American Modern presents a fresh look at The Museum of Modern Art’s holdings of American art of the first half of the twentieth century. Arranging paintings, drawings, prints, photographs, and sculpture in loose thematic groups, the book sets celebrated masterworks of the Museum’s collection alongside works that have rarely been exhibited in concentration and are relatively little known. In doing so, it not only throws light on the cultural preoccupations of the rapidly changing American society of the day but also explores an unsung chapter in the Museum’s own story.

MoMA is famous for its prescient focus on the avant-garde art of Europe—for exhibiting and collecting the work of such artists as Picasso and Matisse, whose reputations the Museum helped to cement not just in the United States but globally. Meanwhile, though, it was also acquiring work by Georgia O’Keeffe, Charles Sheeler, Alfred Stieglitz, Stuart Davis, and other American artists whose work sometimes fits awkwardly under the avant-garde umbrella. The still lifes, portraits, and urban, rural, and industrial landscapes that the Museum pursued vary in style, approach, and medium: melancholy images by Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth bump against the eccentric landscapes of Charles Burchfield and the Jazz Age sculpture of Elie Nadelman. Yet a distinct sensibility emerges, revealing a side of the Museum’s interests that may surprise a good part of its audience. An introduction by Kathy Curry and Esther Adler, Assistant Curators in MoMA’s Department of Drawings, discusses the visual qualities of these works, and an essay by Adler explores the Museum’s history of collecting them.
American Modern  Hopper to O’Keeffe
Kathy Curry and Esther Adler
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The organization of an exhibition drawn predominantly from a museum’s own collection presents a unique set of opportunities and challenges. We are deeply grateful to our colleagues in The Museum of Modern Art’s curatorial departments for their generosity and advice: in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, Ann Temkin; The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Chief Curator; Cora RowEver, Associate Curator; Lillian Tove, Assistant Curator; and Lily Goldberg, Loan Assistant. In the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, Christophe Cherix, The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Chief Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books; and Katherine AICuskas, Collection Specialist. And in the Department of Photography, Quentin Bajac; The Joel and Anne Ehrenkranz Chief Curator of Photography; Sarah Hermanns Meier; Curator; Marina Chao, former Curatorial Assistant; Lucy Gallun, Curatorial Assistant; and Taisha Lutek, cataloguer.

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The project is mainly based on the Museum’s own collection, but the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, gave us the opportunity for an exchange of resources. We are grateful to the Whitney’s Carter Foster, Curator, and Nick Robbins, Curatorial Assistant.

We are fortunate to have been able to explore the exhibition’s works through a beautiful catalogue, impossible without our Department of Publications: Publisher Christopher Hudson; Associate Publisher Charles Kim; Editorial Director David Frankel; Production Director Marc Sapir; Production Manager Matthew Pimm; and the book’s designer, Beate Joël of pulp, ink.

Across the Museum, more people than we can name have helped us to realize our vision for the installation of American Modern. We are most grateful to Jessica Cash, Assistant Coordinator, Exhibition Planning and Administration; Stefanini Ruta Atkins, Head Registrar; Brandi Pompel-Joseph, Assistant Registrar; Claire Corey, Production Manager; and Greg Halthaway, Assistant Creative Director, Graphic Design; and Jerome Neuner, Director, Lana Mum, Production Manager; and Peter Perez, Frame Shop Foreman, Exhibition Design and Production. Our colleagues in Conservation made it possible for us to show every work at its best: we thank Amy Aviram, Conservator; Lynda Zycherman, Sculpture Conservator; and Scott Gerson, Associate Conservator.

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—Kathy Curry and Esther Adler
Assistant Curators, Department of Drawings

Acknowledgments

The Museum of Modern Art has always been deeply concerned with American art.” Thus opened the November 1940 issue of the MoMA Bulletin, which dedicated twenty-seven pages to recounting the place of American art, architecture, and film within the Museum’s then eleven-year history. This may have been defensive: although contemporary readers are as likely to associate an American artist such as Jackson Pollock with the Museum as a Spaniard like Pablo Picasso, in the past MoMA was repeatedly accused of an internationalist bias, particularly before the explosive arrival of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and ’50s made New York an art capital. In 1940, during a period of international upheaval and external danger, neglect of the “American” was taken seriously—hence the museum’s need to argue its case.

More than seventy years later, the argument is no longer urgent, but the perception persists that MoMA, when young, was slow or reluctant to engage with American art. American Modern: Hopper to O’Keeffe resoundingly challenges that notion, celebrating the Museum’s rich history with American art predating the New York School. The works on view testify to the inclusive vision that has always characterized this institution’s progriming. The show mixes acknowledged masters and household names with artists now relatively unfamiliar, but all were critically engaged in the masterful dialogues of their time, and their presence in the Museum reflects the same careful study and risk-taking evident in other areas of the collection.

With works spanning from 1915 to 1950, by more than fifty artists, American Modern covers a period of enormous social change in the United States. The hopes that change inspired, the acknowledgement of what it threatened, and the search for its meaning, the search for what Georgia O’Keeffe cogently deemed “the Great American Thing,” is palpable in these artists’ varied works. Through thematic pairings that draw out commonalities across these critical decades, Kathy Curry and Esther Adler, Assistant Curators, in the Department of Drawings, have recovered the subject matter explored by the artists of the time. With their colleagues in the departments of Painting and Sculpture, Prints and Illustrated Books, and Photography, they have highlighted collection strengths across media and pulled little-seen works from storage for reevaluation with contemporary eyes. The resulting exhibition includes many singular images that have seeped into American cultural consciousness, works that shape the way we envision our national history.

At a time when national boundaries seem increasingly porous, and when museums strive to expand the international scope of their programming to previously understudied artists and histories, many works in American Modern may seem like old friends. Now as then, MoMA remains “deeply concerned with American art,” and this exhibition provides an opportunity for contemporary viewers to reconsider them in their historical context.

—Glenn D. Lowry
Director, The Museum of Modern Art

Foreword
“ONE OF THE MOST AMERICAN TRAITS,” ACCORDING TO THE ART HISTORIAN LLOYD Goodrich, “is our urge to define what is American.”1 Nowhere is this statement proven more conclusively than in the dialogue around American art of the first half of the twentieth century, when curators and critics, artists and art audiences, both in the United States and abroad, championed the “Americanness” of the art produced in this country, some shared quality that made that art distinct from that of Europe. Clear statements about what “Americanness” looked like, however, were hard to find, and no final definition of what an “American” style or subject matter might be ever emerged.

Today, the idea of conclusively identifying an “American art” seems naïve and worse.2 The notion that the diverse and complex population of artists within U.S. borders, working in myriad styles and media and emerging from and addressing many different social contexts, could somehow be covered by a single statement about a country and its visual culture is antithetical to current thinking about art history. Yet the enduring popularity of works by Edward Hopper, Georgia O’Keeffe, Charles Sheeler, and the many other artists included in American Modern has made their vision of the United States to some extent our own. The claim so urgently made in earlier decades that their paintings, drawings, prints, and photographs are in some way uniquely “American” has been accepted by many contemporary viewers, who see these pictures as a shared visual memory of life here in the first part of the twentieth century, pictures reflecting what a writer at a French museum recently deemed the “hypothetical knowledge and dreams conjured up by the fabulous name of America.”

Drawn predominantly from the holdings of The Museum of Modern Art, the exhibition began with a desire to show favorite but rarely exhibited objects, and with a recognition of the need to build some kind of context for them using the collection of an institution that is often thought to be hostile toward both earlier American and realist artwork. In searching MoMA’s storage, we found ourselves drawn to sensuously depicted landscapes strangely devoid of human presence (PLATES 70, 79), evocative still life compositions giving fruits and vegetables the weight of the classical nude (PLATES 31, 32, 55). When the figure did appear, it was often more archetypal than individuated (PLATES 28, 31, 56)—specific people and personalities were often captured not through their faces but through the places they occupied, the things they collected (PLATES 2, 116).
These works seemed to speak to each other, which is why we selected them. Stepping back to look at the results of our search, we saw that our list had grown to span more than forty years of tremendous growth and change in the United States, and to include both household names in American art and artists now largely lost to history. Did these works collectively constitute a statement about what is “American” in American art? Definitely not. Rather, American Modern identifies key themes and approaches tackled repeatedly by a wide range of artists over the course of half a century. This persistence has an importance of its own, and the suggestion of a kernel of truth behind the now largely abandoned search for “Americanness.”

Edward Hopper’s House by the Railroad (1925; PLATE 1), in addition to being considered one of the first works in the artist’s mature style, was also the first painting to enter MoMA’s collection, in 1930, and hence a natural starting point for American Modern. The image of a Victorian manse, cropped by the harsh horizontal of a railway track, has been read as a recognition of a modern America leaving its cluttered past behind, and also as expressing a wistful longing for a quieter landscape, one undivided by the paths of ceaselessly moving trains. Hopper seems not to have weighed in on either side—“My aim in painting,” he once wrote, “has always been the most exact transcription possible of my most intimate impressions of nature”—but House by the Railroad identifies a key theme explored by the artists in American Modern: the clash between the urban realities of a rapidly modernizing society and a nostalgia for an idealized American countryside. Charles Sheeler’s iconic American Landscape (1930; PLATE 93) speaks further to this theme: rather than describe the lush rural expanse that the title might suggest, the painting shows the Ford Motor Company’s River Rouge plant near Dearborn, Michigan, and is one of a series of paintings and works in other media that Sheeler made after his on-site observations and photographs (PLATE 93). The factory’s cement plant, a smokestack, heavy machinery, and railway tracks, this time dotted with trains, expand between the water and a wide-open sky. This painting, too, has been read as both a celebration of industrial efficiency and triumph and a statement of ambivalence about their effects: obviously missing are the thousands of people who made the factory run, and any sense of noise, dirt, or actual labor or hardship.

This absence of the human figure is notable throughout the run, and any sense of noise, dirt, or actual labor or hardship. Effects: obviously missing are the thousands of people who made the factory activity of the city. Yet these images too are largely without human presence. Once again, the figure is absent from most of these country images, but that absence is often accompanied by a twinge of nostalgia. Ralph Steiner’s American Rural Baroque (1930; PLATE 77), with its lovely, empty rocking chair on a porch, suggests to a contemporary viewer a simpler life and time. The image, along with several others by Steiner, was famously included in a 1930 article in the magazine Fortune titled “Vanishing Backyards,” together with photographs that documented not “the new America, its skyscrapers, its airplanes, its dynamos” but rather “the America which remains unregenerate, its back porches and backyards, its ugliness and its waste.” While the tone of the article is hostile to these ugly and unregenerate artifacts, suggesting that their “vanishing” is welcome, Steiner’s images clearly communicate what will be lost. Charles Burchfield’s watercolors of small-town streets were also featured in the article, but his earlier works of 1916–18 capture a wild American landscape untamed by human intervention. The looming black forms of houses and a farm silo in masterwork The Migration Series (1940–41; PLATES 87–89), which specifically documents the massive movement of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North, are void of the figure. Although viewers may not have seen them this way when they were made, today these empty industrial scenes and cityscapes may strike us as eerie in their emptiness, infused with the anxiety that can come with great change. Their stillness is in direct contrast to the New York images of John Marin (PLATE 72), frenetic, celebratory compositions in which buildings and bridges seem the source of the intense activity of the city. Yet these images too are largely without human presence.

Similarly, it is the land and the structures of the American countryside that feature most prominently in the rural landscapes included in American Modern. Where the views of city streets and factory chimneys often take the long view, the rural buildings are often seen in relatively close proximity. Sheeler’s White Barn, Bucks County, Pennsylvania (1914–17; PLATE 73) is a photograph shot from so near to the barn wall that it conveys no sense of the overall structure, while the barn in Bucks County Barn (1932; PLATE 71) sits squarely in the center of the painting, dominating the composition more than the enormous factory does in American Landscape. Despite the chickens scattered about, though, the barn’s clean, balanced lines link it with the manufactured perfection of the Ford plant. Georgia O’Keeffe’s Farmhouse Window and Door (1929; PLATE 90) shows none of the wood grain or wear of Paul Strand’s window image, Red River, Ghost Town, New Mexico (1931; PLATE 81), nor is any hint of life reflected in the window glass—like Sheeler’s barn and O’Keeffe’s paintings of New York City from the same period, this is a cool study of shape and line.

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AMERICAN MODERN

Rogues’ Gallery (1916; PLATE 62) are matched by a frieze of wilting sunflowers; the flowers singled out in the title of The First Hepaticas (1917–18; PLATE 12) are lost among the splintered tree trunks of a threatening forest. This is a landscape up for the battle with contemporary life, though that battle will ultimately be lost: a small patch of green is all that remains of nature in Burchfield’s watercolor The City (1916; PLATE 84).

Despite all these empty landscapes, American Modern is not entirely devoid of the figure. The joyous performer in Elie Nadelman’s Woman at the Piano (1920–24; PLATE 28) suggests a soundtrack for the upbeat parties of her era—perhaps too upbeat, judging by the behavior of patrons of Paul Cadmus’s Greenwich Village Caféteria (1934; PLATE 35). George Bellow’s rich prints of boxing matches (1916 and 1923–24; PLATES 32, 33) also suggest the noise and liveliness of the people conspicuously absent from the pictures of cities. These images are the exception, though—the stillness of the urban scenes pervades even Ben Shahn’s image of a New York handball court (1939; PLATE 13), the shouts and exertions of the players being muffled and repressed by the looming expanse of wall that towers above them. Alfred Stieglitz’s sensitive portraits of the artists affiliated with his galleries—John Marin (1921–22; PLATE 26), Charles Demuth (1923; PLATE 27), and others—are equally silent, more so than the remarkably expressive hands of Georgia O’Keeffe (1931; PLATE 29), Stieglitz’s muse, life partner, and repeatedly his most compelling subject. Throughout the exhibition, in fact, it is the still life images, arrangements of silent objects, that somehow speak the loudest. Edward Weston’s sensuous pepper (1930; PLATE 48), Imogen Cunningham’s sparkling Tower of Jewels (1925; PLATE 56), and Demuth’s ripe Eggplant and Tomatoes (1926; PLATE 55) all have a presence that far exceeds the reality of their subject matter, providing visual proof for their contemporary William Carlos Williams’s famous phrase “No ideas but in things.” Stuart Davis’s jazzy Lucky Strike (1921; PLATE 42) and Odol (1924; PLATE 38), abstracted images of mundane items, voice the tremendous presence of advertising imagery and commercial culture in the lives of modern Americans, as, of course, do commercial photographs by Steiner (PLATE 43) and Paul Outerbridge (PLATE 44).

The works in American Modern cover an expansive time frame of tremendous change in the United States, and a variety of the visual styles, artistic movements, and personal visions that characterize the art of that time. As with all exhibitions drawn from a museum collection, the show is inevitably shaped as much by the institution’s history as by the art itself. It is not an

2. Plate 30 depicts Charles Sheeler’s photograph of the Elizabeth Dillingham house in River Rouge, Michigan, which is included in the American Modern exhibition.
6. For a concise history of Sheeler’s River Rouge project, in all its media, including a summary of the various interpretations of his work, see Charles Brock, Charles Sheeler: A Studio Area (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art in association with University of California Press, 1996), pp. 73, 108.
PLATES
Edward Hopper. House by the Railroad. 1925. Oil on canvas, 24 x 20" (61 x 50.7 cm). Given anonymously, 1930.
3. Arthur Dove. Grandmother. 1925. Collage of shingles, needlepoint, sprigs from Concordance, pressed flowers, and ferns mounted on cloth-covered wood, 20 x 21 1/4" (50.8 x 54.0 cm). Gift of Philip L. Goodwin (by exchange), 1939.

Edward Hopper: Night Windows
1928. Oil on canvas, 29 x 34 in. (73.7 x 86.4 cm). Gift of John Hay Whitney, 1940.

Edward Hopper: New York Movie
1939. Oil on canvas, 32 1/2 x 40 1/4 in. (82.6 x 102.2 cm). Given anonymously, 1940.


9. Martin Lewis. The Glow of the City. 1929. Drypoint, plate: 11 7/16 x 14 7/16" (29.1 x 36.6 cm); sheet: 14 5/16 x 18 7/8" (36.3 x 47.9 cm). Publisher and printer: the artist. Edition: 106. Purchase, 1954.


11. Walker Evans. Untitled. c. 1930. Gelatin silver print, 3 1/2 x 1 1/8" (8.3 x 2.9 cm). Gift of Dr. Iago Galdston. 1977.
Ben Shahn. New York
1936. Gelatin silver print, 6 x 8 1/4" (15.2 x 21 cm). Gift of the artist, 1975.

Ben Shahn. Handball
1939. Gouache on paperboard, 22 3/4 x 31 1/4" (57.8 x 79.4 cm). Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund, 1940.
Georgia O'Keeffe, *Evening*, 1917. Watercolor on paper mounted on board, 8 7/8 x 11 7/8" (22.7 x 30.4 cm). Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Straus Fund, 1958.
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