

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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MUSEUM OF MODERN ART OPENS LARGE EXHIBITION OF ROMANTIC PAINTING
IN AMERICA

As its major painting exhibition of the 1943-44 season, the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, opens to the public today Romantic Painting in America. The exhibition, including more than two hundred paintings, represents the work of over 120 artists, beginning with Benjamin West's Saul and the Witch of Endor, 1777, Copley's Watson and the Shark, 1778; and Trumbull's Sortie from Gibraltar, 1788, to paintings made in the last few years by Mattson, Weber, Hartley, Brook, Watkins, De Martini and O'Keeffe and younger contemporaries who have developed so recently as to be almost unknown.

The exhibition, which will remain on view through February 6, has been directed and installed by Dorothy C. Miller, Associate Curator of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture. James Thrall Soby, Director of the Department, has written the 20,000-word text of the illustrated book which the Museum will publish in conjunction with the exhibition.

Both exhibition and catalog trace the Romantic spirit from its beginnings in the late 18th century through its flowering in the 19th, to its continued development in the work of painters of today. In the catalog Mr. Soby begins by pointing out that:

"Romantic painting represents the temporary triumph of Imagination over Reason in the war between the two which had been openly declared in the 17th century"

and states that the earlier Romantics

"chose subjects which fall into three rough classifications: those to which their audience was emotionally preconditioned, such as scenes from widely read literature; subjects of common firsthand experience--moral causes, dramatic current events, fear, loneliness and pain; and subjects of common nostalgic appeal--the distant in time or place, solitude, sublimity, fantasy. ... American Romantic art adopted some of the themes of European Romanticism and much of its spirit. Indeed our Romantic painting came into being in London, with Benjamin West, as part of the European movement. It was brought to this country in the early 19th century....

"American Romantic painting was at first to feed upon the special grandeur of the American continent, the scale and sweep of its scenery, history and legend. Our early landscapists took their basic inspiration, direct and raw, from the rich wilderness of nature, first in the East and later in the West. Our figure painters took theirs from the giants of myth and fact and from the lesser heroes of daily life in an untamed country."

Characteristic of this early period is Kindred Spirits, painted in 1849 by Asher B. Durand--a canvas depicting those twin spirits of Romanticism, the painter Thomas Cole and the poet William Cullen Bryant. Amidst Catskill mountain scenery the two men stand on a rocky ledge which juts out over a tumbling stream, with the distant hills disappearing curve above curve in the background; in the foreground are the twisted trunks and meticulously painted foliage of the trees.

Also from this early period are John Quidor's Leatherstocking Meets the Law and The Money Diggers, both painted in 1832. During these years, also, Audubon's paintings of the birds of America were making the artist-ornithologist both famous and popular. Of him Mr. Soby writes:

"While striving for realism of detail and habitat Audubon succeeded, perhaps unconsciously, in dramatizing his subjects beyond the requirements of ornithological research. ... He studied birds and quadrupeds objectively but appreciated and interpreted their instinctive savage wisdom, which so many Romantics considered superior to man's untidy and vacillating logic."

Mr. Soby points out that the pioneer era of American Romantic painting came to an end shortly after the middle of the last century. The Romantic spirit at its height in the second half of the century is shown in the exhibition in the paintings of Ryder, of whom Mr. Soby writes:

"During the quarter century since Albert Pinkham Ryder's death his name has become synonymous with Romanticism in American painting and for indisputable reason. He was in person the very type of Romantic artist, exalted, solitary, living in constant and fierce communion with his own inner world of imagination, awaiting inspiration as the faithful await miracles and forcing it to its ultimate expression through a figurative 'prayer and fasting.'"

With Davies, Sloan and Bellows the exhibition enters the 20th century. Of the last two painters Mr. Soby writes:

"John Sloan, a member of 'The Eight,' in such paintings as The City from Greenwich Village interpreted New York with love and transforming devotion, and was one of the founders of a street scene Romanticism which continues to flourish among both painters and photographers. George Bellows was more often a Romantic Realist. His paintings and lithographs of actual prize fights revert to that emotionalism of violent physical action of which the 19th century prophet was Théodore Géricault. But for Géricault and his French contemporaries boxing had been an aristocratic sport imported from England and reserved for the few. In America and in Bellows' period it was the people's spectacle and an outlet for group emotion, supported and promoted by a press which to this day has made its sport pages the last refuge of an unabashedly romantic prose."

There are three paintings by Edward Hopper in the exhibition: Cape Cod Evening, 1939, Gas, 1940, and Shakespeare at Dusk, 1935.

Mr. Soby states that

"Hopper is ostensibly a realist, intent upon a direct and forceful transcription of appearances, without alterations either Romantic or Classic. His horizontal system of composition is simplicity itself; his subjects are everywhere in America, for everyone to see. But it is the intimacy of Hopper's impressions of the obvious which carries him into Romanticism, and this intimacy is of a dramatic and thoroughly personal kind.... Hopper is primarily a poet of the inanimate in figures as well as in landscape and architecture. In his painting the frenzied motion of much early 19th and early 20th century Romanticism comes to an abrupt and slightly uneasy repose."

In the early watercolors of Charles Burchfield we find what Mr. Soby designates as "perhaps the most concentrated, consistent and pure manifestation of Romanticism in 20th century American art. ... The existence of these watercolors is in itself a Romantic phenomenon, for they were painted by a very young man living and working in Salem, Ohio, in more or less complete isolation from contemporary esthetic currents and in almost total ignorance of the European Romantic tradition."

The influence of Ryder reappears in the work of Henry Mattson who, as Mr. Soby writes

"has sacrificed the recognition which comes from being definably 'modern,' and has remained a thorough Romantic in the 19th century tradition.... Mattson is not the first important American artist to have ignored the main direction of art in his time. Romanticism appears to be a growing force in American art, though still scattered in effect, and Mattson's fine Stars and Sea may yet link Ryder's sea pieces to a more general revival of Romantic subject matter and treatment."

"In continuing the Romanticism of night and mystery developed by Ryder, Mattson has not worked alone. The California artist, Matthew Barnes, within the past ten years has produced a number of paintings comparable in viewpoint. But whereas Mattson is a professional painter of long experience and great technical dexterity, Barnes is a self-taught artist. His technique is crude but nevertheless eloquent for his purpose. Like Ryder and Mattson he has worked within a restricted iconography; nearly all of his paintings are of the same obsessive chimera whose symbolic properties are ghostly houses, unlikely hills and streets, lumpy phantoms running inexplicable errands, and over all the moonlight."

In the early 1930's a Romantic art not confined to the American scene and tradition appeared in the work of Franklin C. Watkins. Of him Mr. Soby writes:

"After a decade of painting in which abstraction and the American Scene were predominating forces, here suddenly was a vigorous, proud, elegant and imaginative art in the grand manner. Coming on the heels of Marin's impulsive plein-airisme, following closely Hopper's concentration on American reality, Watkins' painting was a studio art, using the rich devices of the Mannerist and Baroque figure styles. Though its relation to European tradition was obvious, at its best it was a solid, original and courageous accomplishment."

For the many younger contemporary painters in the Romantic tradition Mr. Soby lets Morris Graves, the newly discovered painter of "the inner eye," speak: "I paint to rest from the phenomena of the external world."

After the exhibition closes at the Museum February 6, it will be sent on a tour of other museums and art galleries throughout the country. The 144-page catalog, a general survey of Romantic painting, will contain two color plates and 124 halftones, and will sell for \$2.50.