If you haven't ever had Campbell's Soup it could be thought that you are un-American... Or at least, I think you are.

In 1962, through his 32 paintings of *Campbell's Soup Cans*, Andy Warhol fully described an American conformist society. Andy Warhol was born in 1928 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvanian (5). His parents were Czechoslovakian, and did not have much money. Warhol became the main money supplier when he was only 14. But he did not disappoint. Warhol made a huge impact in the art world by creating a new identity for art culture. En lieu of his Pop Art, many critics viewed Warhol's greatest accomplishment to be his own image (4). Warhol was one of the first artists to have such a celebrity status (5). Warhol became famous for copying common objects, similar to how housewives copied the common fashions in food and decor to keep a higher status...

*Campbell’s Soup Cans* are currently in the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA). Andy Warhol hand-painted each of the 32 Campbell's soup flavors and originally displayed them on shelves, to give it an even more "mass-produced" feel (1). The only non painted part of each soup can is the fleur de lys stamped pattern at the bottom of each can:
While these 32 paintings were hung to resemble a grocery store, they were not hung in any order until MoMA hung them in chronological order according to their introduction dates onto the market (1).

These 32 paintings were considered a transitional point in Warhol's artistic life because he switched from hand-painting to screen-printing (in which his Marilyn Monroe's and comics are famous) (4). If I painted 32 of the same image, I would switch artistic styles too! 😊

Warhol coined the Pop art movement, changing art to its current phase in our history. Pop art challenged every meaning of what an artist is. Pop art is not original: it absorbs pop culture (1). Just like Jasper Johns, Warhol chose common objects to create art on/about. However, instead of a flag, Warhol chose Campbell’s soup cans and Marylin Monroe.

‘I don’t think art should be only for the select few,’ Warhol believed, ‘I think it should be for the mass of the American people.’ (2)

In this quote, Warhol is describing a conformist and unified America. He wants his art to be relative to the mass consumption of society. Campbell’s Soup Cans points out the uniformity of Cambell’s soup cans, but also the uniformity of American citizens in Suburban Consumption. In the 50s and 60s, people were scared because of bomb threats, and thus found closure in family bonds and consumption (3). In my opinion, this increase in consumer products and labels made everyone (aka Nuclear Families) all the same. So maybe American culture was all about conformity and even over-looked because of how similar everyone seemed.

This feeling of being over-looked is displayed in Campbell's Soup Cans because every can looks the same, but when you spend time to really look, they are all different flavors and there are subtle differences. This is just like how students, women, anyone who was NOT a white middle-class man because they were over-looked on their ideals and opinions (3).

References:


Jasper Johns' *Flag*, was an innovative painting in 1945, around the time of McCarthyism during the Cold War.

Jasper Johns is probably one of my favorite artists. His painting, *Map*, is the background I chose for this American paintings blog: here it is if you didn’t notice 🌟

Around the mid 50s, America was changing after the cold war, and so was art. Officially, we were in a modern artistic era with many pioneer painters such as Pollock and Warhol. Jasper Johns was one of those pioneers, but on a different level: he switched from Pollock’s Abstract Expressionism of no-objective things to be a recognizable object instead (1). Johns focused on “things the mind already knows” because then we could leave the process and minor differences up for interpretations(1). It is almost when you see something so often that it becomes irrelevant. However, at the time of the Cold War, the American flag was very potent.

Johns was born in 1930 in Augusta, Georgia and grew up in rural South Carolina. Having served in the Korean army, Johns returned to New York in 1953, and started his patriotic paintings (2). “One night I dreamed that I painted a large American flag,” Johns has said of this work, “and the next morning I got up and I went out and bought the materials to begin it” (3)

*Flag* painted in 1944, was Johns first major painting. Johns painted a common object using newspaper (even more common of an object), wax, oil paint, and all of this on fabric that is mounted on plywood. The idea of painting common objects like a flag, map, signs, letters and numbers led Johns to create a foundation where the process and a closer examination is more appreciated (3).
From a distance, it is a flag, but closer in, you see the dates 1953 and 1952 and the words “communism” and “McCarthy” (5).

“I think a painting should include more experience than simply intended statement” (1)

This quote exemplifies Johns ability to break down the abstract process of painting and form it into a Pop Art and Conceptual art movement. What I mean is that Johns set the foundation for postmodern art by embracing common culture and objects with high levels of interpretation.

The symbol of the flag has many connotations and meanings from person to person. But to Johns, I think he was affected by being in the war and with the “McCarthy witch hunts” and wanted to paint a patriotic piece (1). Some viewers could read national pride or freedom in the image, while others may see imperialism or oppression (1).

A flag is such a black and white subject to paint, its very easy and controlled. However people viewed McCarthyism as black and white as well: communists are all bad, and capitalism is good. But weren’t there are underlying ideas behind it? Not all ‘associated communists’ were bad, but they were turned in by their brothers and sisters (4). The boldness but hidden newspaper in Johns’ Flag can be parallel to The Second Red Scare in which Americans were turning against each other (2).

I see patriotism in this painting, but maybe a little too much when it comes to the drastic measures Americans took to find Soviet spies.

References:
4. Krome-Lukens, Anna. In class notes. 2015
Indifference, 1944, is a reactionary and transitional painting by Thomas Hart Benton.

Benton was born in 1889 in Neosho, Missouri into a family of prominent politicians whose ideals focused on republicanism and populism (1). He grew up moving around the Midwest, where he saw many public murals that sparked his interest in art. Benton is mainly known for his detailed Regionalism murals during the Great Depression. However, Indifference, is one of his transition pieces from Regionalism to the soon-to-be-created abstract movement. Claiming to be an "enemy of modernism," Benton simultaneously became one of the first American artists to combine modern artistic principles into his structured artistic style (1).

For quick review, Regionalism is an artistic movement where painters focused on the working class and rural scenes, usually in response to the Great Depression.

During his mid 50s, Benton was on tour talking about American Regionalism. However, on December 7, 1941, he was interrupted during a speech to hear the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Benton was immediately struck by the awful events of D-day and left in the middle of his speech with new painting ideas to be excavated (2).

After planning his responsive pieces, it only too Benton 6 weeks to create 8 paintings: together known as the Year of Peril (2).

Indifference, created in 1944, is currently at the State Historical Society of Missouri in Columbia, MO (5). While this piece became very popular during the war effort, many magazines thought it to be too gruesome to show. It was also criticized by those who studied Salvador Dali’s surrealist works (3). Many of these critics compare Indifference to Dali’s The Persistence of Memory. Here is a view of them together:
Both paintings have a fantasy environment that is contrasted by its grim content. The use of ghastly reds and sour greens were not usually on Benton’s palate, proving that Dali influenced him. Also the vertical movement on the left side is mimicked in both paintings with a horizontal line to break up the composition. The beheaded and mangled figures in Indifference are strewn about the painting like the clocks in Dali’s work (3).

Benton used this Year of Peril series as a warning to what could happen to the United States if we did not all get behind the war effort. His vast scenery can be thought to be expanding all the way to the Mid West as a precursor to what could be. Benton wanted to display the “crude reality of violence and blood” from the war, as he stated in his essay on the Year of Peril (3, p292). He wanted it to be gruesome; to be a “warning about what the fascists might do to mainland America and to the Midwest in particular if they were to invade” (6, p118) This was his form of propaganda for the war, and soon some magazines even used his paintings for propaganda for the war effort. The Japanese were the animalistic enemy and demonized by OWI war posters (4). Japanese Americans were moved to camps because Americans feared they could hurt us from our homeland.

While The US was showing hatred towards the Japanese during WWII, American society started to reject regionalism. Many Regionalist painters wished they had never started painting before. However, Benton stated that he started to focus on nature and growth. People became an accessory and “I was thus myself moving away from regionalism” (3, p281). For Benton, it was more of a natural flow into a slightly more modern artistic style, but people wanted more. They wanted Jackson Pollock, who was coincidentally taught by Benton (3).

References:

Baptism in Kansas

FEBRUARY 17, 2015 / 0 COMMENTS

*Baptism in Kansas*, by regionalist John Steuart Curry, is a cultural and social reaction to the Great Depression.

Born on November 14, 1897 in north-eastern Kansas, John Curry learned a farmers struggle. However, he did not let this struggle affect his will to be an artist. Because of his exquisite narratives of Midwest farm life, Curry is considered one of the three most important painters of the American Regionalism movement (Whitney Museum). Curry never focused on specific historical events, but instead tried to convey heroic farmers confronting the dangerous and unforgiving prairie life (Joslyn Art Museum).

In October 1929, the economy of the United States crashed. While some deprivations were worse than others, there was a nation-wide Depression, and a nation-wide call to arms. One critic from the Whitney Museum of Art states: “Regionalism is the movement that glorified grassroots rural values during the poverty-stricken years of the Great Depression” (Whitney Museum).

*Curry’s Baptism in Kansas* c. 1928, currently located in the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, depicts many American achievements from the 1920s, but also many hardships. In 1928, the gap in economic distribution of wealth was at its highest peak in American history so far (Krome-Lunkens). Curry depicts this by showing the “pious pious hymn singers and the row of Ford Model-T cars” in contrast to the never-ending prairie and full-water submersion baptism (Whitney Museum). Now this might not seem like a huge contrast right now, but at the time, the prices to keep a prairie field seeded and mowed were unattainable to 1/3 of the American population (Krome-Lunkens). Also at the time of Curry’s childhood, 1890s, there was a state-wide drought: the local creeks were dried up, making it harder to cultivate the land and to have a river baptism, thus a water tank was the only substitute (Whitney Museum).

Curry grew up a Scottish Calvinist, and depicted that faith in many of his works. The baptism in this oil painting shows the vulnerability of people during the late 1920s. People are leaning away from the urban depression and towards “cultivation of the land, community, simplicity, and faith” (Junker). From my analysis, I view the ford cars can be seen as a depiction of urban life almost surrounding the whole scene, but if you fall back -like the woman being baptized- on old comforts of early America, one can get through the harder times. The two hovering birds, critics compare them to Noah flood, bring peace and blessing on this religious act but also towards a better future (PBS Newshour).
People wanted Regionalism: to go back to simpler times and glorify their roots. The ideals of Regionalism remind me of ten years before in history: the Great War has just ended and people were confused about their thoughts of Woodrow’s Progressivism and what it caused. This reaction sparked Harding’s post war election slogan “return to normalcy” (Krome-Lunkens). And that’s exactly what people wanted again in the late 1920, early 1930s, a return to normalcy.

References:

“Baptism in Kansas” – John Curry. Oil on Canvas. 1928. 40 1/4 × 50 1/4 in
Krome-Lukens, Anna. In class discussion. 2015

Election Night
FEBRUARY 17, 2015 / 0 COMMENTS

Election Night, by John Sloan, is a social realist portrayal of a busy urban New York City night in 1907.

John Sloan was born in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania in 1871. Sloan wanted to be an artist since he was little, but had to
pause schooling at the age of 16 to help his family's economic situation (John French Sloan). Sloan found illustration jobs for the local newspaper and later started studying art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, where he met fellow artist and friend Robert Henri. In his mid thirties, Sloan moved to Greenwich Village, NY where he focused on urban street life as his subject matter. In New York, Robert Henri created an art exhibit with Sloan and six other realist artists at the time: “The Eight.” This exhibit snowballed into the creation of the Ashcan School for American Art which focused on social realist painting (Lopate).

In the early 1900s the Ashcan School focused on the grittier side of metropolitan life: Social Realism. Social Realism is a branch of Post-Impressionism that focused on social issues of everyday life. (ARTcyclopedia). Often times, Sloan was considered “the Painter in the Crowd” (John Sloan: Figuring the Painter). What I mean by this is Sloan painted what he saw, and didn't idealize it like in the impressionism art movement.

Currently located in the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, this oil painting pulls the viewer into the scene. And that if fully “The Painter in the Crowd’s” intention; he wants you to also be in the scene. Here is the scene of Election Night written in Sloan’s Journal:

“Took a walk in the afternoon and saw boys in droves, foraging for fuel for their election fires this evening…after dinner…out again and saw the noisy trumpet blowers, confetti throwers and the “ticklers” in use—a small feather duster on a stick which is pushed in the face of each girl by the men, and in the face of men by the girls. A good humorous crowd, so dense in places that it is impossible to control one’s movement.” (John French Sloan)

“Impossible to control one’s movement” is exactly how I would describe Sloan’s oil painting; the quick brushstrokes heighten the sense of movement. This piece was very relative to the working class of New York at the time, because of the location and energy depicted in this work. While this a a very shaded and quick piece, the detailing of the Herald Building (on the painting’s left) and the elevated train tracks on Sixth Avenue are very obvious (Seeing America). The train’s light, movement and noise add to the lively feel in this scene. The early 1900s was the time of Progressivism, but to me, this scene seems the opposite of social control: a celebration! (Krome-Lunkens)

Sloan draws the viewer in with the centered woman in red. Then directional movement is created by the seemingly constant expansion of the crowd in the back. This never-ending crowd is paralleled to the “never-ending” greatness of industry in the United States (Seeing America). While the triangle of the crowd draws the viewer further back, the circular artificial lights in the top left bring focus back to the foremost celebrants.

Now the strange concept of time in this painting is that it was created in 1907, no elections were partaking: T. Roosevelt was reelected in 1904 and New York mayor, George McClellan, was safely serving in his second term (Lopate). There is nothing in the painting about the outcome – no posters or anything. But many critics state: while John Sloan was known as a socialist, he did not want to be a social/political commentator in his work (Krome-Lunkens). So the ‘Election of 1907’ is a mystery to me, but could just be a depiction of another election night in years past.

Most importantly is that Sloan stuck to his new style, creating a new art movement: social realism. Elite critics called Sloan’s work “vulgar” and “disturbing” – lacking beauty (Coco). But it was just an accurate portrayal or lower class/working class citizens.

References:


The Cotton Pickers

January 27, 2015 / 0 Comments

"The Cotton Pickers," painted by Winslow Homer in 1876, is a mix between realism and impressionism displaying heroic plantation workers.

Homer was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1836. Mostly self taught, Homer was a landscape painter and a print-maker. Homer is renown for his expressive facial renderings of 'unusual,' rural subjects. Homer studied and painted in Europe in the later part of his life, impacting his style. However, this new stylistic development helped Homer display ‘unusual’ muses as graceful and heroic. Because of his realism and sensitivity towards his subjects, Homer is known as “first American consistently to paint African Americans without the prevailing attitudes of condescension and sentimentality” (LAMCA).

As seen in "The Cotton Pickers," there is a realistic view of these slave-like workers: it is early morning and the two women have already filled their baskets full of cotton. There is no sugar-coating the fact that they have probably been working before dawn. Black codes are forcing these women into an inevitable cycle of labor. But the slave women are looking onward... They are surrounded in a hazy Impressionistic swirl of oppression but are keeping a stoic and determined face. They have been glorified by Homer.

Now what was happening at history at the time was rather poignant. In 1876, the date “The Cotton Pickers” was painted, Federal troops were being taken out of the south. Reconstruction was coming to an end, and the Federal Government decided to switch from helping their new vulnerable citizens, to helping rich industrialists fight labor unions. The years right before Homer painted "The Cotton Pickers," African-Americans had hopes of drastic improvement. But this idealism was short lived, as racism and a newer harsher form of black codes (Jim Crow Laws) was soon to be created.

In contrast to the new disappointment in many southern Freedmen, Homer still paints these two women fieldworkers with sympathy and strength. He paints with a low vantage point, making the women take the whole composition. The
women are not fatigued, but erect: exemplifying their will-power to withhold their current circumstances. The woman to
the right in red looks defiant, an attitude which will help in the future.

Again, as the woman in red looks onward to the left, we can notice how the background changes from right to left: from
one tree to a forest. Or it can be interpreted as one hope turning into a unified force of change: a prediction for the civil
rights movement.

References:

“American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life.” Art for Change. 2010 http://art-for-a-change.com/blog/2010/03/american-
stories-paintings-of-everyday-life.html


“The Cotton Pickers” – Winslow Homer. Oil on canvas. 1876. 24 1/16 x 38 1/8 inches


Lackawanna Valley

THE LACKAWANNA VALLEY, painted by George Inness in 1856, displays a transition not only in the art world, but also in
American history.

George Inness, born in 1825 in Newburgh, New York, was a famous American landscape painter. Inness studied under
masters in the Hudson River School where he developed a spiritual expression in his paintings. Inness is known for his
realistic work through the Tonalist movement and unique American style.

“The Lackawanna Valley” is changing from Romanticism to Realism. Artistically, there is a happy, ‘rose-tinted’ background
but also a harsh, stumped tree-scape in the foreground. In a historical sense, there is a celebration of the transcontinental
railway; but there is also the reality of the environmental impact.
My initial reactions to this painting included the use of muted colors (Tonalism) and a lonesome, large tree in the left foreground. This painting emphasizes the tree by mere size, the train smoke and roundhouse I feel are also emphasized by the use of light. The boy’s red sweater also pops. From these observations, I came to realize this painting would be relative to the topic of westward expansion and its impacts.

Many critics view “The Lackawanna Valley” as a harmonious piece between nature, machine, and progress. This is a more Romantic view because harmony and progress overlook the negative impacts of the industrial revolution. This progress demonstrated only by the progressing train, but also by the completed roadhouse. Inness was commissioned by the president of the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad to paint this valley scene with the intended roadhouse completed to show viewers what glory it would behold. The boy in red is thought to be admiring the beauty of the train. This admiration of machines was very common at the time: as noted in class, the Corliss Steam Engine was viewed as a revolutionary work of art in a museum.

When looking at the painting, the railroad splits it into thirds: 1/3 civilization, 1/3 tree stumps, and 1/3 woods and farmland. While some think the thirds in a rhythmic flow of progress, I see it as a juxtaposition and it’s result. What I mean by this is that I see the mixture between machine and nature resulting in the destruction of the environment and the creatures living in it. This reminds me of a moment in class when we talked of the mass killing of Buffalo in the west to make room for the expanding railway.

(image from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bison_skull_pile,_ca1870.png)

So instead of this progressive Romantic view some critics have, I think Inness wanted to display destruction. With “the swath of tree stumps” in the foreground and the roadhouse in the background, it is implied that the boy in red is overlooking and contemplating the impact of western expansion. The boy in red is almost in the shadow (or protection) of the tree. How ironic.

References:


Inness, George. The Lackawanna Valley c. 1856. Oil on canvas. 86 x 127.5 cm

Krome-Lukens, Anna. In class discussion. 2015
