

Craven and Cahill, were vociferously against Modernism – Kenyon Cox, Royal Cortissoz and John Alexander – though some painters, such as Benton, who had been a Modernist for a number of years before the First World War, also turned chauvinistically against it. According to Benton:

Modern art became, especially in its American derivations, a simple smearing and pouring of materials, good for nothing but to release neurotic tensions. Here, finally, it became like a bowel movement or a vomiting smell.

Benton went on to diagnose a form of what he called ‘aesthetic colonialism’, identifying Modernism as a form of international, un-American conspiracy:

The United States is invaded by aliens, thousands of whom constitute so many acute perils to the health of the body politic ... these movements have been promoted by types not yet fitted for the first papers in aesthetic naturalization – the makers of true Ellis Island art.

(Benton, quoted in Rose, *Readings in American Art since 1900*, pp.27, 54)

This form of racist polemic was a component of the New Deal nationalism which propelled some government art administrators into an attack on the dominance of European art in general in the USA, and which envisaged, through the Federal Art Project, a state intervention into the national culture in the cause of saving and nurturing an indigenous American art. This was conceived as being produced *by* Americans for all the American people; hence the funding aimed not only to arrest European and US Modernism, but also radically to democratize the experience and intelligibility of an ‘authentic’ art produced by Americans. The existence and influence of a small but active Modernist avant-garde – largely based in New York and patronized by an exclusive intelligentsia – was anathema to the populism of the Federal Art Project.

The tradition of ‘naturalistic’ or ‘realist’ representational art in the USA, and a corresponding ‘art-for-life’s-sake’ populism, can be traced as far back as the American Revolution; it may be seen as analogous to the political and legal egalitarianism enshrined in the US constitution. Indeed, US art up to the start of the twentieth century, and the beginnings of the large-scale and direct influence of European Modernist art following the Armory Show of 1913 in New York, was dominated by varying ‘realistic’ practices and ideas. I shall use the term ‘realist’ to denote the attempt to represent some aspect of social and historical reality, rather than to imply the use of any particular style or formal convention. Nor should the term be taken to involve only *one* political position.

The ‘vernacular’ tradition

Terms such as ‘naïve’, ‘topographical’, ‘folk’ and ‘romantic’ have been used to identify works produced within this broad American ‘realist’ tradition. Consider, for example, Edward Hicks’s *The Residence of David Twining* (1846–47), Thomas Cole’s *Schroon Mountain, Adirondacks* (1838) and Frederic Remington’s *A Dash for the Timber* (1889) (Plates 15–17). All three paintings belong to what has been called a ‘vernacular’ tradition of visual representation in the USA. ‘Vernacular’ when used in relation to art in North America refers to two parallel movements and approaches, which can be traced through to art produced in the 1930s as well as after the Second World War within the work of the Pop Artists. ‘Vernacular’ used as an adjective implies ‘native’ or ‘indigenous’, and includes the types of subject-matter found in these three paintings, i.e. agricultural settlement and farming of land that had been either uninhabited (the ‘wilderness’) or the habitat of Native Americans. This settlement by waves of European immigrants gives an indication of the connected sense of ‘vernacular’ when it’s used as a noun, i.e. ‘the native speech or dialect of a people, as opposed to a literary, learned or obsolete language’ (*Penguin English Dictionary*, 1979). Stylistic labels such as ‘naïve’, ‘topographical’ or ‘folk’, when used about art produced in the USA, carry the particular meaning that the works have been made

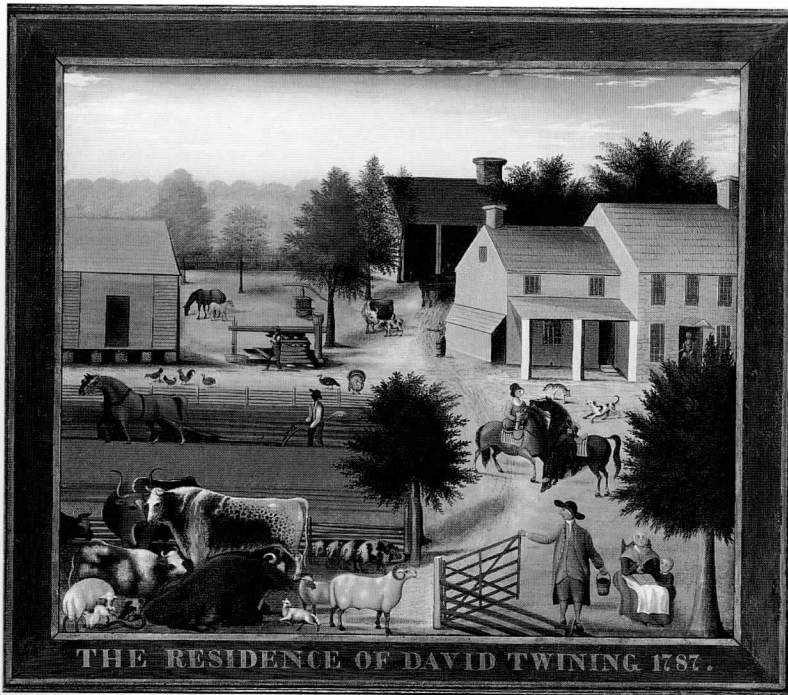


Plate 15 (attributed to) Edward Hicks, *The Residence of David Twining, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, 1846–47*, oil on canvas, 67 x 89 cm. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Virginia 33.101.1.

outside the parameters of *European* artistic culture, both in terms of the institutions for training and exhibition (the Academy system in France and Britain, for example) and the conventions developed within European art since the Renaissance. Although the USA was 'settled', this term hardly carries the sense of the struggle and exploitation that were involved in the process of colonization: the developing 'otherness' of these immigrant populations when contrasted with European culture and society quickly became a feature of historical accounts of the USA produced *both* in Europe and in the US. Cahill's defence of what 'is specifically American', outlined in his introductory essay for the New Horizons in American Art show in 1936, is one version of a celebration of 'vernacular' culture. Modernist accounts of US art downplay the value of such 'indigenous' work produced before the Second World War precisely because it is seen as synonymous with 'parochial', and as ignorant of the development and qualities of European Modernist art.



Plate 16 Thomas Cole, *Schroon Mountain, Adirondacks, 1838*, oil on canvas, 100 x 160 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection, 1335.17.



Plate 17 Frederic Remington, *A Dash for the Timber*, 1889, oil on canvas, 123 x 214 cm. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, 1961.381.

At the start of the twentieth century in the USA, the traditions of vernacular representation were re-articulated within the writings of populists such as Oliver Wendell Holmes and Walt Whitman, and in the statements of artists and writers including Robert Henri and the 'Ash Can School'. Two statements exemplify the yearnings for a rich vernacular culture at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth:

America has yet morally and artistically originated nothing. She seems singularly unaware that the models of persons, books, manners, etc., appropriate for former conditions and for European lands, are but exiles and exotics here.

(W. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, quoted in Rose, *Readings in American Art since 1900*, p.11)

If anything can be done to bring the public to a greater consciousness of the relation between art and life, of the part each person plays by exercising and developing his own personal taste and judgement and not depending on outside 'authority', it would be well.

(R. Henri, *The Art Spirit*, quoted in Doss, *Benton, Pollock and the Politics of Modernism*, p.45)

Henri's book *The Art Spirit* became influential on a group of artists including John Sloan, George Luks, Everett Shinn, William Glackens and George Bellows, active especially during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Henri urged artists to engage with the 'vernacular modernity' of urban life in the USA, and the term 'urban vernacular' may be a useful way of describing the genre dominant in the USA until the Second World War, as most artists were concentrated on the Eastern Seaboard and especially in New York. The 'outside "authority"' Henri cites as a block on 'indigenous' development referred to European civilization and the codes of representation within both European academic and Modernist art.

John Sloan's *Sixth Avenue at 30th Street (New York)* (Plate 18) is part of the 'subway' painting tradition to which Rothko contributed in the 1930s. Sloan is concerned with the representation of the life of people as part of the material fabric of urban life in New York; and he uses an obscure but nevertheless quite extensive narrative to depict social relations within the city's structures of roads, overhead railways and buildings. The woman in the foreground appears distressed and physically 'alienated' (i.e. separated) from other groups, including the two women who, in passing, appear to mock her demeanour.

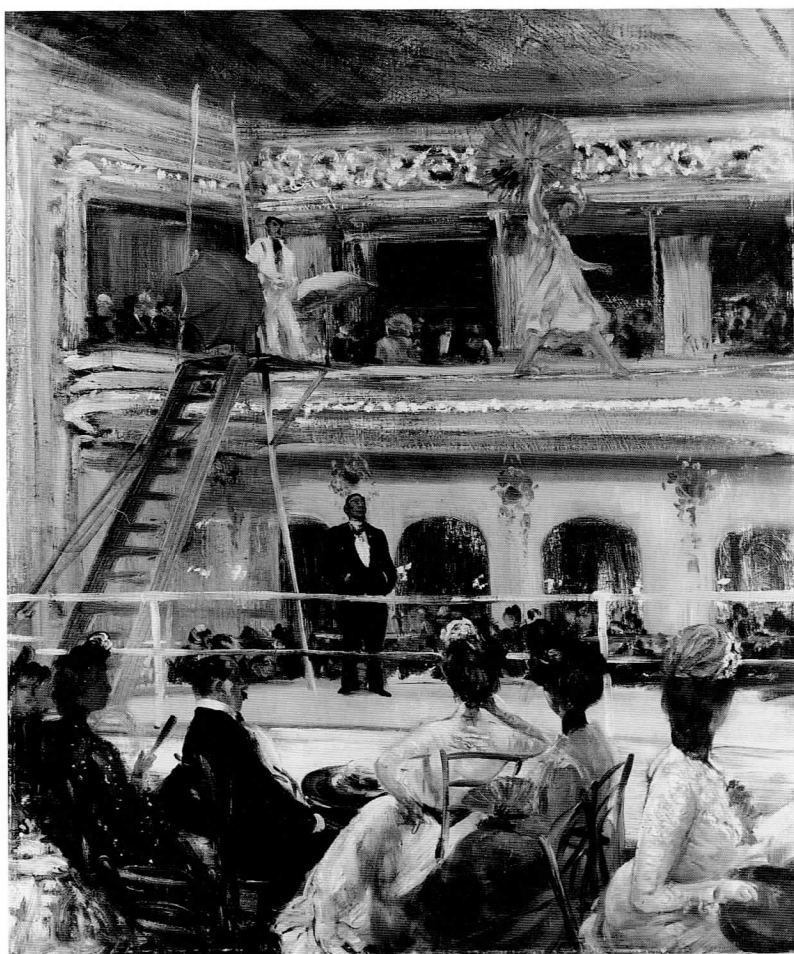


Plate 18 John Sloan, *Sixth Avenue at 30th Street (New York)*, 1907, oil on canvas, 64 x 90 cm. Collection of Mr and Mrs Meyer Potamkin, USA.



Plate 19 John Vanderlyn, *Ariadne asleep on the Island of Naxos*, 1809-14, oil on canvas, 174 x 221 cm. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; gift of Mrs Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison jr Collection).

Plate 20 William J. Glackens, *Hammerstein's Roof Garden*, c.1901, oil on canvas, 76 x 64 cm. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



William Glackens's *Hammerstein's Roof Garden* and George Bellows's *Dempsey and Firpo* (Plates 20 and 21) are examples of how US artists depicted contemporary mass leisure pursuits in the commercial capitalist culture of urban life. The tightrope act and the boxing match are both portrayed as spectacles within urban cultures founded on exchange-relations, within which the work activity of one person or group is consumed as part of the leisure activity of another group. Display, in terms of the daring circus act and the boxing 'exhibition', is mirrored by the display of the audience's dress codes, indicative of their location within other social groups present in the urban milieu. Both this choice of subject-matter and the sketchy, 'illustrational' or 'impressionistic' means of depiction suggest antipathy to the traditional values and practices of nineteenth-century academic painting in the USA (contrast Glackens's and Bellows's paintings with, for example, John Vanderlyn's *Ariadne asleep on the Island of Naxos*, Plate 19).

Such a concentration on the 'urban vernacular' also contrasts sharply with paintings produced by the 'Regionalist' artists active during the 1920s and 1930s. While Benton's work contains scenes of *both* rural and urban life (Plates 7 and 23), the artists John Curry and Grant Wood are primarily regarded as painters of an agrarian America. Consider, for example, Benton's *City Activities with Subway*, part of the *America Today* cycle, along with Curry's *Baptism in Kansas* and Wood's *American Gothic* (Plates 22-24). Benton projects an almost kaleidoscopic montage of scenes to be found within urban life, including the familiar themes of boxing and burlesque night-life, along with the perennial modern



Plate 21 George Bellows, *Dempsey and Firpo*, 1924, oil on canvas, 124 x 161 cm. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchased with funds from Gertrude V. Whitney. Photograph: Geoffrey Clements.



Plate 22 John Steuart Curry, *Baptism in Kansas*, 1928, oil on canvas, 102 x 127 cm. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Gertrude V. Whitney.



Plate 23 Thomas Hart Benton, *City Activities with Subway (America Today)*, 1930–31, distemper and egg tempera with oil glaze on gessoed linen, 236 x 341 cm. Collection, The Equitable Life Assurance Society, New York. © Thomas Hart Benton, DACS, London and VAGA, New York, 1993.

experience of travelling on the subway. The sexual seediness of modernity also preoccupies Benton, who pictures women as objects of consumption within the masculine spaces of the music-hall, the newspaper and the underground railway car. Benton's sense of the city as a site of apparent contradiction is represented in the depiction of religion and prayer, though the sign 'God is Love' appears as simply another form of advertising and display characteristic of the city as a whole. His caricatural, expressionist formal treatment emphasizes through line and compositional pattern what might be described as the pervading 'rhythm' of the network of urban economic and social relations. The quasi-mural size of the panel, which was of interest to Jackson Pollock during their relationship in the early 1930s, creates the sense of a kind of 'monumentality' characteristic of the city for Benton: cities (especially New York) were the 'building' of the USA. In contrast, Curry's and Wood's representations seem tied into a nineteenth-century 'naïve' or 'folk' tradition, equally 'vernacular' but oriented to a set of social relations and values denied by the realities of urban industrial capitalist society. The beginning of the Depression in the early 1930s exacerbates this sense of a tension between a perceived, perhaps imagined, form of communal life (the Midwest idyll) and the transformations wrought within a capitalist social order apparently brought to its knees. The Federal Art Project, as part of the New Deal, was to offer US artists the opportunity to work within a government agency that, rhetorically at least, wished to see the country's economic and political life reordered as part of a 'New Deal Democratic Revolution'.

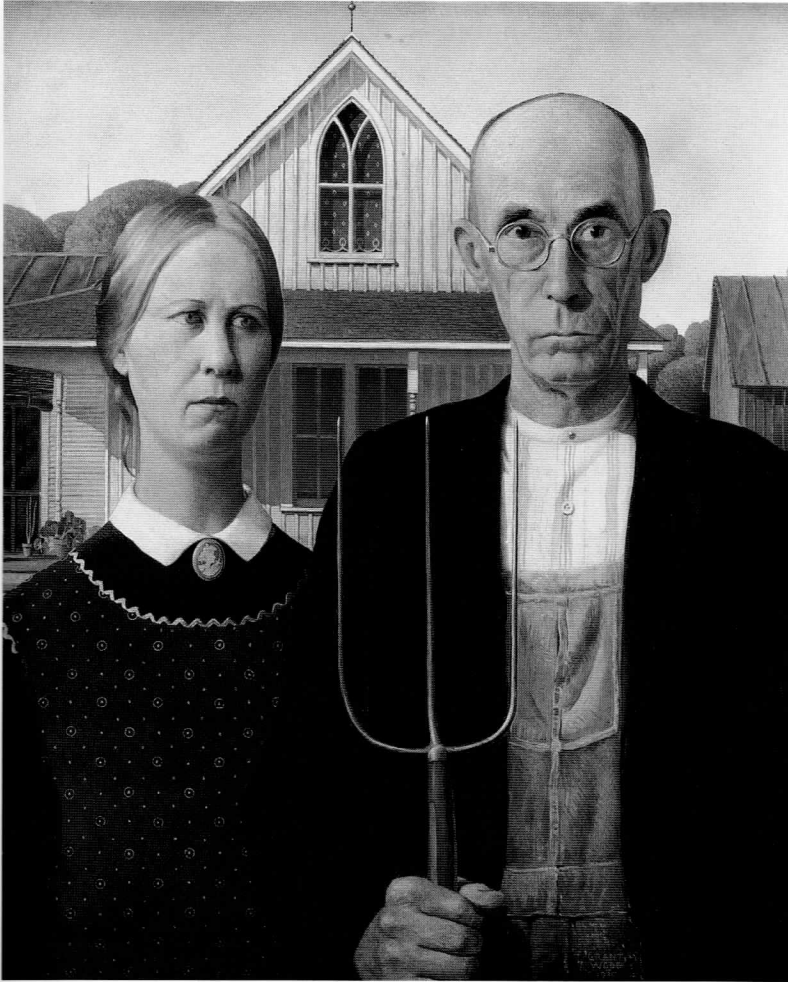


Plate 24 Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930, oil on beaver board, 76 x 63 cm. All rights reserved © 1992 The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection 1930.934. © Grant Wood, DACS, London and VAGA, New York, 1993.

New Deal 'democratic realism'

It was also in the early 1930s that the Mexican mural artists began to achieve widespread popularity and acclaim – for their work in Mexico under the revolutionary-nationalist government of Alvaro Obregon, and then in the USA. Murals by Diego Rivera, José Orozco and David Siqueiros were admired by many in the USA who had no commitment to the Mexicans' socialist and communist beliefs. Rather, the work was seen as valuable in the USA because it represented 'a paradigm of socially-conscious wallpainting'.³ American artists including George Biddle, Philip Guston and Grace and Marion Greenwood went to Mexico to paint murals, and later worked in the USA on public art programmes sponsored by the government's art projects. Ben Shahn helped Rivera on a series of ill-fated murals at the Rockefeller Center, New York, in 1933–34, including a panel entitled *Man at the Crossroads* (Plate 25). This depicted a history of the development of human technological and social development and included a portrait of Lenin, symbolic of the choice available between a continuing capitalist system of production and the possibility of a socialist revolution. John Rockefeller, the US corporate capitalist with paternalist leanings, ordered the portrait to be removed from the mural. Rivera refused and the mural series was whitewashed over. Rivera had painted other, successful mural cycles, such as the 1932–33

³ George Biddle, letter to Roosevelt in May 1933, quoted in K.A. Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America*, p.31; see also G. Berman, *The Lost Years*.