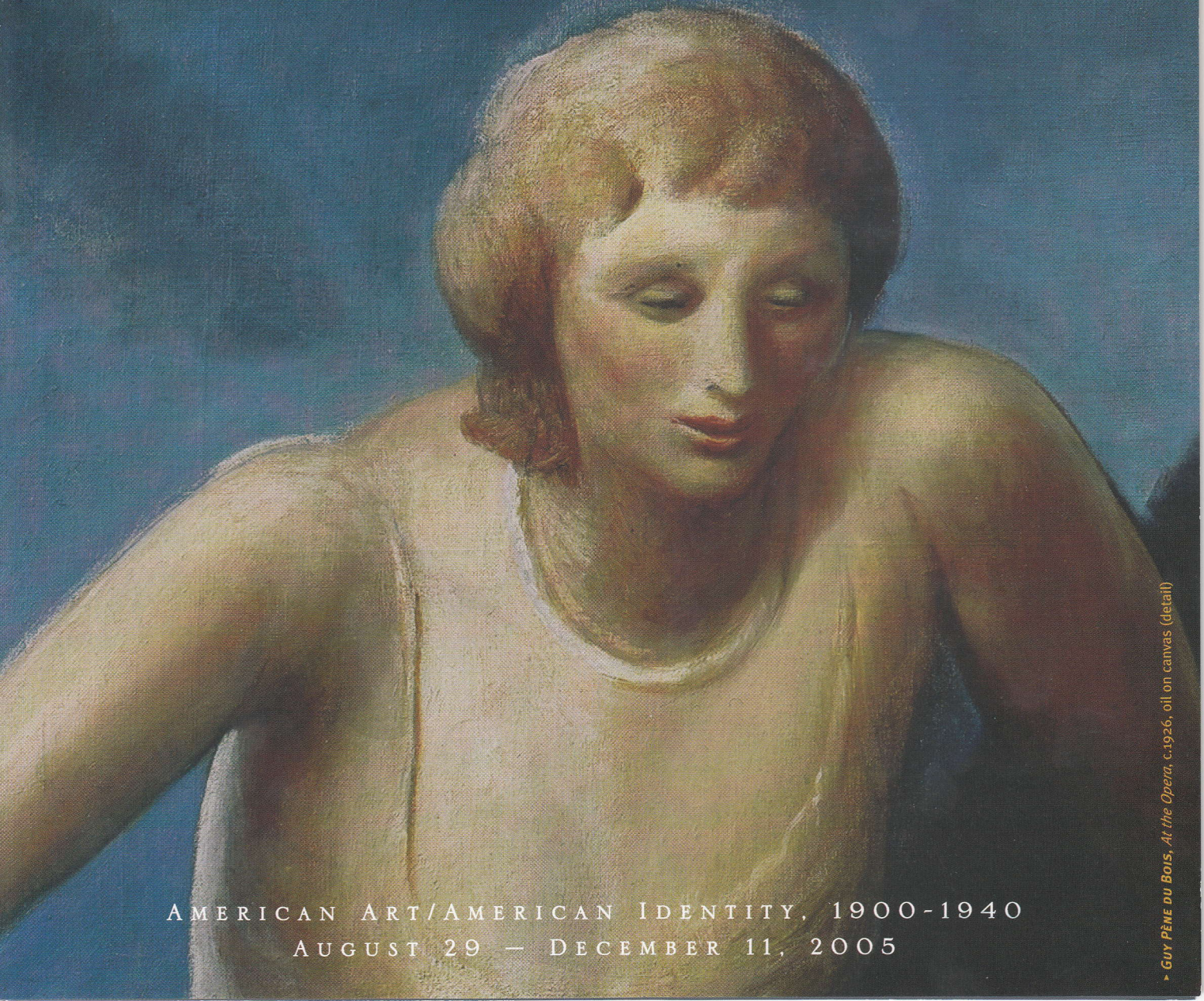


HIDEOUS BEAUTY



AMERICAN ART/AMERICAN IDENTITY, 1900-1940
AUGUST 29 — DECEMBER 11, 2005

We begin with the opening decade of the 20th-century with examples of works of art from the **ASHCAN SCHOOL**, so named for its depiction of unglamorous, cheerless subject matter rooted in the gritty vernacular of modern American life. Known



► **THOMAS HART BENTON**, *Sunset*, 1941, lithograph

ASHCAN SCHOOL – Group of artists active from about 1908 to WWI, who had worked as artist-reporters in Philadelphia and who, upon moving to New York City, used their talent for rapid on-the-spot sketching in depicting scenes of modern everyday life, often the seedier side of slum life and social outcasts.

collectively as ‘The Eight,’ this group of young rebels were frustrated by the conservatism of art instruction at the National Academy of Design where artistic experimentation was discouraged, and where they were often excluded from official public exhibition. They scandalized the public with their first and only independent group exhibition at the Macbeth Gallery in New York City in 1908, led by Robert Henri and including those artists represented in this exhibition: John Sloan, William Glackens, Everett Shinn, and George Luks. These artists, the majority of whom began their careers as illustrators for news journals in Philadelphia (a practice soon to be superseded by the technology of photography), were encouraged by Henri to paint the American scene. And so they emphasized the seediness, and sometimes squalor, of contemporary urban life, bringing with them from their artist-reporter days a draftsman’s freshness of observation and an unsentimental fascination for the transient, everyday texture of American life – its people, places, attitudes and events. These artists set about capturing an American identity that took full account of the conditions of work and leisure, class and gender, and, given the rising tide of foreign immigration, race and ethnicity. While ‘The Eight’ exhibited

EUROPEAN MODERNISM – a general term to describe the artistic experimentation that characterized the early modern era in Europe: for instance, the use of expressive color and brushstroke in Van Gogh and the Post-Impressionists; the intensely non-naturalist color and design of Matisse and the Fauves; the distortions of space in the Cubism of Picasso and Braque; the exaggerations of shape and color in German Expressionism; and the irrational dream-world of Surrealism.

as a group only this one time, their influence, and in many cases their teaching and mentorship, is felt in the work of many of the other artists exhibited here, including Kenneth Hayes Miller, Isabel Bishop, Peggy Bacon, Alexander Kruse, and Carl Sprinchorn.

This hard-won and relatively brief leadership of the American art vanguard, was eclipsed, however, by a single sensational event: the so-called Armory Show of 1913 (the International Exhibition of Modern Art). The exhibition was held in New York City at the 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue and was a landmark event that completely changed the American art scene by introducing American audiences to the whole mainstream of experimental **EUROPEAN MODERNISM**. Almost immediately there was evidence of a shift in American art making and collecting, with new galleries specializing in modern painting and sculpture that catered to the tastes and aspirations of a certain class of modern, up-to-date American.

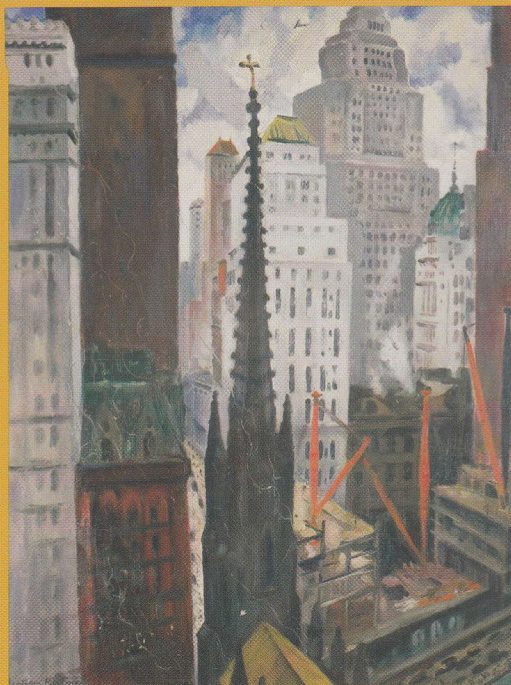
Yet there re-emerged in the 1930s - a period precipitated by the Wall Street crash of 1929 and closing with America's entry into World War II in Europe - a group of young artists who were deeply concerned about the social and economic problems of the day, and who, through their art, commented on these issues directly and unambiguously. It was a period of both economic depression and political liberalism, and many of these artists were committed to social reform and a vision of a new, non-capitalist America. This is the art of Depression America which, in its literal attention to subject matter and moralizing attitude, was often regarded negatively as mere 'illustration' and banal 'anecdote.' It was indeed an art that unapologetically chronicled contemporary figures in contemporary dress and settings, and its subject matter was the ordinary stuff of what artists saw around them. During these years both art and politics saw an inward-turning focus on themes that were felt to be intrinsically American, like urban poverty and agrarian plight - what one artist called the "hideous beauty" of America. These artists concentrated on 'American' themes, whether in naïve optimism and celebration of the values of 'middle America' or in exposing and attacking the political and economic system that had produced the sufferings of the Great Depression.

Another crucial event around this time was the establishment, under the New Deal administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, of huge welfare programs and work-relief schemes beginning in 1933 (known as the **WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION**), which were designed both to regenerate the economy and enable people to maintain themselves above the poverty line. An important subdivision of the WPA was the **FEDERAL ART PROJECT** (1935-1943) which employed artists to produce works of art as a way to earn their subsistence. At its peak, the FAP (which also included writers and musicians) employed more than 5,300 artists, producing more than 4,500 public murals, 19,000 sculptures, and more than 450,000 paintings and prints. Funded by the government, which effectively operated as a kind of aesthetic watchdog, 'naturalist' or 'democratic realist' representational styles were encouraged. The chief idea was that art should be immediately intelligible and that it should be both intellectually and emotionally accessible to all people rather than to an expert elite. One conservative critic, Thomas Craven, who was an outspoken proponent of this ideal, urged artists in 1934: *'We can no longer turn away from the significance of the subject matter of art. America lies before us, stricken with economic pains, but eager for the voice of criticism, and in desperate need of spiritual consolations. Shall we face the situation like honest workmen; or shall we hide in the dark tower and paint evasive arabesques on an ivory wall? Again and again, with all the temper at my command, I have exhorted artists to remain at home in a familiar background, to enter emotionally into strong native tendencies, to have done with alien cultural fetishes. And at this critical moment, I repeat the exhortation.'* Dominant among these artists and a favorite of critics like Craven, was Thomas Hart Benton who virulently, and with undisguised racism during this time of unprecedented immigration, promoted a rugged artistic nationalism against a high-brow, overly sophisticated European Modernism. An advocate of undefiled Americanism, Benton argued: *'The United States is invaded by aliens, thousands of whom constitute so many acute perils to the health of the body politic... these movements have been promoted by types not yet fitted for the first papers in aesthetic naturalization - the makers of Ellis Island art... In spite of all your cultural whoopings to the contrary, art cannot be imported. It has to grow.'*

'HIDEOUS BEAUTY': AMERICAN ART/AMERICAN IDENTITY, 1900-1940 explores

the connections between the realist impulse in the development of modern art in America – the desire to depict the commonplace and the recognizable – and the whole social and political tradition that shaped American national identity from the turn of the 20th century to America's entry into the Second World War. All of the works on view are from the Sordani Art Gallery's own permanent collection, rich with examples of the various definitions and interpretations of **REALISM** as a social-political ideal and as a distinctly American art style, a style and an ideal modeled on the values of common sense pragmatism and practicality.

REALISM – refers in art to a desire to depict things accurately and objectively, without idealization, and often with an emphasis on low life subjects or the ordinary activities of common man. 'Social Realism' is a term that applies to realist art that makes overt social and political comment.



► BERTRAM HARTMAN, *Razing of No. 1 Wall Street, 1929*, oil on canvas

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Established in 1973, and named for the late Andrew J. Sordoni, former State senator from Northeastern Pennsylvania and prominent businessman, the Sordoni Art Gallery holds a permanent collection of more than 1,200 objects that include European and American works on paper from the 17th century to the present; European art from the 19th century; a small collection of American decorative arts; and American paintings from the 19th century to the present. Through an ambitious year-round exhibition schedule which features artists of regional, national, and international renown, and through a commitment to education, the Sordoni Art Gallery has earned a reputation as a professionally recognized and respected center for the study and appreciation of visual art. For students, faculty and members of the community, the Sordoni Art Gallery is a different kind of classroom – a place for active looking, talking, learning, thinking, and enjoying.



SORDONI ART GALLERY



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