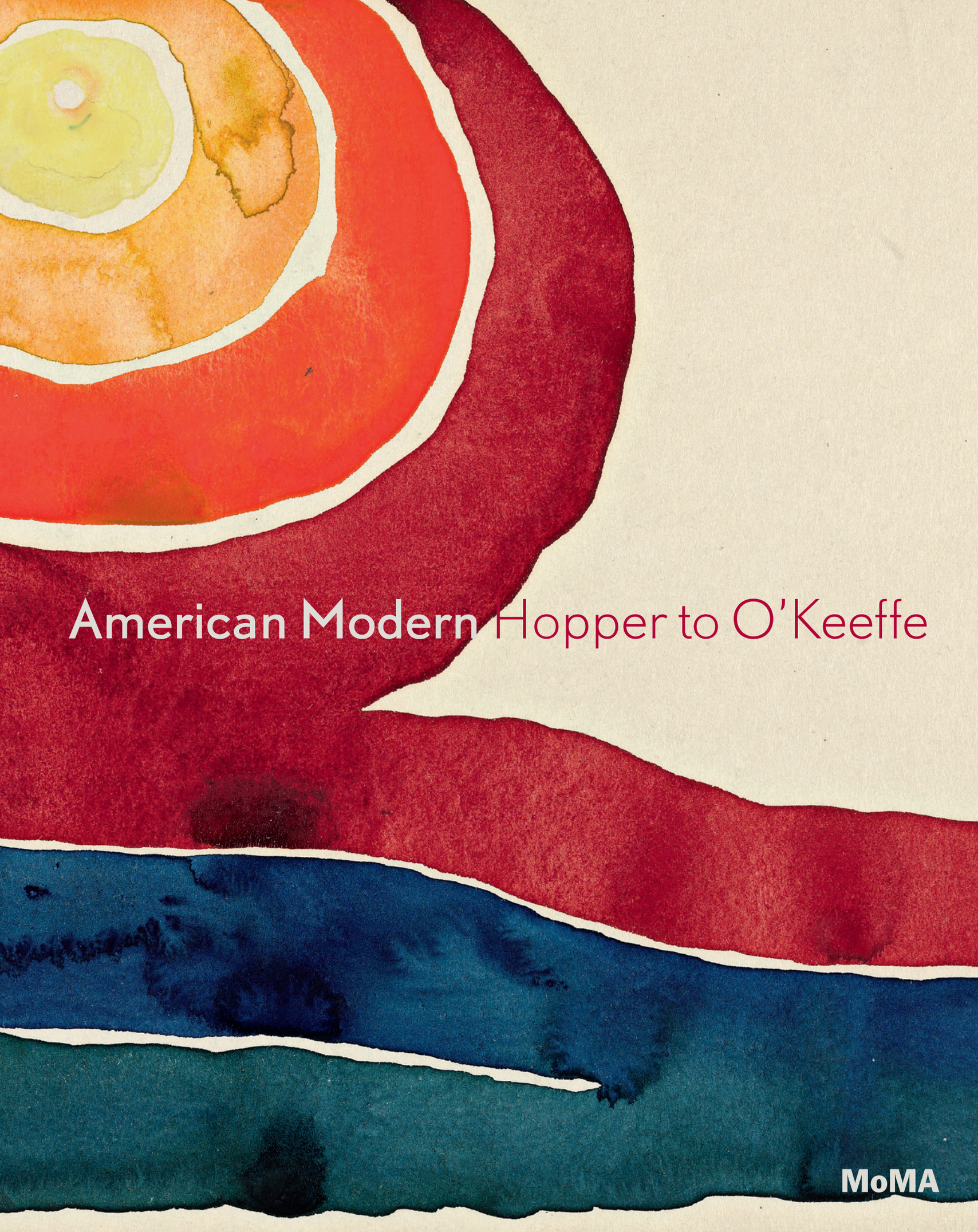

American Modern Hopper to O'Keeffe

MoMA

American Modern Hopper to O'Keeffe

Kathy Curry and Esther Adler

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

Published in conjunction with the exhibition *American Modern: Hopper to O'Keeffe*, at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, August 17, 2013–January 26, 2014. Organized by Kathy Curry and Esther Adler, Assistant Curators, the Department of Drawings.

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Cover: Georgia O'Keeffe. *Evening Star, No. III* (detail). 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. See p. 29

Back cover: Edward Hopper. *House by the Railroad* (detail). 1925. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29" (61 x 73.7 cm). Given anonymously, 1930. See p. 17

Frontispiece: Edward Hopper. *New York Movie* (detail). 1939. Oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 40 1/8" (81.9 x 101.9 cm). Given anonymously, 1941. See p. 21

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Foreword

"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 programming. The show mixes acknowledged masters and household names with artists now relatively unfamiliar, but all were critically engaged in the artistic 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 acknowledgment 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

Acknowledgments

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For their ongoing support and encouragement we are indebted to Glenn D. Lowry, the Museum's Director; Ramona Bronkar Bannayan, Senior Deputy Director, Exhibitions and Collections; Peter Reed, Senior Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs; James Gara, Chief Operating Officer; Jan Postma, Chief Financial Officer; Todd Bishop, Senior Deputy Director, External Affairs; Lauren Stakias, Director of Exhibition and Program Funding; Patty Lipshutz, General Counsel; Nancy Adelson, Deputy General Counsel; Erik Patton, Associate Director, and Jennifer Cohen, Assistant Director, Exhibition Planning and Administration; Kim Mitchell, Chief Communications Officer; and Margaret Doyle, Director of Communications.

Our closest colleagues are in the Museum's Department of Drawings, and they have been unfailingly supportive: Connie Butler, Robert Lehman Chief Curator; Jodi Hauptman, Curator; Samantha Friedman, Assistant Curator; Emily Cushman, Research Assistant; John Prochilo, Department Manager; Karen Grimson, Assistant to the Chief Curator; David Moreno, Preparator; Margaret Aldredge, twelve-month intern; and Kaitlin Dempsey and Alex Moore, interns.

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, Beverly Joel of pulp, ink.

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

INTRODUCTION

Kathy Curry and Esther Adler

"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."[3]

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 51, 52, 55). When the figure did appear, it was often more archetypal than individuated (PLATES 28, 31, 36)—specific people and personalities were often captured not through their faces but through the places they occupied, the things they collected (PLATES 2, 116).

plate 70

plate 55

plate 28

plate 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,[4] 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"[5]—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 91) 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 more railway tracks, this time dotted with train cars, 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.[6]


plate 1


plate 91


plate 93

This absence of the human figure is notable throughout the works in *American Modern*, but is perhaps most apparent in the images of cities and industry. Walker Evans's untitled photographs of urban architecture (c. 1928–29; PLATES 108–13) and George Ault's *New Moon, New York* (1945; PLATE 99) capture the strong lines of bridges and skyscrapers in a formally reduced language, almost abstract but easily recognizable, and missing the crush of people who flocked to the cities during these decades. Even three from the group of paintings selected from Jacob Lawrence's sixty-panel masterwork The Migration Series (1940–41; PLATES 87–89), which specifically documents the massive move 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.[7] Their stillness is in direct contrast to the New York images of John Marin (PLATES 102, 103), 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.


plate 99


plate 89


plate 103

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 75) 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 77) 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 80) 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.


plate 75


plate 77


plate 80

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 73), 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."[8] 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


plate 73


plate 62

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 64) 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 Cafeteria* (1934; PLATE 35). George Bellows'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 25), 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 46), Imogen Cunningham's sparkling *Tower of Jewels* (1925; PLATE 56) and Demuth's ripe *Eggplant and Tomatoes* (1926; PLATE 52) 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."[9] 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 45).


plate 35

plate 33

plate 13


plate 25

plate 42

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 encyclopedic review of American art of that period, nor is it an argument for a native national style free of outside influence—the visual dialogue with international artists and art movements is obvious here, despite attempts by critics and scholars from that earlier time to deny it. Yet in framing this group of images as American, even now, something is said beyond the fact that their creators were born or lived in the United States. The continued exploration of a particular subject matter—the American landscape and the people and objects that filled it—over the course of those years suggests a shared though not exclusive approach, one shaped by an acute awareness of that world, and more specifically of the fact that it was changing. That these works continue to appeal to contemporary viewers familiar with a United States dramatically different from the one depicted by these artists, that the works have become for many the way an earlier time in America is visualized and understood, speaks to their enduring legacy.

1. Lloyd Goodrich, "What Is American in American Art?," *Art in America* 46, no. 3 (Fall 1958):19. The year Goodrich published this article, he became the director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, having previously served as a curator and associate director there.

2. The use of the word "American" to describe art made in the United States is already a topic for debate, given the rich cultural production of South America. See Paulo Herkenhoff, "The Void and the Dialogue in the Western Hemisphere," in Gerardo Mosquera, ed., *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995), pp. 69–73.

3. This telling phrase appears in a press release issued by the Grand Palais, Paris, to publicize their recent, intensely popular exhibition of the work of Edward Hopper. On the show's popularity see Judith H. Dobrzynski, "Hopper, Wowing Them in France, Also Goes '24 Hours,'" available online at www.artsjournal.com/realcleararts/2013/ 01/hopper-wowing-them-in-france-also-goes-24-hours.html.

4. Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 4 vols. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and W.W. Norton, 1995), 1:66.

5. Edward Hopper, "Notes on Painting," *Edward Hopper Retrospective Exhibition* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1933), p. 17.

6. For a concise history of Sheeler's River Rouge project, in all its media, and a summary of the various interpretations of the series, see Charles Brock, *Charles Sheeler across Media* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art in association with University of California Press, 2006), pp. 72–105.

7. See Teresa A. Carbone, *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties*, exh. cat. (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2011), pp. 140–60, esp. p. 153.

8. "Vanishing Backyards," *Fortune* 1, no. 4 (May 1930): 77–81.

9. William Carlos Williams, "Paterson," 1927, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 1, *1909–1939*, eds. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986), pp. 63–66.

PLATES

1.
Edward Hopper. House by the Railroad

1925. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29" (61 x 73.7 cm).
Given anonymously, 1930

2.

Edward Hopper. Mrs. Acorn's Parlor

1926. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 13 7/8 x 19 7/8" (56.2 x 86.7 cm). Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, 1935

3.

Arthur Dove. Grandmother

1925. Collage of shingles, needlepoint, page 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

4.

Edward Hopper. Night Windows

1928. Oil on canvas, 29 x 34" (73.7 x 86.4 cm).
Gift of John Hay Whitney, 1940

5.

Edward Hopper. New York Movie

1939. Oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 40 1/8"
(81.9 x 101.9 cm). Given anonymously, 1941

6.

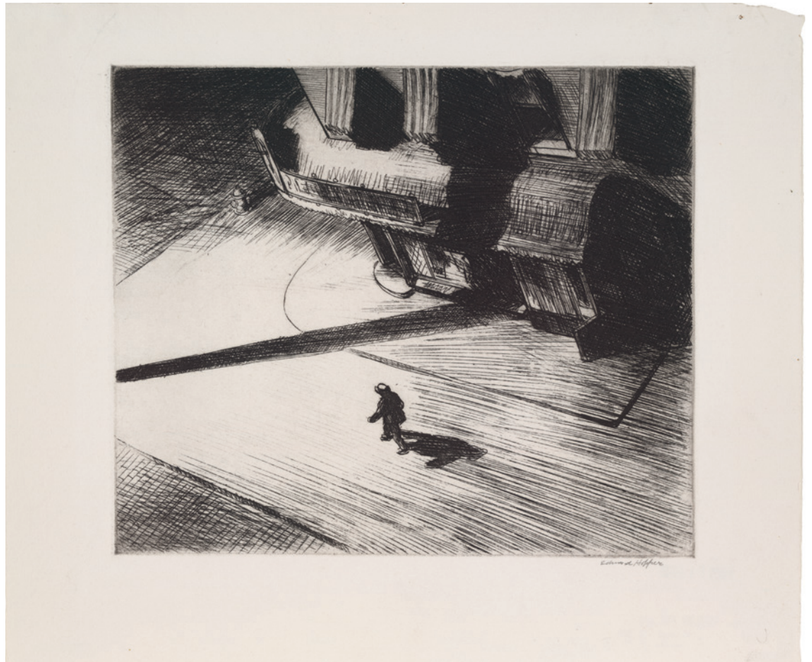
Berenice Abbott. Christopher Street Shop

1948. Gelatin silver print, 14 9/16 x 11 1/8" (37 x 28.2 cm). Purchase, 1971

7.

Berenice Abbott. Cedar Street from William Street

1936. Gelatin silver print, 10 13/16 x 7 15/16" (27.4 x 20.1 cm). Thomas Walther Collection. Purchase, 2001



8.
Armin Landeck. Manhattan Nocturne

1938. Drypoint, plate: 7 1/8 x 11 15/16" (18.1 x 30.3 cm), sheet: 10 5/8 x 11 7/16" (27 x 29 cm). Publisher: Society of American Printers. Printer: Ernest David Roth. Edition: 100. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, 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

10.
Edward Hopper. Night Shadows

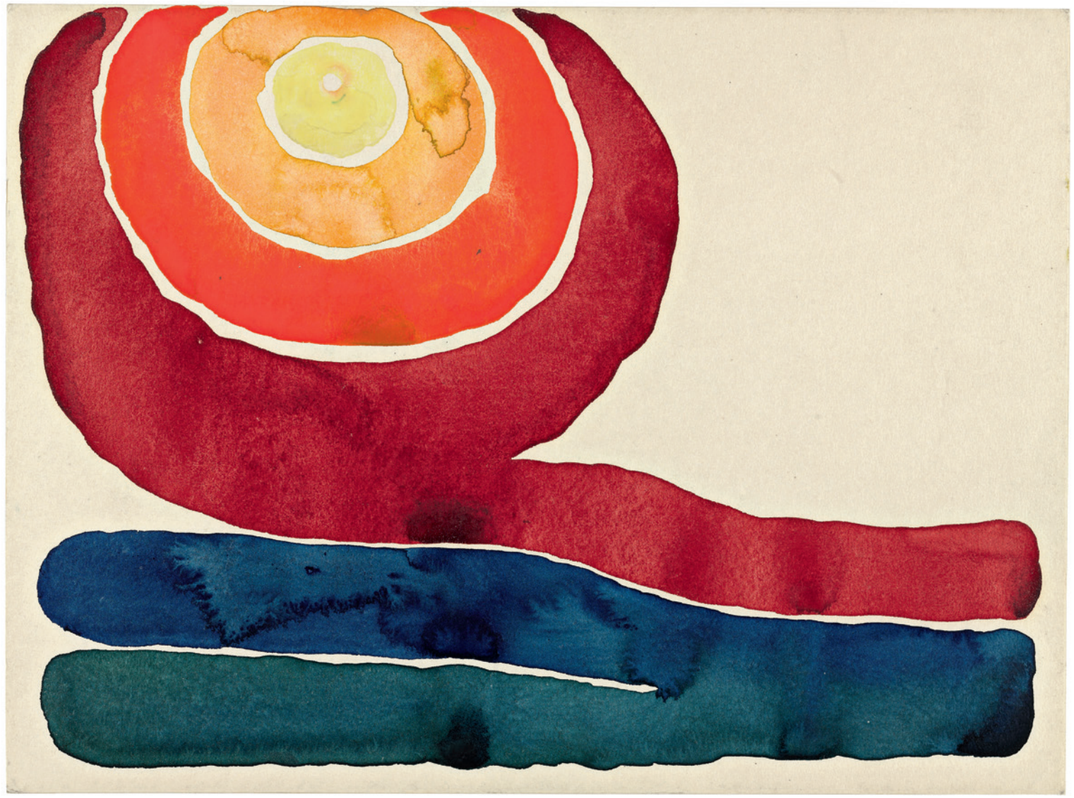
1921, published 1924. Etching, plate: 6 15/16 x 8 1/8" (17.6 x 20.7 cm), sheet: 9 7/16 x 11 1/4" (24 x 28.6 cm). Publisher: The New Republic, New York. Printer: Peter Platt. Edition: approximately 500. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, 1940

11.
Walker Evans. Untitled

c. 1928. Gelatin silver print, 2 1/2 x 1 5/8" (6.3 x 4.2 cm). Gift of Dr. Iago Galdston, 1977

12.
Ben Shahn. New York
1936. Gelatin silver print, 6 x 8 1/4" (15.2 x 21 cm). Gift of the artist, 1975

13.
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



14.

Georgia O'Keeffe. Evening Star, No. III

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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