for the student of our culture.

He assumed that those artists who painted anecdotes of life in the Middle West came the closest to painting the reality of American life. Paris in art and Paris in general was corruption; the heartland of America was integrity --in some respects a reversal of Sinclair Lewis's Main Street as barbarism, Paris as civilization. New York was more Paris than heartland; New York was corrupted by internationalism. There was a strong dash of the isolationism of the 1930's in this. It even went beyond to a nativist tinge in Craven when he predicted how American a painter could be by how American, that is, how Anglo-Saxon, was his family name. Here were the shades of Samuel F. B. Morse and Thomas Bailey Aldrich who viewed the imminent dangers to America offered by immigration.

Another assumption of Craven which was basic in the thought of the 1930's was that the farmer, the small town person, the little man, is reality. This was no time to call him a boob, as he was dubbed by Mencken in the 1920's. The man of little education, threatened by poverty, was reality. What is more, the real was seen as the good. This was the day when the apartment-dweller with college degrees made a point of liking folk songs, even singing them to the discomfort of his guests.

We are just beginning to explore the cultural and intellectual taste of the 1930's, but it does appear that there was a strong current running through those years of fleeing the large, the complex, the urban, and returning to the safety of the small, the simple, the rural. This was not the rush to suburbia of the 1950's for the abundant life. It was a retreat to that which had been rejected as old-fashioned and limiting in the 1920's. Life was not luxurious and sophisticated after all. Keeping alive was enough. One was to be grateful for boiled potatoes and turnips.

Regionalism in painting celebrated the folksy ways of the Midwest farm and small town. It was a reaction against the abstract painting which figured prominently in our cultural capital, New York City, since the period of World War I. The story is well-known that Benton himself had been influenced by abstractionists like Stanton MacDonald-Wright before he decided to return to see, as Craven would put it, "the local essence." Regionalism was a reaction against such experimentation in painterly expression.

It was, in part, a return also to certain themes popular in the nineteenth century, the period of the ascendancy of bourgeois taste in art. As the middle class on the Continent, in England, and in the United States assumed power through politics, business, and the professions, they also became a group which turned to buying paintings. They did not prize style in art, for the sense of style is acquired slowly through much exposure. The eighteenth-century rococo was the last international aristocratic school in which style was held to be more important than content, how one painted more significant

than what one painted. The subject of a painting assumed great importance because it was the subject which furnished the new patrons with something familiar, a story. They could recognize what a painting was about without being concerned with what the painting was. Literary elements in painting were featured, and landscape and genre painting flourished. The romantic celebration of nature and the sentimental celebration of anecdotes from common life were prized subjects.

However, our landscape painters in the nineteenth century and our regionalists in the twentieth differed decidedly in the natural scenes they chose as subjects. The nineteenth-century man painted the landscape he saw on a holiday, whether it be an excursion in the Catskills as enjoyed by Thomas Cole, or an expedition to the Rocky Mountains as undertaken by Albert Bierstadt. It could be the natural wonder of Niagara painted by Frederick Church or the pastoral, golden valleys of the early George Inness. There were the lovely seascapes of a calm summer day of John F. Kensett. The painter tended either to enjoy the soft, domesticated beauty that Emerson's generation still saw as being painted best of all by Claude Lorrain, or the fierce, wild nature that still bore in the nineteenth century the eighteenth-century name of the sublime.

The twentieth-century regionalist made a point of choosing the ordinary, even the ugly, to emphasize that here was reality, here was life as it really was. He did not go to the mountains of the West or to the sea or to the pastoral valleys of the East, but instead he returned to paint America--the Middlewestern farm. It is also typical of the regionalists that they never got very far away from man, the inhabitant of nature. The painter of the 1930's did not subscribe to the convention of nineteenth-century romanticism in which man was but a tiny foreground spectator of the vast panorama of the scene quite untouched by human hand.

When the regionalist did paint a rural scene where man's role was de-emphasized, the result was a conventional landscape which the nineteenth-century taste would not have found unpleasant, although the scene selected by the painter might have been questioned. The regionalists were primarily genre painters, however. Painting the American scene for them was painting the people of the Midwestern farm and village in their daily activities. The city was a possible subject too, but this was no city of the soft, impressionistic palette of a Childe Hassam. Instead it was a product of the Industrial Revolution which left ugliness and squalor where it had erupted. These became the painters' tall tales of the city.

Just as the nineteenth-century American landscapist did not record on canvas the ugly cut-over land deplored by the European traveler, so too his contemporary, the genre painter, saw what he was painting in a golden light. Time does soften, and we, looking back upon scenes painted a hundred years ago, will find them picturesque in ways unanticipated by the artist. But the genre painting of the last century did stress the "more smiling aspects of

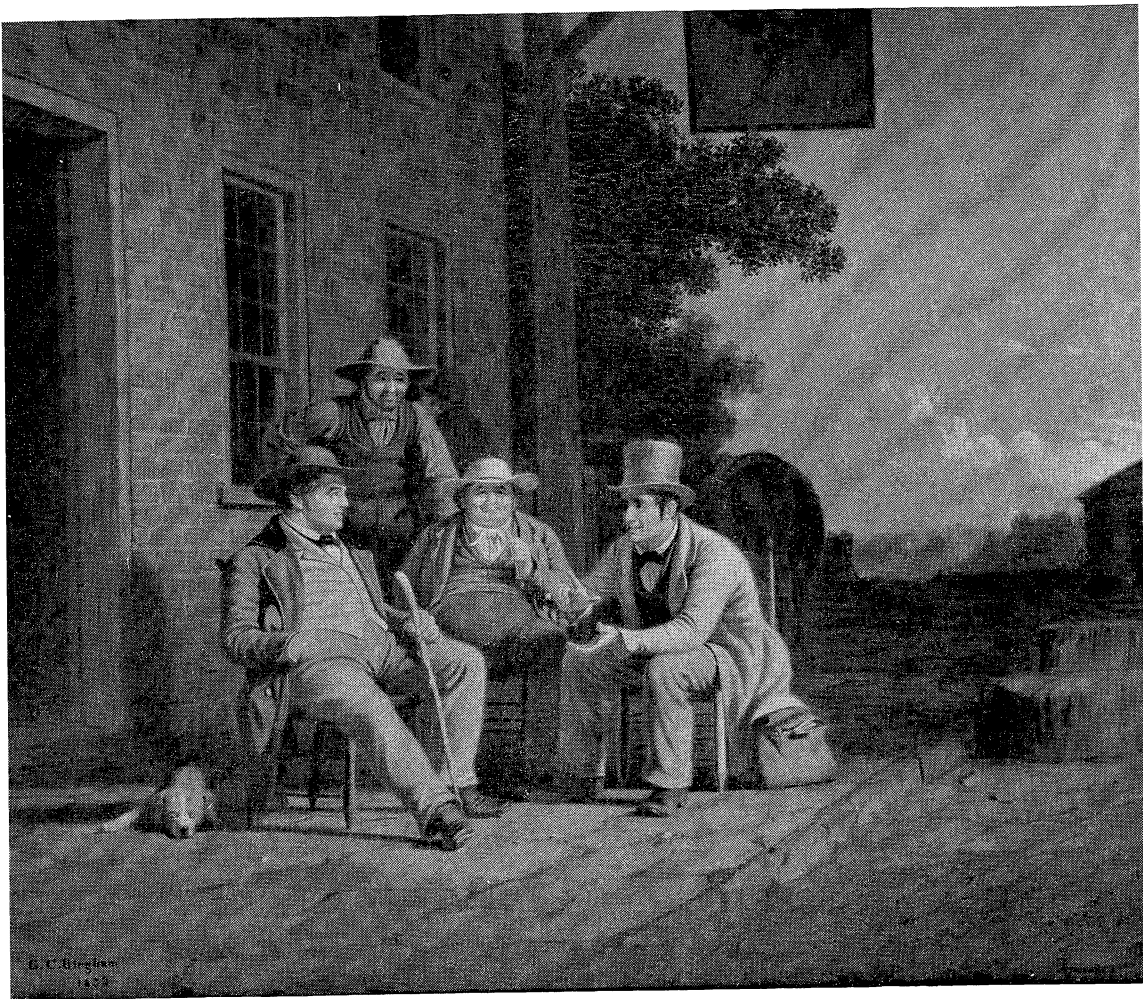


Figure One: "Canvassing for a Vote" by George Caleb Bingham. Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum (Nelson Fund), Kansas City, Mo.

life, which are the more American," William Dean Howell's goal for the novelist. It could be two races dwelling blissfully together on William Sidney Mount's boat of eel spearkers at Setauket, or the carefree boys snapping the whip in a New England mountain school yard as in Winslow Homer. For our purposes we are better served by a genre painting of a Mid-Western scene (although ante-bellum Missouri was at least as much southern as Mid-Western). Here in George Caleb Bingham's "Canvassing for a Vote" we have the genial scene of politicking painted in a period and locale when politicking could be anything but genial. (See Figure One.)

The twentieth-century regionalist delighted in the anecdotal painting as much as the nineteenth-century genre painter did or as a cover-artist for

the Saturday Evening Post does today. John Steuart Curry in the late 1920's was singling out some of the stories told in every Kansas family. One such was the tornado story. In his "Tornado over Kansas" he emphasized the story elements, with the details spelling out the anecdote. (See Figure Two.) The people are typical rather than individualized.

Many times the regionalist stressed the story aspect to the point of caricature. He exaggerated to the degree that he became an expressionist rather than a realist in the presentation of his subject. Benton has been quoted recently as saying, "We believed in painting reality and we believed reality is what one experiences at the moment." In 1935 he replied to Diego Rivera's manifesto for the Marxian concept of the superior art being that which expresses "the basic law of struggle in human life" by asserting, "if American

Figure Two: "Tornado over Kansas" by John Steuart Curry. Hackley Art Gallery, Muskegon, Mich.



Art elects to follow, on the other hand, the simple call of life, to see its functions as reflective, it must proceed without the help of a directing belief. . . . In the particular conditions of our society and environment lie the things which will modify our inherited practices and make our forms alive and original."¹

Reality, the particular visual conditions of the environment, was seen through the eyes of the artist, however. This was not photographic reality by any means. Here were painters whose vision had been influenced by the tenets of expressionism, that is, that distortion is a legitimate means to communicate the personal vision of the artist to his viewer.

Caricature was strong in Grant Wood's work. His landscapes, which incorporated trees from Flemish primitive painting, were highly contrived. He simplified the way a cartoonist does, so that the story is learned quickly and the effect upon the beholder is comparable to that gained through a caricature. There is a streak of humor in his work which is refreshing today when humor is so seldom found in our painting. The ladies with the teacups in his "Daughters of the American Revolution" are well-remembered even though they are remembered as types. His best known work--and perhaps his most thought of work today--is one in which he breaks out of the depiction of types to which genre is prone. The "American Gothic" has anecdotal detail to set the scene for the two faces which are supposed to typify the gaunt, spare Midwestern farm couple, but the faces have a quality of individuality which makes this one of his better works. (See Figure Three.)

Thomas Hart Benton, like his Southern contemporaries who wrote instead of painted, has a penchant for the tall tale. From this taste for the narrative of exaggeration he constructed his anecdotal painting. When he painted the mural the "Arts of the West," his West was the West of the movies, our uniquely twentieth-century medium for the tall tale. (See Figure Four.) He chose the West of the folk-tale, true or pseudo, that was so prized in the 1930's. This was the West of the gambler, dance-hall girl, bronco-buster, and gunman. I am sure that Benton took delight in thumbing his nose at those who might have expected more genteel arts to be depicted. Milton W. Brown has called Benton's work "the most completely plastic illustration of Menckanism."² I think that on the other hand he glories in these mythologies. These are not boobs; to him these are Americans. What Benton is lampooning is anyone who makes claim to gentility.

The world the regionalists celebrated then was the painter's reality. It was experience seen through the eyes of art. Each artist had technical goals he set for himself. The professional world of art intervenes. Curry attempted to master the baroque world of the rounded form, strong, swirling composition, atmosphere through darks and lights. Wood used the linear deline-

Figure Three (opposite): "American Gothic" by Grant Wood. Courtesy of Art Institute of Chicago (Friends of American Art Coll.)

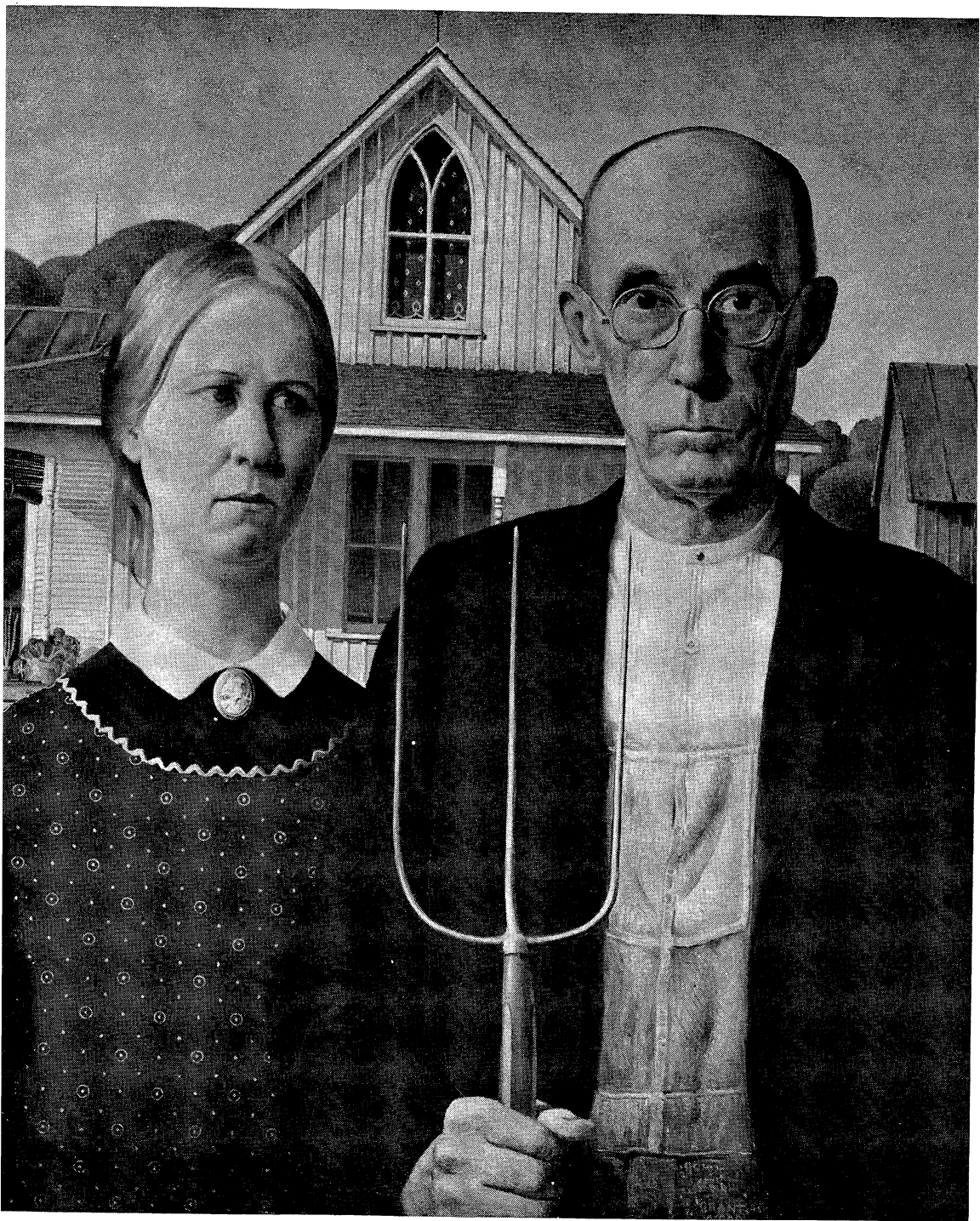




Figure Four: "Arts of the West" by Thomas Hart Benton. New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, Conn.

ation of the Flemish primitives. Benton disregarded the aestheticians who insisted that murals should be flat in perspective to maintain the quality of architecture, and proceeded to build his work from approaches he considers to be in the Renaissance tradition. He eschewed both the Grecian allegories and the enlarged easel paintings, our previous solutions to painting a mural. His murals are made up of one scene overlapping another, but each separated from the other, in the way a montage of photographs is achieved for a Sunday supplement, as Edgar Richardson has pointed out.³

No matter the size of painting, mural or easel, or the subject, a Benton is easily recognized. It could be a boom town, or haying in July, or even a floral still life. All have an explosive energy with no object depicted being at rest. There is a nervous angularity. Bodies are akimbo, masses of color are arranged in repeated diagonals that oppose still other diagonals to form angles out of the silhouettes of darks against lights. There is never the long, fluid line even in his circus billboard Persephones. I have, rightly or wrongly, come to feel that this Bentonesque composition is highly expressive of the speech and movement of his region, Bible-belt America. This is an expressionism which, emphasizing drama and recognizing no subtleties, is better suited for mural painting which is seen from a distance than for easel painting.

I have dwelled on this matter because I want to emphasize that for all the attention given to the subjects of regionalist painting by the journalists of art, that technical matters did intervene. To repeat, "reality" was an individual painter's way of seeing reality. In the heyday of Thomas Craven, however, the subject received the limelight.

Now I want to venture the guess that it was just this approach which may have encouraged some to think of art as providing usable material for cultural studies. The great push forward for American Studies programs came in the late 1940's when the regionalists were still relatively influential. Certainly art as an area of study having a bearing on cultural studies was a concept in the American Studies program when it was begun in 1946 at the University of Minnesota. Minnesota's program was unusual in that it made a place for art history courses; Minnesota pioneered in using visual and audio materials in its American humanities classes.

The correlation seemed so evident. One could perhaps show on a screen a slide of a painting such as Alexandre Houge's "Drought-Stricken Area." (See Figure Five.) At the same time one could play a recording of Woody Guthrie's "Dust Bowl Ballads." Now if one were really a frustrated producer, one could, I suppose, play the record softly as background music to one's reading aloud from The Grapes of Wrath.

One could use the painting as illustration while discussing the drought in American culture in the 1930's, but this is not talking about the painting as a painting. Most of my colleagues among the graduate students in the program in the late 1940's thought this presented no problem. The art historians in whose courses we sat felt otherwise. I agreed with the latter. I believed that art history courses should not become the one exception to the Minnesota idea that interdepartmental majors should take departmental courses straight. My fellow students tended to see all matters other than the subject of a painting as irrelevant to cultural studies.

To use the painting as illustration of subject only is to use it the way one might use a Department of Agriculture report. If the painting has anything unique to contribute to cultural analysis, it will be only to the extent that it is considered as a painting. This, of course, is what students of our culture are less well prepared to do. In a cultural problem where products of the artistic imagination may lead us into needed new approaches, students may be prepared to hold forth on the structure or lack of it in Huckleberry Finn, but the composition of a George Caleb Bingham is something else again. But why shouldn't this be true? We spend years learning to read, but how many hours have we spent looking at paintings?

Yet this is an age in which the visual arts figure largely. Someone has said that today the layman is much more apt to know Botticelli's "Venus" than Vergil's Aeneid. Jacques Barzun feels that this is only one more threat against his house of intellect, but could it not be that we have expected the

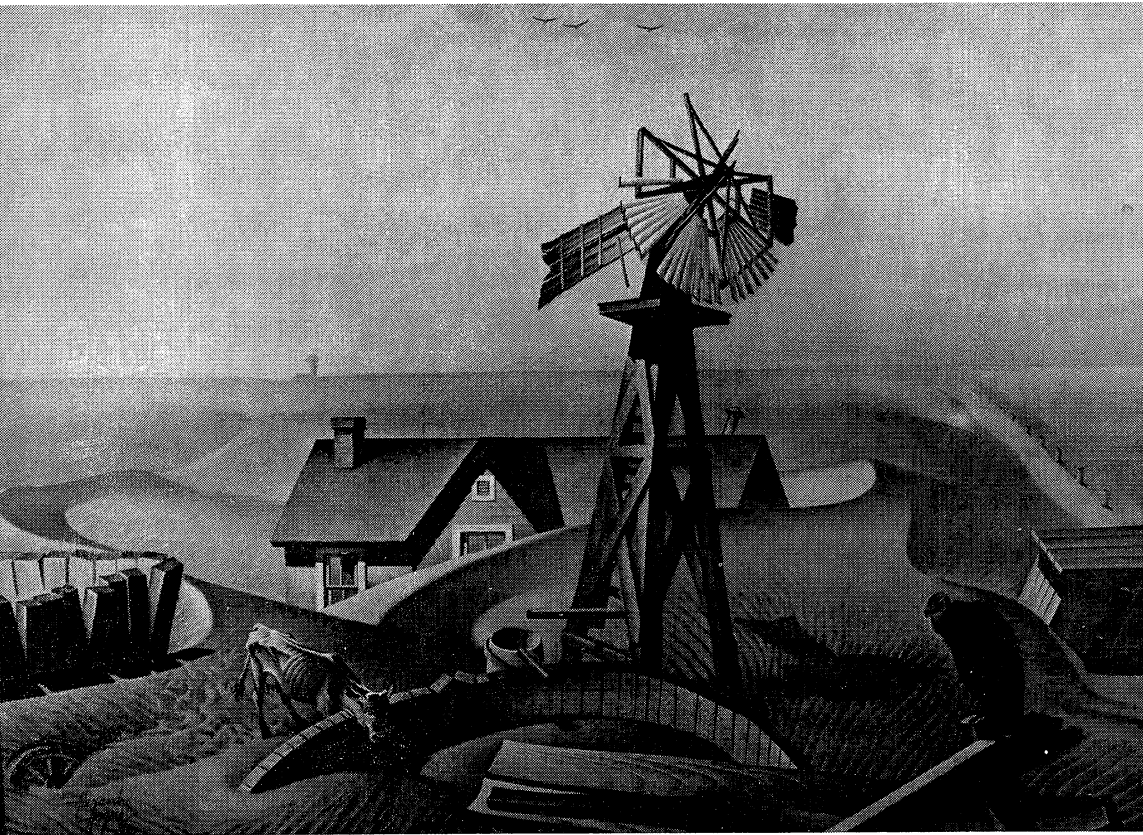


Figure Five: "Drought-Stricken Area" by Alexandre Hogue. Dallas Museum of Fine Arts.

sun to rise in the west? Perhaps Suzanne Langer comes much closer to the nature of art as expression when she says:

Visual forms--lines, colors, proportions, etc.--are just as capable of articulation, i. e., of complex combinations, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language. . . . But symbolism furnished by our purely sensory appreciation of form is a non-discursive symbolism, peculiarly well suited to the expression of ideas that defy linguistic "projection."⁴

To restate, an idea can be composed of too many closely related parts for it to be expressed in words.

Am I then forced to the conclusion that one cannot talk about art? I think not. The conclusion is rather that words cannot take the place of the painting. The person who writes about art struggles or should struggle with lan-

guage, to try to avoid the high-flown, the far-fetched; but he is the specialist, like any other, whose contribution to cultural studies is to warn against what his special knowledge cannot support in attempted generalizations and to suggest new approaches to the non-specialist.

Now to return to the question of regional painting. I said in the beginning that I did not accept the view of the history of twentieth-century art as being the chronicle of the conspiracy of taste-makers against the true and the beautiful. I am not content with the answer that the reason why the regionalist of the 1930's has given place to what is known as "modern art" is because the art dealer and critic have corrupted the viewer, that they have sold him a bill of goods. But that is neither here nor there. As a student of cultural history I am not concerned with this. I observe merely that there are people who buy such work, who go out of their way to see it in museums. I know people who will decline to buy a representational painting where they will elect to buy a non-representational work.

But I shall venture more than this. I think that the declining interest in the regionalists of the 1930's is something more than the result of changing fashions in taste. I sense that the paintings of Curry, Wood and Benton do not satisfy the emotional needs of today. Ours is an age of romanticism in art. We celebrate the mysterious, the strange, the powerful. This generation of artists wants to achieve monumentality. Now, as in past periods, monumentality may be confused with bigness. Our artists are like the nineteenth-century history painters who wanted to paint profound stories on mammoth canvases. "Mahoning" by Franz Kline is 80 inches by 100 inches. (See Figure Six.) Now it is difficult to see a painting this large as a whole in any museum. We move, keep shifting our eyes, become lost in the painting. To see it as a whole was not intended, perhaps because that would be limiting, focusing experience which the artist apparently did not see as his "reality."

These explosive compositions on huge canvases are another example of the age-old attempt of the artist to heighten experience. The heightening of experience in this violent age must often take on violent proportions to be effective. May not many contemporary paintings be a reaffirmation of contemporary experience that nothing remains settled, controlled; that something new, but only half-formulated, keeps crowding in on one's consciousness, demanding to be recognized?

In the painting of Jackson Pollock, that ogre for those of more academic taste in painting, could there not be an aesthetic resolvment of the experience of the complex? A complex experience is one without sharp delineations of the emotions perhaps, but patterns can be found in what at first seems without design. Or in a Mark Rothko there is the exhibition of the sheer power of abstracting raw experience to simply color and mass. For one moment one can be at rest and lost in reverie.

I think the better contemporary painting makes the regionalist painting of the 1930's pale in its lack of emotional intensity. A Kansas tornado scene,



Figure Six: "Mahoning" by Franz Kline. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art (Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art Collection), New York.

even, does not seem a probing at life at a time when an Edward Albee can give us a Zoo Story or Willem de Kooning can give us this painting entitled "Woman." (See Figure Seven.) This question of what constitutes emotional impact for our period can also be approached through looking at two works done in different periods by the same artist. In Mark Tobey's 1936 painting, "Broadway," his interest in white line is evident, yet his subject is still Broadway. (See Figure Eight.) Interest in white line is present in a painting of thirteen years later, "Universal Field," but now we have the non-representational Mark Tobey. (See Figure Nine.) I feel that we today, after look-

Figure Seven (opposite): "Woman, I" by William de Kooning. Museum of Modern Art, New York.





Figure Eight (opposite): "Broadway" by Mark Tobey. Collection Metropolitan Museum of Art (Arthur H. Hearn, 1942), New York.

ing sufficiently at both, would go away with a more vivid memory of the non-representational work.

This is not to say that a twentieth-century painting must be non-representational to express to our satisfaction what it feels like to live in our world today. Edward Hopper was born before Curry, Wood and Benton, and his work is most certainly representational. One might even say that his paintings have a story to tell, but what really happens is that the painting calls forth an emotional response which we may use as a springboard for a story. This story is our elaboration and it is superfluous.

In his "Early Sunday Morning" the title gives a literary assistance inasmuch as the loneliness we sense is depicted as the moment in the week when a city street is most deserted. (See Figure Ten.) Whether it be a house on Pamet River or someone alone in a hotel room it is loneliness, a classic

Figure Nine: "Universal Field" by Mark Tobey. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.





Figure Ten: "Early Sunday Morning" by Edward Hopper. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

American theme, seen pictorially through objects bathed in a piercing light. Hopper has distilled the anecdotal through his craftsmanship as a painter to extract the pictorially significant.

Most of us with any love at all for life do not want to believe that artists have exploited for all time the representation of objects. Here, Thomas Craven, wrong-headed as he often was, was right in seeing the desirability of painting the concrete object. Painting, like writing, may stray too far from the concrete so that what results is the aridity of the allegorical. What we call monumental another generation may declare bombastic. But this is not the problem here.

Regional painting of the 1930's will have an historical importance and we may well always enjoy Benton's murals and Wood's faces. It is not likely that we shall return to such regionalism in the future--even if our artists return to representation (which I think is not inevitable). I believe we shall not have the anecdotal regionalism of the 1930's because we do not carry about with us visual images of what constitutes Southern, Western, Middle-western, Eastern regional cultures--if such really exist in the first place. Oh, we know a Rocky Mountain when we see one or Spanish moss hanging from a cypress tree or a New England rocky shore, but do such scenes con-

stitute a regional art? Today is not such pictorial representation what Edgar Richardson calls the art of the "artists' colony"⁵ These are the stage properties of a region.

Now only eight per cent of our population makes its living from the farm. In another generation the memory and metaphor of the rural will have left most of our people. At the same time the distinctive visual qualities of our cities and towns are becoming harder to establish. Osage brush or a corn-stalk or a Great Plain or a rolling Mississippi River hill may still be painted and we may take pleasure in them still--I should like to think this--but I think we will be wiser and not place upon the painters of such the burden that Thomas Craven put upon the regionalists, the burden of somehow being particularly and uniquely American. As for the possibility that the artists of one area will paint differently from those in another, I doubt this too. We are too mobile, too much in touch for particular visions to be formulated according to geographical boundaries.

I wish to make one more prediction to those who are interested in cultural studies. In a period in which the pictorial image has taken on an enormous importance, we cannot advocate ignoring it in those studies which must, since they are centered on an analysis of our culture, be inter-disciplinary. To date little has been published which suggests relevant and profitable approaches. That little is largely the work of several art historians, but most historians of American art are involved in the documentation of objects (a still essential task). Among those who write on American art without necessarily contributing to scholarship are, unfortunately, those given to sweeping generalizations that students of American culture cannot accept. That these students have themselves done so little in relating art to our culture reflects the academic orientation of most of them toward literary or historical studies. It seems clear that considering only the subject of a painting is not enough. Just how we shall approach painting as a cultural object we have yet to determine, but view paintings as paintings we must.

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Footnotes:

¹ Rivera and Benton, "Art and Social Struggle: a Discussion," The University Review. A Journal of the University of Kansas City, II (Winter, 1935), 66, 77.

² American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression (Princeton, N. J., 1955), 194.

³ Painting in America: The Story of 450 Years (New York, c. 1956), 398.

⁴ Philosophy in a New Key (New York, 1948), 75.

⁵ Painting in America, 367-8.