

SEEING AMERICA: John Koch's *Interlude*, 1963



Artists' works reflect the values of their times as well as their own points of view.



John Koch (1909 –1978)

Interlude, 1963

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas H. Hawks, 65.12

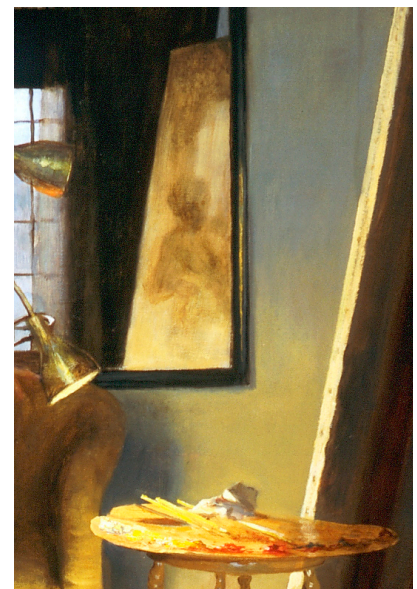
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

Courtesy Kraushaar Galleries, New York

The Art

"I am intensely concerned with the believability of my painted world. Again and again I invent objects, people, and even places that do not exist." (Seeing America, 275)

Interlude reminds the viewer that the long history of representational art—portraiture, genre painting, and still life—continues to flourish in America. The story of artist and model is an old and traditional art theme. Here artist John Koch presents a moment in his studio when both artist and model relax, the nude model to enjoy a cup of tea while the artist gazes at his partially completed work on the easel. The African American model dominates the foreground as Koch sets her dark velvety back against the white bed sheet and the vibrant red robe of the third person in the painting, a white woman who offers a cup of tea. As Koch draws the viewer deeper into the room, the curved lines of the model's body are repeated in the Queen Anne chair, glass pitcher, teapot and doorway arch. Contrast these curving lines with the diagonal lines on the painting's right side. There the receding floorboards, the long legs of the lounging artist, and the angle of the easel create the believ-



able space of the studio. The circles of light accenting the artist in the background help the muted tones on the right balance the powerful push-pull of the colors on the left.

Koch's compositional skills and ingenuity are evident in his placement of the large rectangular mirror behind the couch. What the viewer imagines at first as windows in the painting's background are revealed to be the reflection of the room behind the model. Also striking is that the three figures neither engage with the viewer, nor do they engage in eye contact with each other. The model's dramatically **foreshortened** arm reaches back to the older woman, but she does not touch the teacup; neither does the robed white woman look directly at the naked young black model.

Believable scene of art and model: yes. Every inch of the painting is "photographically" correct—the three-dimensionality of the room, the gleam of the highly polished floor, the accurate details of the gooseneck lamp and other decade-appropriate objects. The apartment/studio, and the two women (Koch's wife, Dora, and the model, Rosetta Howard) appear in many John Koch paintings. Yet he admits to "staging" his scenes—and leaves the viewer to imagine his purpose.

Is *Interlude* simply a portrayal of a relaxing break in the process of painting? Or does it also gesture toward some of the social changes of 1963, the year it was painted? Consider, for instance, the implications of the multiple reversals—the windows revealed to be reflections, and, at the center, a white woman serving a woman of color.

Glossary

foreshortening: Technique used in perspective to create an illusion of an object receding into the background.

The Artist



John Koch (1909–1978) was born in Toledo, Ohio, and spent much of his childhood in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He taught himself to paint by copying the old masters at the Louvre during the five years (1928–33) he lived in Paris. Upon his return from Europe, he moved to New York City, determined to paint the people and places he saw there.

Koch was interested in portraying the sophisticated community he lived among—painters, models, and musicians like his wife, Dora Zaslavsky, a prominent piano teacher at the Manhattan School of Music. Koch often painted himself at work in his studio in his Central Park West apartment in the El Dorado. His was a self-contained elegant world high above the busy city streets.

John Koch had a very successful career painting commissioned portraits of prominent New Yorkers. He worked very methodically: a sketch to work



Edward Sudentas
The Eldorado, Art Deco Coop

out the composition, then sketches from life, which he then enlarged and traced onto the canvas, and finally the painted version. Often the subjects were sketched separately and never met each other.

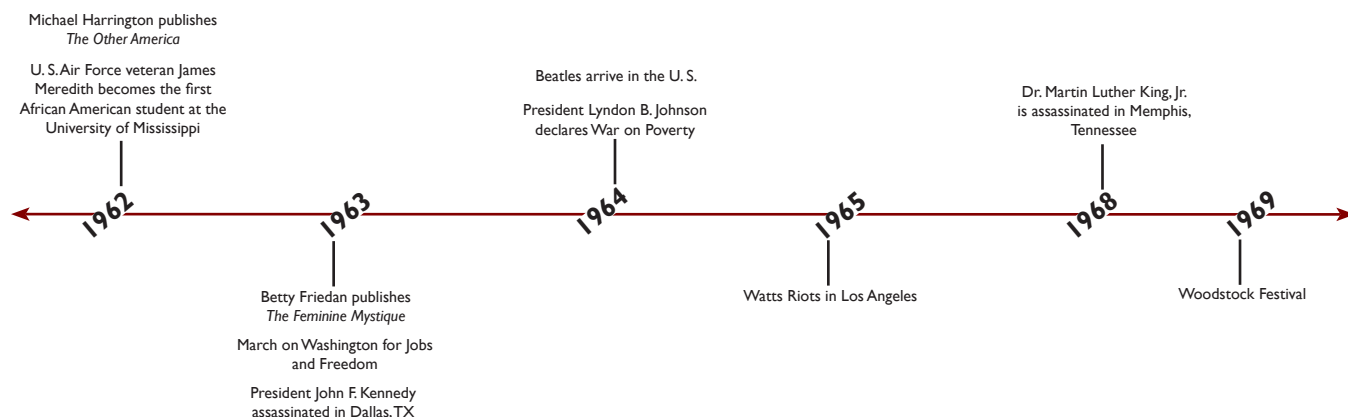
Koch recorded the objects of his life—his apartment rooms, the views outside his windows, his chairs, lamps and especially the mirrors. The apartment or other settings were like a stage set, with the props of a private, gracious, well-ordered life. He painted these objects as if they were still lifes—with textures and lustrous surfaces. He moved the objects, even the doorways, to satisfy his compositional strategy. Much of the life he portrayed never happened—except in his mind. Reality as it should be!

Koch was undeterred by abstraction’s dominance in the art world during the 1940s-1960s. An exhibition in 2001, *John Koch: Painting a New York Life*, reestablished his significance during these decades as a supremely talented artist who worked successfully in parallel with the prevailing style of his time.



John Koch (1909 – 1978)
The Lesson, 1970
 The New York Historical Society

America



In 1963, Bob Dylan released his new album, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, with music that captured the social issues and conflicts of the decade: racial tension, economic inequality, and the generation gap. In America, the post-World War II years were a time of great economic growth and personal wealth; families bought their own homes and cars; television reached almost 90 percent of American homes by 1963; credit cards and installment plans fueled consumption. Numerous educational opportunities allowed many Americans to move into the middle class.

But the widespread prosperity of postwar America did not reach everyone. In *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962), Michael Harrington wrote that nearly 20 percent of Americans lived below the poverty line. Many lived in the new urban slums; between 1945 and 1960, nearly five million African Americans had moved from the rural South to cities in the North as well as to Atlanta and Washington, DC. This large-scale migration to the cities had fueled rising expectations—and a civil rights movement. However, as middle-class whites left the city for the suburbs, urban schools, housing, and public facilities deteriorated and urban job opportunities declined.



Unknown photographer
 A young civil rights demonstrator at the
 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,
 August 28, 1963
 National Archives and Records Administration
 306-SSM-4B-61-32

1963 was a year of momentous events in America. Protests against racial discrimination led to violence Americans could watch on the television nightly news as Bull Connor used fire hoses, electric cattle prods, and police dogs against black demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote his important “Letter from Birmingham Jail” arguing that individuals have the moral duty to disobey unjust laws. In June, President John F. Kennedy proposed a Civil Rights Bill. A day later, NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers was murdered outside his home. In August, about 200,000 people heard Martin Luther King, Jr. deliver his “I Have a Dream” speech during the March on Washington. A month later, four young girls died when a bomb exploded at their Birmingham, Alabama, church on a Sunday morning. On November 23, President Kennedy was assassinated.

Cold War fears, civil rights demonstrations, and the Vietnam War led many—especially young people—to question the values of American society. Students demanded free speech and assembly; attendance at traditional churches plummeted as people sought spiritual answers in eastern religions; pop artists like Andy Warhol and rock musicians like the Beatles challenged traditional art and music standards. The generation gap widened as many young people felt something deeply amiss in the United States, while older Americans remembered the past struggles and urged more faith in the government and American political, social, and religious institutions. The pace and depth of these social, political, and economic changes was challenging for many Americans, but their impact has had a profound and lasting effect on the country.

See also Susan Dodge-Peters Daiss, “John Koch: Interlude (1963),” in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 275–77.

Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell you where and when this is?

How does knowing the title, *Interlude*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



Comparing and Contrasting

While accurately recording the objects of his life, John Koch manipulated the settings to create pleasing compositions and the appearance of a gracious, well-ordered life. Compare the painting with the preparatory studies. What artistic decisions has Koch made? What is the result of these decisions?



John Koch (1909 –1978)

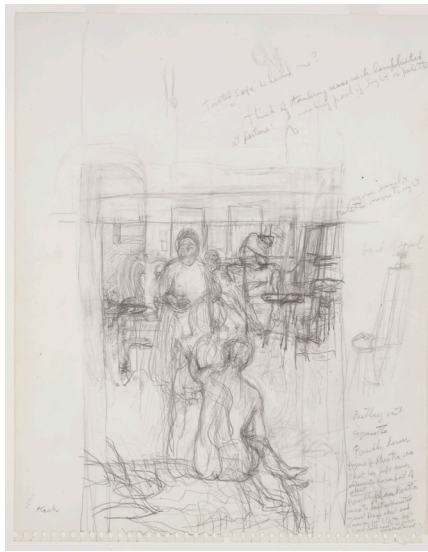
Interlude, 1963

Oil on canvas

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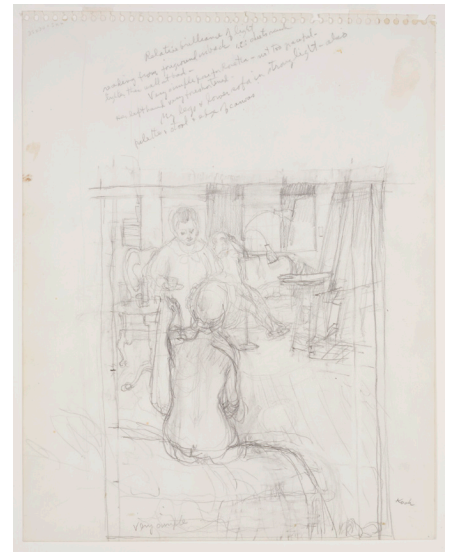
Study for "*Interlude*" (I), 1963

Graphite on paper

Gift of the artist, 65.63.1

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John Koch (1909 –1978)

Study for "*Interlude*" (II), 1963

Graphite on paper

Gift of the artist, 65.63.2

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Finding and Analyzing Point of View

Women's lives have been popular subject matter in American art. Compare these paintings of American women. Consider time periods, life styles, social class as well as the personalities revealed through facial expression, gesture and body language.



Ammi Phillips (1788 – 1865)
Old Woman with a Bible, ca. 1834
Oil on linen

Beatrice M. Padelford Trust, 84.22
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Lilly Martin Spencer (1822 – 1902)
Peeling Onions, ca. 1852
Oil on canvas

Gift of the Women's Council in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the
Memorial Art Gallery, 88.6
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Kathleen McEnery Cunningham (1885 – 1971)
Woman in an Ermine Collar, 1909
Oil on canvas

Gift of Joan Cunningham Williams, Peter Cunningham, and Michael McEnery
Cunningham, 83.13
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



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Interlude, 1963
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Reading and Interpreting Visual Language

How and why do artists create realistic interior places? What details do the artists include and what is the effect achieved? Compare the settings created by the artists of these paintings.



M. M. Manchester (active ca. 1840)
Judge and Mrs. Arthur Yates, ca. 1840

Oil on canvas

Gallery Purchase, 41.30

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Lilly Martin Spencer (1822 – 1902)
Peeling Onions, ca. 1852

Oil on canvas

Gift of the Women's Council in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Memorial Art Gallery, 88.6
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Mortimer Smith (1840 – 1896)
Home Late, 1866

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 75.139

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



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Interlude, 1963

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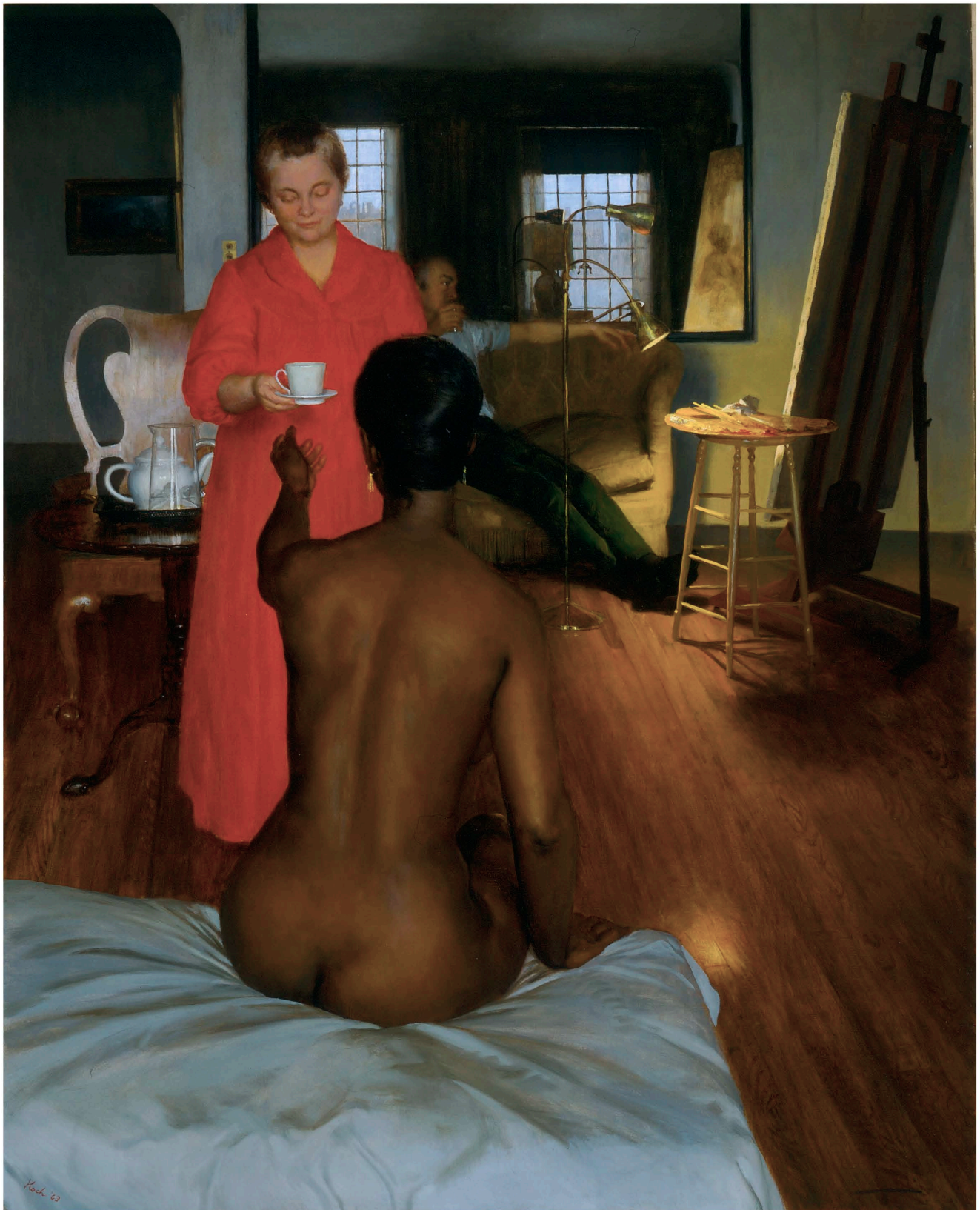
Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist* and *America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

Reading and Interpreting Visual Language

John Koch is remembered as saying, “I am quite visibly a realist, occupied essentially with human beings, the environments they create, and their relationships.” How does the artist accomplish this goal in *Interlude*?

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