

Introduction

Michael Kammen

*"Now ye'd think seein' that he made his money in this counthry, he'd pathro-
nize American art...."*

*"Well," said Mr. Hennessy, "perhaps a bum European pitcher is bettther thin
a good American pitcher."*

"Perhaps so," said Mr. Dooley. "I think it is so."

—Peter Finley Dunne, *Observations by Mr. Dooley*¹

As the Memorial Art Gallery approaches its centennial, it is a propitious time to consider the notable qualities of its American collection. First and foremost, I believe, has been the museum's receptiveness to American art, which so many counterpart institutions snubbed until at least the 1930s, and more often until well after World War II, in favor of works from Europe and East Asia. (The attitude of people running those museums is epitomized by the pithy dialogue between Mr. Dooley and Mr. Hennessy.) The Memorial Art Gallery's inaugural exhibition in 1913 followed by a few months the legendary Armory Show in New York City, which introduced European modernism to the United States. MAG's very first display featured art by contemporary American painters, including George Bellows, Winslow Homer, and George Inness, and during its initial five years, it acquired the beginnings of a respectable native collection with paintings by John Twachtman, Jonas Lie, and Willard Metcalf, among others. It did not hurt, of course, that the founding director, George Herdle, was American (not common at that time) and a painter himself, and that he was succeeded for many decades by his daughter, Gertrude, with yet another keen-eyed daughter, Isabel, as associate director and curator.²



Memorial Art Gallery, 1913
building designed by Foster
and Gade

It is impossible to overestimate the role women played in shaping and contributing to the collection generally, not merely as curators and major benefactors, but as active members of MAG's Women's Council (now the Gallery Council). The founder and first benefactress was Mrs. Emily Sibley Watson, whose generosity funded construction of the original building. And a major bequest from Hannah Durand Gould in 1938, in memory of her daughter Marion, provided the first endowed fund, which made possible a very important coup: the 1951 acquisition of work from the Encyclopedia Britannica collection by American artists, including such paintings as Thomas Hart Benton's *Boomtown* (1928), Georgia O'Keeffe's *Jawbone and Fungus* (1931), and Stuart Davis's *Landscape with Garage Lights* (1931–32). This purchase was truly a landmark moment in MAG's history, providing the backbone for its significant twentieth-century holdings.³



Emily Sibley Watson
(1855–1945), founder
of the Memorial Art Gallery;
James G. Averell (1877–1904),
her son, in whose memory the
Memorial Art Gallery
was founded

One of MAG's most distinctive dimensions from a historical perspective—possibly its *most* distinctive—is that it was created in conjunction with a university so that it would function within a scholarly milieu, yet at the same time was intended to be a community museum and asset emphasizing public outreach and service to an extended urban area. Some other art museums eventually moved in the direction of such a double mission, but MAG is preeminent in seeking to fulfill both functions from the outset. Hence the important role, for example, of Howard S. Merritt, a professor of fine arts at the University of Rochester, in writing catalogues for exhibitions of American art and providing counsel in matters concerning connoisseurship and acquisitions.

The particular mix of mission and municipal participation in MAG's history also means that, in distinction from some other museums, its holdings do not reflect the taste or lengthened shadow of a dominant individual, such as W. W. Corcoran, Isabella Stewart Gardner, or Duncan Phillips. Input, guidance, suggestions, and direct support have come from diverse groups and individuals who hoped to improve the collection without wishing to shape it according to their personal preferences. Among the many who have donated major holdings are George Eastman, Charles Rand Penney, and Dr. and Mrs. James Lockhart, Jr.

The museum's inventory of American art can be contemplated in various ways. Is it suitably comprehensive and representative of the most significant phases of development and change? Are the paintings by important artists strong and distinctive examples of their work? Looked at along such customary lines, the Memorial Art Gallery's collection certainly distinguishes itself with flying colors.

If we consider the collection from a cultural and historical perspective, however, we can use a less obvious set of criteria: How well does the ensemble reflect changes in American tastes, enthusiasms, and social concerns? Specifically, what sort of national narrative do these images, taken together, suggest? Taken on these terms, the Memorial Art Gallery's holdings are no less worthy. Indeed, because of their particular strengths, and owing to their breadth, MAG's American works provide an engaging window for viewing significant developments and changes in American life.



Hall of Casts, ca. 1914,
dominated by William Ordway
Partridge's *Memory*

The most fundamental "story line" for the history of the nation's culture concerns an essential conflict, even a contestation, between the desire to be cosmopolitan and avoid provincialism on one hand, and the quest for a distinctively *American* art and literature on the other.⁴ As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it in his widely influential essay titled "The American Scholar" (1837): "We have

School group, 1926, arriving
at the Gallery for a visit.
Construction of the 1926
addition is visible on the right



listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.... We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds." That impulse is readily visible in MAG's diversified collection and manifest in exemplary works that we might notice from the pre-Civil War era right through the mid-twentieth century and beyond.

Let us then consider the national narrative conveyed by MAG's American collection. To begin, we might recall that during the middle third of the nineteenth century Americans liked to regard their country as "Nature's Nation" because they believed the United States was unsurpassed for natural beauty, whether that meant geological wonders or landscapes that had been "improved" by human hands. Writers, artists, and architects referred almost obsessively to the "American picturesque." MAG has important works by Thomas Cole, John F. Kensett, and George Inness—members of the Hudson River School of painting who celebrated the majesty of New York and New England's wilderness places. One of the finest examples from this phase is *Genesee Oaks* (1860) by Asher B. Durand. Its motif is no dramatic mountain or valley scene, but a brace of stately oaks near Genesee, New York. Because the subject is familiar and not exotic, we can understand how "Nature," to the Hudson River School painters, was more than merely a romantic spectacle, but an occasion for immanence. Durand would have known the seventeenth-century Dutch landscape masters, such as Albert Cuyp; but unlike Cuyp, whose cows were constantly so prominent and dominant, Durand "shrinks" the cows and gives priority to the mighty oaks, emblematic of stability and endurance.

Construction of 1926 addition
designed by McKim, Mead
and White



Political maturity and stability would soon be sorely challenged, however, by the darkest chapter in the nation's history. Two pieces in the collection exemplify in distinctive ways how that conflict was viewed by anxious contemporaries and then subsequently in national memory. *The Night Before the Battle* (1865) by James Henry Beard owes much to a very rich tradition of European allegorical art dating back to the later Middle Ages—hence the presence of the grim reaper ambiguously manning the cannon in the middle ground and the slumbering, bone-weary soldiers awaiting their fate, symbolized by emblems of chance—the cards—in the brightly lit foreground. We immediately think of those haunting moonlit scenes by the greatest German romantic painter, Caspar David Friedrich. The shadow of Old World art remained strong.

By contrast, George Grey Barnard's noble bust of *Abraham Lincoln* (ca. 1918) captures the contemplative melancholy of a beardless Lincoln, also brooding through a dark night of the soul but in the plaintive austerity of a ravaged republic. Because Barnard telescoped the life of a rural lawyer turned commander-in-chief into a single

image, his work was initially controversial. Americans idealized Lincoln in various ways, especially following the centennial of his birth in 1909. Hence some called the work an “atrocity” and a “calamity” while others regarded it as “the image of a saint,” and eventually “something like a mirror of Lincoln’s soul.” The latter view has prevailed, of course.

In the aftermath of the Civil War the specificity of place increasingly intrigued many Americans. In literature, “local colorism” or regionalism infused such popular novels as Sarah Orne Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) and the best-selling tale of upstate New York by Edward Noyes Westcott, *David Harum* (1898). In painting, several extraordinary holdings by the Memorial Art Gallery illuminate this intense passion for the particular. John Henry Twachtman maintained a very tight focus on the seventeen acres of his home on Round Hill Road near Greenwich, Connecticut. *The White Bridge* (late 1890s) shows his selective use of French impressionist techniques brought to bear upon a very particular and familiar New England subject. Winslow Homer for many years painted Adirondack mountain scenes, and spent the last two and a half decades of his life repeatedly painting the Atlantic in all seasons and weathers from his solitary spit of land at Prout’s Neck, Maine. For Homer, however, meteorology meant more than elemental science. It was a manifestation of God’s inscrutable will, a view shared by most of his American contemporaries.⁵

Abraham Lincoln would serve as a symptomatic symbol during the early twentieth century for numerous reasons, but especially because he seemed to transcend the constraints of class. A great many Americans had long clung to the myth that theirs was virtually a classless society (especially by comparison with Europe), and consequently explicit acknowledgment of class, race, and ethnicity emerged only gradually and at first subtly in American art. But the motif grew steadily in importance, as we can see in *Peeling Onions* (ca. 1852) by Lilly Martin Spencer, George Luks’s *Boy with Dice* (1923–24), and Robert Gwathmey’s *Non-Fiction* (1943). Moreover, the perception that justice in America better serves the affluent classes than the poor is closely related. That is clearly what David Gilmour Blythe had in mind when he painted *Trial Scene (Molly Maguires)* (ca. 1862–63) and numerous works like it, usually incorporating a potent dollop of ironic humor. The contentious and polemical nature of our democracy is vividly illustrated in *The Opposition* (1942) by William Gropper, a member of the radical left throughout the Depression and World War II years and an impassioned defender of civil liberties.

Meanwhile, the United States had quite rapidly begun to urbanize, a phenomenon that avant-garde artists responded to in engaging ways. Consider Everett Shinn’s *Sullivan Street* (1900–1905), John Sloan’s *Chinese Restaurant* (1909), and later on Jacob Lawrence’s *Summer Street Scene in Harlem* (1948). They are significant for several reasons: because of their innovative attention to the increasing role and importance of ethnicity and racial diversity in American life, and because their aesthetic modernism is so decidedly American. Witness, for example, Gwathmey’s and Lawrence’s deliberately *flat* cubism.

MAG’s collection is notably well-represented by the Ashcan school (initially fostered by Sloan and Robert Henri) and by the regionalist emphasis associated with Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood. What these two iconoclastic movements shared, spanning the years from 1908 through the end of the Great Depression, is an emphasis upon the “American Scene” (a phrase frequently invoked during the 1920s and 1930s), unglamorous common folk and familiar landscapes characterized by refreshing, distinctly unromantic candor. The oft-recognized entrepreneurial spirit of America (including its ruthless aspect), accelerated by manifest forms of industrialization, is supremely well illustrated by the contrasting



Thomas Ridgeway Gould’s *West Wind* overlooks the American collection installed in the 1913/26 building

styles yet complementary motifs of Benton's energetic *Boomtown* (1928) and Charles Sheeler's serenely surreal *Ballet Mechanique* (1931), the latter actually commissioned by Henry Ford as an idyll of his River Rouge plant.

Sheeler felt equally at home, however, depicting colonial Americana in Williamsburg, Virginia, along with rustic structures from an earlier era in eastern Pennsylvania. His work along those lines coincided with a renewed interest in American folk art, which the Memorial Art Gallery pioneered in displaying. The first exhibition devoted to this genre occurred as early as 1931, when few individuals and even fewer museums were competing for items now regarded as native treasures. Collecting in this long-ignored field began in earnest during the 1950s at MAG—hence the immediate visual impact and appeal of weathervanes, larger-than-life cigar store Indians, *Pierrepoint Lacey and His Dog Gun* (1835–36) by M.W. Hopkins, Thomas Chambers's *View of West Point* (after 1828), and especially Ammi Phillips's exquisite *Old Woman with a Bible* (ca. 1834). This American nationalism infused with nostalgia for simpler times of yesteryear gave new meaning to neglected artists and works like *Articles Hung on a Door* (after 1890) by John F. Peto.

Modernism emerged in American art with particular force fairly soon after the Armory Show (and MAG's opening) in 1913. Aaron Copland's music and the choreography of Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham had their counterparts in the visionary images of (among those in MAG's collection) Georgia O'Keeffe (*Jawbone and Fungus*, 1931), Stuart Davis (*Landscape with Garage Lights*, 1931–32), and Arthur Dove (*Cars in a Sleet Storm*, 1938). And yet, although Americans have invariably affirmed Progress as a prominent part of their cultural ethos, they have been notably ambivalent in their attitudes to modernism in the plastic and graphic arts. In Rochester, however, the more positive reception may be the result of a commitment to modernism by James Sibley Watson, Jr., son of the Gallery's founder and a member in his own right of the American avant-garde, as well as the sophisticated tastes of director Gertrude Herdle Moore and her sister, associate director Isabel Herdle.

1941 Creative Workshop
summer class on the back lawn



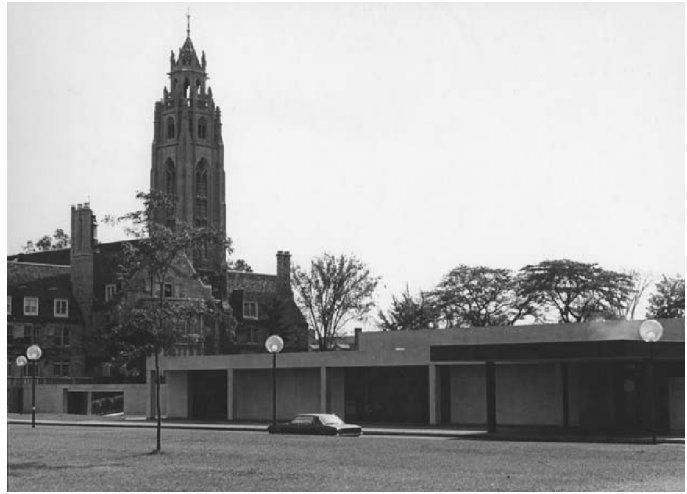
Although World War II would prove to be a transitional time in American art, that event prompted important works that perpetuated the contrasting approaches of native-born and European painters. George Grosz, for example, who fled Nazi Germany for the United States in 1933, took refuge in a country that he idealized. But the style and vision that haunt his work called *The Wanderer* (1943) are unmistakably Old World, born of tradition and personal experience. As he remarked right after the war: "The old man is the eternal human spirit—here he walks once again through a dark world—through an apocalyptic landscape."⁶ By contrast, Norman Rockwell's *Soldier on Leave* (1944) seems sentimentally chin-up, and intimately more hopeful. It conveys a sense of sociability rather than solitude, dry and polished shoes rather than wet and muddy boots, optimism rather than despair. Consequently we are reminded of Samuel

Isham's remark in his *History of American Painting* (1905) that the fundamental characteristic of American art is its overall impression of wholesomeness.

In the years directly following the war, uncertainty about new developments in American painting, particularly abstract art, was manifest in many ways. Between 1947 and 1950 negotiations broke down among the major New York City museums—the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum—over possible mergers or spheres of dominant activity in the accession and exhibition of work by contemporary artists. The Met did not establish a Department of American Art until 1952. In 1949 Robert Goldwater organized a symposium called "The State of American Art" for the *Magazine of Art*, which he edited. Among the sixteen contributors, all but one, Clement Greenberg, agreed that the best painting of the day originated in Paris.

That consensus would very swiftly undergo a dramatic change, one that is well illustrated by two abstract works in MAG's collection, both from 1950.

The completely nonobjective *Untitled (Relational Painting)*, by Russian-born immigrant Ilya Bolotowsky, reflects the obvious influence of Mondrian's color and space relationships as well as Russian constructivism. Here we have the international style, also clearly associated with the prewar Bauhaus, transmitted to the United States. In contrast we have Jackson Pollock's elegant, almost lyrical work simply titled *Red*. It is fluid, free, and accentuates movement—in that sense almost a parallel work to Andrew Wyeth's famous *The Young American* (also 1950), a realist's vision of a young man riding his bicycle through the wide-open landscape. The American watchwords at mid-century were freedom, not enclosure, liberty rather than constraint. That is why Pollock's *Red* is such a harbinger, both of Pollock's enormous influence at home and abroad, and of a dominant trend in American art and thought for years to come.⁷



Cutler Union tower and main entrance, 1968 addition. Cutler Union (1932) was designed as the University of Rochester Women's Student Union by the Rochester firm of Gordon and Kaelber and built with funds donated by Rochester architect James Goold Cutler, also remembered for being the inventor of the Cutler Mail Chute. The 1968 addition was designed by Waasdorp, Northrup and Kaelber.



Within less than a decade a new consensus emerged that New York rather than Paris was the art capital of the world. The quest for a distinctively American aesthetic had not only been achieved, it received international acceptance. Indeed, its influence received the ultimate compliment of imitation. In 1958–59 the Museum of Modern Art proudly organized a huge exhibition titled *New American Painting*, and sent it abroad. The cultural hegemony of Europe had been overcome at last. American art stood on an equal footing with any other, and some even insist that primacy had been achieved.

As if in anticipation of this "equal footing," it is safe to say that the Memorial Art Gallery has, from the beginning, collected the best of American art as an essential part of its mission to "promote the appreciation, understanding, and interest in art and the arts." This publication does more than refute Mr. Hennessy's comment that "a bum European pitcher is better than a good American pitcher." It reminds us that the best American art is inextricably bound up with essential truths of American experience.

Looking from the entrance of the 1987 addition, designed by Handler and Grosso, through the allée of trees designed by landscape architect Fletcher Steele, toward the steps of the 1913 building

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