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Preface

Seeing America is a journey in space and time. It is, to begin with, a tour through the pride of the Memorial Art Gallery: the collection of American art the museum has been championing for almost one hundred years. But (with a nod to the cover) the book is also a kind of packet-boat tour of America, with some of her most outstanding artists as guides. The artists are uniquely equipped for the job: they see with such compelling immediacy that we now are "pulled across the room"* to a different time and place. Their tour ranges from Colonial times to the twenty-first century, from Maine to Florida to the far West, from mighty historical subjects to intimate byways, from august figures and events to the humblest and most anonymous. The huge diversity of American experience is on display here, but as Michael Kammen shows in his Introduction, distinctive themes of American history also emerge from this tour.

Seeing America is also a running commentary on the art by knowledgeable and thoughtful contemporary scholars and artists writing on eighty-two works. Each essayist was charged with observing his or her subject closely and freshly, defining and answering questions generated by the work and its relationship to the spirit of its times, and ultimately presenting a new, deeper, and more authentic viewpoint that will enhance the reader-viewer's understanding and appreciation of the object. In so doing, the writers have helped to fulfill the goal of the Henry Luce Foundation's American Collections Enhancement (ACE) initiative, awarded to MAG in 1999 as part of an effort "to highlight American art collections that are not widely known, but deserve greater attention."

This book also documents the Memorial Art Gallery's commitment to building an outstanding collection of American art. From the acquisition in its opening year, 1913, of a masterpiece by John Twachtman (*The White Bridge*), to the acquisition in 2005 of the iconic *Pittsford on the Erie Canal* (the painting featured on the cover of this volume), the museum has been in the business of promoting and acquiring American art. While the significant 1951 purchase of fourteen paintings from the Encyclopedia Britannica Collection of Contemporary American Painting has been hailed over the years, a little-known aspect regarding the development of the American collection surfaced during the research for this publication. In 1941, ten years before the Britannica purchase, MAG had established a Lending Library of American Art "in an effort to bring contemporary American art closer to the American public in this grave period of national emergency and to promote the sale of excellent average-priced paintings by artists." Ninety artists were asked to contribute paintings, including Charles Burchfield, John Steuart Curry, and Rockwell Kent, and a selection of their work entered the permanent collection as a result of this patriotic gesture.

The creation of *Seeing America* has also been an illuminating professional journey in the company of outstanding colleagues. I am profoundly grateful to the fifty-one distinguished, often brilliant scholars and artists who gave their time, intelligence, and expertise to the essays, sometimes putting aside current projects to meet our deadlines. To the staff at MAG, particularly Grant Holcomb, The Mary W. and Donald R. Clark Director, I owe my deepest appreciation for their belief in me and in this project. Christine Garland has worked side by side with me through the years to obtain the necessary funding. Cynthia Culbert labored over this publication but also managed to bring into the world two beautiful little girls while the book was gestating, spelled by Jessica Marten and Emily Pfeiffer. Lu Harper and Susan Nurse managed research materials and images. MAG staff members Cynthia

* The phrase is from Dr. Virginia Mecklenberg, senior curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.



George Harvey,
1800–1878
*Pittsford on the Erie Canal—
A Sultry Calm*, 1837 (detail)
Oil on panel, 17½ x 23¾ in.
Gift of the Margaret M.
McDonald Memorial Fund,
2005.33

Culbert, Susan Dodge-Peters Daiss, Marlene Hamann-Whitmore, Grant Holcomb, Jessica Marten, Nancy Norwood, Susan Nurse, and Marie Via contributed insightful essays. John Blanpied's wise editing and cheerful spirit has made this project a joy, and Kathy D'Amanda, who designs all things beautiful, has contributed her inimitable sense of style. Donald Strand worked his magic to turn the publication into a website. The choice of Monroe Litho and the related choice of paper are rooted in our strong desire to have an American publication printed in America, and most happily in Rochester, by a company certified by the Forest Stewardship Council—an organization that contributes to the retention of beautiful American landscapes like the ones depicted in this volume.

And of course, my gratitude goes out to my family, for whom this catalogue has become a condition of family life. They have done research and accompanied me on quixotic quests, and Scott in particular has provided technical support so that information, images, and essays could fly through the ether. To my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, who imbued me with a deep love of "Seeing America," my thanks.

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