American Moderns, 1910–1960: From O’Keeffe to Rockwell
Mobile Tour Script

GREETING

Hello, this is Jack Becker, Executive Director and CEO of Joslyn Art Museum, and it is my pleasure to welcome you to the exhibition: American Moderns 1910 – 1960: From O’Keeffe to Rockwell. American Art underwent a dramatic transformation between 1910 and 1960, as artists absorbed the latest innovations in European painting and then reformulated prevailing traditions at home in search of new ways to portray contemporary life. The United States was emerging on the international stage as an economic, industrial, and military power, yet also struggled with two world wars and the Great Depression. Urbanization and new technologies altered our daily lives, and an increasingly diverse population re-shaped social norms.

This rich and exciting exhibition from the Brooklyn Museum explores the ways American artists addressed these challenges and engaged an ever more modern society. Join Toby Jurovics, Joslyn’s chief curator, and me as we narrate this tour highlighting fifteen paintings in the exhibition, introducing you to the major artists, themes, and styles of American modernism.

Thank you to our presenting sponsor, Omaha Steaks, and our major sponsors, Peter Kiewit Sons and Douglas County, for their generous support of this exhibition and tour. To show your support, please consider becoming a Joslyn member. I hope you enjoy your time with us, and I encourage you to tell your friends and family about the exhibition. I look forward to seeing you in the galleries.
STOP #1 – Marsden Hartley, *Handsome Drinks*, 1916

Marsden Hartley spent three years in Europe before the outbreak of World War One, where he was exposed firsthand to the latest developments in modern art. In Paris, he frequented the salon of Leo and Gertrude Stein, who hosted gatherings of vanguard artists and writers in their art-filled home. In Germany, he befriended Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, leading German expressionists who emphasized the spiritual significance of color.

*Handsome Drinks* shows Hartley’s assimilation of these influences in a unique approach that integrates Cubist elements and Expressionist color with personal significance. The multiple perspectives and the café theme evoke the cubist compositions of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, while its suggestion of several friends gathered for drinks may symbolize the camaraderie that Hartley enjoyed during this period of his artistic life. The glass of green absinthe – a potent drink associated with European café life – represented a social society that Hartley found extraordinarily stimulating.
STOP #2 – George Lovett Kingsland Morris, *Wall-Painting*, 1936

*Wall-Painting* was completed over the summer and fall of 1936. Later, George Morris’ dealer suggested he “freshen up” the painting for his 1944 Downtown Gallery solo show, since clients “always wanted to have the latest,” so Morris added a number “44” to the date.

Morris’s artistic philosophy and his mature style, as seen in this painting, was particularly influenced by his teacher Ferdinand Leger, a French artist who sought to merge modern abstract styles with classic themes of the past. Countering prevailing attitudes that abstract art was both un-American and elitist, Morris and the American Abstract Artists, a group that he co-founded, asserted that an authentic national art could be created by combining the precision, harmony, and rational structure of European Cubism, with references to America’s unique culture and identity. Indeed, the floral patterns seen in the composition were based on wallpaper samples taken from an old demolished house.
Max Weber was born into an Orthodox Jewish family in Bialystok, in modern day Poland. In 1891 the Webers immigrated to Brooklyn, where Webber studied at the Pratt Institute. Between 1905 and 1908, he was in Paris, where he became one of the first Americans to fully absorb the new artistic theories of Cubism. When Weber returned to New York in 1908, he embarked on a period of intense stylistic experimentation, executing energetic scenes of New York City streets, buildings, and cafes. Taking up more traditional subjects after World War One, as many European and American artists did, he painted bathers – inspired by the earlier canvases of Paul Cezanne and Henri Matisse, still lifes, and scenes like this one of Jewish life.

*The Visit* combines the sophisticated compositions of Cubism – fragmenting the room and its inhabitants into multiple planar facets – with a modest domestic scene of a courtship or Sabbath gathering. Weber began painting nostalgic scenes of Jewish life in 1918, possibly in response to the pogroms (that were then decimating Jewish populations in his native Eastern Europe.)
THE STILL LIFE REVISITED

STOP #4 – Maurice Brazil Prendergast

Flowers in a Vase is one of a series of about twenty-four still-life paintings that Maurice Prendergast made between 1910 and 1913, which were a departure from his usual subject matter of people at leisure in parks or at the beach. Inspired by recent currents in Post-Impressionism – in particular, the ground breaking still life compositions of Paul Cezanne and Henri Matisse – that he saw on a 1907 trip to Paris, Prendergast began experimenting with a more vivid palette and a vigorous application of paint. One of the first American artists to recognize the importance of European modernism, Prendergast was actively involved in progressive art circles. He exhibited with The Eight, a group of realist artists led by Robert Henri, who concentrated on portraying both the vitality of the city and recording its seamy side, with a keen eye on current events and social concerns. Prendergast also helped to organize the International Exhibition of Modern Art, known as the Armory Show in 1913, a groundbreaking show of over 1,300 works of European Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism that changed the course of modern art in America.
STOP #5 – Georgia O’Keeffe, *Black Pansy and Forget-Me-Not*, 1926

Georgia O’Keeffe’s career began in earnest following the first exhibition of her work at Alfred Stieglitz’s gallery 291 in 1916. He became her mentor, and the two eventually married in 1924. The circle of artists that gathered around Stieglitz and his gallery – including Alfred Maurer, Max Weber and Marsden Hartley – offered both camaraderie and intellectual stimulation, but O’Keeffe increasingly sought her creative inspiration and escape in nature – in places removed from the New York art scene. Annual trips to the Stieglitz family’s summer home in Lake George, New York, provided the subject for her painting *2 Yellow Leaves*, seen nearby.

The still life *Black Pansy and Forget-Me-Not* offers an even more bold and striking composition. O’Keeffe explained, “When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it…it’s your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else. Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower.” O’Keeffe was also influenced by the modernist photographs of her colleagues, including Paul Strand and Imogen Cunningham, who made highly detailed but abstracted close-ups of plants and flowers.
Throughout a career marked by constant wandering and stylistic experimentation, Marsden Hartley returned again and again to floral still lifes, often when he felt uninspired by his current surroundings or wanted to delve into the purely formal concerns of painting. In 1935, Hartley needed an emotional escape after he was forced to destroy more than a hundred paintings because he could not afford the storage costs. To restore his flagging spirits, his dealer sent him to Bermuda, where Hartley reworked the motif of a floral arrangement on a window ledge that he had first developed decades earlier during a 1917 visit to the island. Sunday on the Reefs is one of his later depictions of the subject that Hartley called “fancies” because they depict flowers drawn purely from imagination and memory, rather than from flora native to Bermuda. More evocative than descriptive, the painting’s title suggests a leisurely day in the tropics.
BEGINNING IN 1929, GEORGIA O’KEEFFE MADE ANNUAL TRIPS FROM NEW YORK CITY TO NEW MEXICO, SETTLING THERE PERMANENTLY IN 1949. SHE FELL IN LOVE WITH THE AUSTERE BEAUTY OF THE SOUTHWEST AND INCORPORATED MOTIFS SHE ENCOUNTERED – GEOLOGICAL FORMATIONS, DESERT PLANTS, ANIMAL BONES, ADobe HOMES, AND INDIGENOUS HISPANIC CULTURE – INTO HER ARTISTIC THEMES.

LATER IN HER CAREER, O’KEEFFE FOUND NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN THE AERIAL VIEW. HER SERIES OF ABSTRACT LANDSCAPES INSPIRED BY FLIGHTS IN A SMALL PLANE CONSTITUTED ONE OF THE FINAL GROUPS OF PAINTINGS SHE MADE BEFORE FAILING HEALTH AND EYESIGHT REDUCED HER PRODUCTIVITY. IN MANY WAYS, *GREEN, YELLOW, AND ORANGE* RECasts THE ISSUES THAT CONCERNED O’KEEFFE OVER THE COURSE OF HER LONG CAREER, SUCH AS ISOLATING ELEMENTAL FORMS OF NATURE THROUGH ABSTRACTION, IDENTIFYING A DEEP EMOTIONAL RESONANCE IN THE LANDSCAPE, AND OFFERING AN UNEXPECTED PERSPECTIVE ON THE FAMILIAR. THIS PAINTING SUGGESTS A WESTERN RIVER WITH ITS BANKS FLANKED BY THIRSTY TREES AS IT MEANDERS THROUGH ARID DESERT TERRAIN, ALTHOUGH HER REFERENCE TO A SPECIFIC PLACE IS ALMOST ENTIRELY SUBSUMED BY THE FORCE OF HER ABSTRACT COMPOSITION.
STOP #8 – Arthur G. Dove, *Flat Surfaces*, 1946

Arthur Dove began his career as an illustrator for popular magazines, but he decided to change directions after a trip to Paris in 1907, where he met his fellow Americans Alfred Maurer and Max Weber. Although a member of Alfred Stieglitz’s circle—a prominent photographer, gallery owner, and promoter of modern art in New York—Dove preferred to live and work outside the city in close proximity to nature. Considered one of the first American artists to produce purely nonrepresentational pictures, he developed a highly personalized and constantly evolving approach to abstraction in which he used form and color to express his deep spiritual feelings about the natural world and its vital forces. Dove’s work shares an affinity with Georgia O’Keeffe, who credited Dove as an important influence, and critics often compared the two artists. *Flat Surfaces* was made during a final campaign of visual experimentation that, despite his failing health, saw Dove move toward an even greater degree of flatness and simplification of forms.
STOP #9 – Joseph Stella, *The Virgin*, 1926

Inspired by the natural beauty and artistic heritage of his native Italy, Joseph Stella made a series of paintings of the Virgin Mary. In both its religious subject matter and archaizing style, his modern Madonna recalls the early Renaissance paintings and popular devotional imagery that he saw while traveling there in 1926. Stella explained, “The beauty which smiles all around, here, in Italy, from innumerable masterpieces, spurs me to create a new Beauty equal in power to the old one.” Stella’s ‘New Beauties,’ which included paintings of the Virgin as well as mythological goddesses and other heroic women, were a drastic departure from his earlier cubist-inspired paintings that celebrated the modern wonders of his adopted city of New York. In the 1920s, Stella was among many American and European artists who turned to more traditional subjects and naturalistic styles in response to the disillusionment caused by World War One.
Throughout his long career, Stuart Davis drew inspiration from the contemporary American experience, particularly its consumer products and advertising, technological advances, jazz music, and urban environments. A politically active and polemical artist, Davis worked in the realist style of his teacher Robert Henri, leader of the Ashcan School, until seeing the Armory Show in 1913 – the first major exhibition of European modern art in America.

Convinced to experiment with modernist abstraction, by the 1920s Davis had developed his distinctive artistic vocabulary of sharply defined, intersecting planes, derived from Cubism. He was also deeply interested in theoretical concerns and kept voluminous journals of his ideas. His paintings of the early 1940s, like Landscape with Clay Pipe, articulate his newly developed “color space theory,” in which juxtapositions of different color values suggested spatial depth based on how certain hues appear to advance or recede from the perspective of the viewer.
STOP #11 – Isabel Lydia Whitney, *The Blue Peter, 1927-28*

*The Blue Peter* is one of a dozen or so works that Isabel Lydia Whitney painted of her Brooklyn neighborhood, whose high bluffs overlooked the East River and New York harbor. The daughter of a wealthy silk manufacturer, Whitney grew up in Brooklyn Heights, a prosperous and elegant residential neighborhood overlooking. By the late 1920s, many of the district’s old families were worried about the imminent decay of their once-genteel community as many stately mansions were turned into boarding houses or demolished to make way for new apartment towers. Reflecting these concerns, Whitney’s paintings recorded both the area’s beloved old landmarks and signs of the intrusion of waterfront commerce and manufacturing. These small canvases also offered her a welcome respite from her larger and more demanding mural commissions for private homes and clubs.
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STOP #12 – Francis Criss, City Landscape, 1934

This painting’s generic title, the For Sale and For Rent signs, and the word Trust inscribed above the bank door suggest an ironic commentary of the deflated economy of the 1930s. In contrast, economic growth and prosperity are embodied by the new building and the row of V8 automobiles, Ford’s latest model which are also advertised on the billboard at far right. Produced from 1932 to 1934, the V8 was the first low-priced, mass-market car with a high-performance engine, and the preferred getaway car of the infamous bank robbers Bonnie and Clyde!

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Francis Criss was primarily known for Precisionist cityscapes like this one, which reduced factories, skyscrapers, street signs, lamp posts, and elevated subway tracks to colorful arrangements of geometric shapes and lines. After the Depression, he designed posters for the US Office of War Information and worked mainly as an art teacher, muralist, and commercial artist.
Max Weber and Abraham Walkowitz, both Russian-born New Yorkers, first encountered Paul Cezanne’s paintings at an exhibition in Paris in 1906, shortly after the French painter’s death. The two friends sought out Cezanne’s work and studies in galleries around the city, and Weber purchased a set of photographs of Cezanne’s paintings that he likely used as models for his own canvases.

After returning to New York, the two artists continued their friendship, sharing a studio and becoming closely associated with 291, the leading modern art gallery in New York. Run by the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, 291 exhibited the most important modernist artists from Europe and the United States. Although Weber had a falling out with Stieglitz and severed ties with Walkowitz soon after, Walkowitz kept this portrait as a reminder of their friendship and the camaraderie of their student years together in Europe.
STOP #14 – Guy Pene du Bois, *Evening*, 1929

After twenty years as a reporter, writer, art critic, and part-time artist, Guy Pene du Bois quit his day job in 1924 and took his family to Paris for an extended stay. There, he was able to focus solely on his art career, painting numerous depictions of people attending parties and social events – subjects that continued to interest him after his return to America five years later.

Pene du Bois’s satirical depictions of high society often focused on intimate conversations between men and women. He frequently painted stiff figures with mask-like faces, suggesting social alienation beneath the glitter and gloss of the party scene. Despite his figures’ physical closeness, their expressions are inscrutable and their actions and motives remain a mystery.
STOP #15 – Norman Rockwell

Born in New York City in 1894, Norman Rockwell always wanted to be an artist. At age 14, he enrolled in art classes at The New York School of Art, and two years later, he left high school to study art at The National Academy of Design. Rockwell found success early working as an independent illustrator by the age of 16, and he painted his first cover for The Saturday Evening Post when he was only 22. Rockwell called the magazine the “greatest show window in America,” and he painted another 321 covers for The Post over the next 47 years.

Rockwell’s naturalistic style, charming characterizations, and clearly legible narratives of small-town life made him one of America’s most beloved illustrators. To achieve the exacting realism in his paintings, Rockwell relied heavily on photographs and detailed preparatory studies. He enlisted his friends and neighbors in Arlington, Vermont, as models. And in this painting, a local farmer played the role of the sailor and another illustrator, Mead Schaeffer, stood in for the tattoo artist. While Rockwell’s images are generally perceived as straightforward reflections of American life, he also painted pictures that illustrated some of his deepest concerns and interests, including civil rights, and America’s war on poverty.