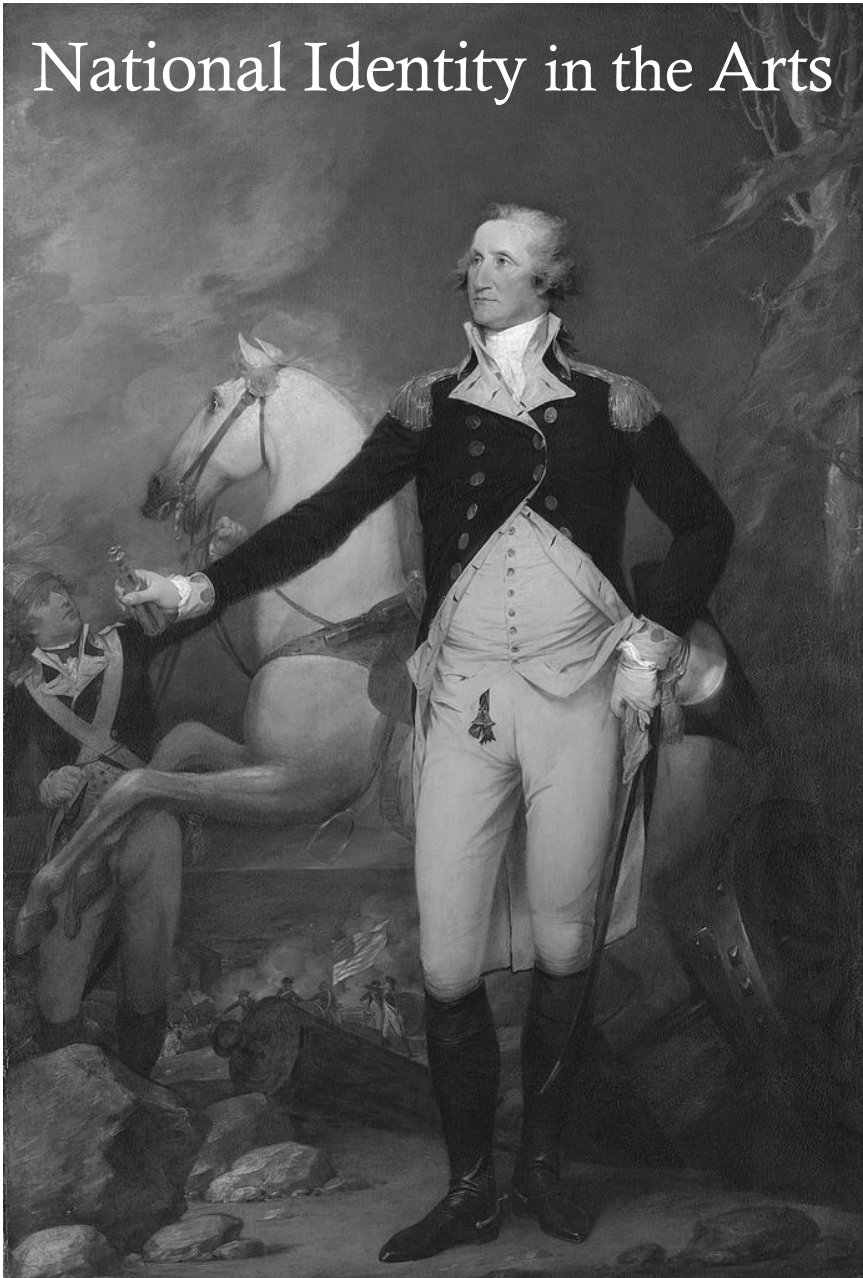


National Identity in the Arts



10. What is American about American Art?

November 29, 2022

What is American about American Art?

THE ASSERTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE ARTS typically involves a negotiation between myth and reality. Myth need not preclude facts: General Washington taking his troops across the River Delaware on Christmas night 1776 is a fact; Emanuel Leutze's 1851 painting, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, is a building block in the national myth. As a country of immigrants, the young America lacked a common mythology of her own, and attempts to coopt one from the original inhabitants were only partially successful. So she has relied to a great extent on mythologizing her history, the unique features of her land, and a set of quasi-religious beliefs linking that land to her destiny.

But by the late 1900s, an opposite tendency was emerging: Realism. It can be seen in the poetry of Walt Whitman, in the painting of the Ashcan School, and the Regionalist writers and artists of the interwar years. It is an esthetic that rejects foreign standards and is determined to show America just as she is, smokestacks, slums, and all. It is not the only approach—throughout the century, it would coexist with abstraction—but it is one that I see as distinctly American . rb.

A. History at Home and Abroad

The paradox that many of the iconic artworks celebrating American history were created either outside this country, or by immigrant artists born elsewhere. [Note: the slide lists are representative only.]

Sully: *The Passage of the Delaware* (1819, Boston MFA)

Leutze: *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851, NY Met)

Bingham: *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1856–71, Norfolk)

West: *Franklin Drawing Electricity from the Sky* (1816, Philadelphia)

West: *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770, Ottawa)

Trumbull: *Declaration of Independence* (1786–1817, US Congress)

♪ **Ancestry.com:** *Declaration Descendants* (TV ad, 2017)

B. The Other Americans

The representation of the American Indian in literature and art, and various attempts to learn from or harness indigenous cultures

♪ **Michael Mann:** *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), final sequence

Catlin: *Stu-mick-o-sucks* (1832, Smithsonian)

♪ **Coleridge-Taylor:** *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* (1898), excerpt

C. Nature and Nature's God

19th-century depictions of the American landscape, whether in words, paint, or sound, were typically bound up with a belief that it was the specific gift of God to the American people.

Leutze: *Westward the Course of Empire* (1861, US Capitol)

Church: *Niagara Falls* (1857, Washington NGA)

♪ **Fry:** *Niagara Symphony* (opening)

♪ **Bryant:** *To a Waterfowl* (video by Carl Peterson)

♪ **Whitman:** *Leaves of Grass* (Tom O'Bedlam)

♪ **Whitman:** *A noiseless, patient spider*, ill. Jeremiah Dickey

D. Badges of National Identity

A brief summation of the first hour, founded largely on myth-making, and an introduction to the topic of the second hour: Realism.

E. Out of the Ash Can

The artists of the Ashcan School in the early 1900s rejected European models to offer a view of urban America that was seldom pretty, but often suffused with humanity. Some poets and composers followed suit.

Bellows: *Men of the Docks* (1912, London NG)

Sloan: *Sixth Avenue and 30th Street* (1907, Philadelphia)

Sloan: *Six o'Clock, Winter* (1912, Washington, Phillips)

Bellows: *Cliff Dwellers* (1913, Los Angeles)

♪ **Sheeler and Strand:** *Manhatta* (1921), with **Varèse:** *Amériques*

Sloan: *McSorley's Bar* (1912, Detroit)

F. Silence

A few artists of the interwar period turned off the noise and city bustle of American Realism to offer instead an art of total silence, whether to emphasize a pristine ordered vision, or to explore human loneliness.

Hopper: *Automat* (1927, Des Moines)

Sheeler: paintings at the Ford plant, River Rouge (1930–31)

G. Regional Realities

Another characteristic of literature and the arts of the interwar period was to reject New York esthetics and focus instead on the life and values of middle America—although not all their depictions were positive.

Curry: *Baptism in Kansas* (1928, NY Whitney)

Wood: *Stone City, Iowa* (1930, Omaha)

♪ **Video:** Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*

♪ **Steinbeck/Ford:** *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), diner scene

♪ **Benton:** *America Today* (1931), w/Copland: *Music for the Theatre*

Artists, Composers, and Writers

George **Bellows** (1882–1925, *painter*), Thomas Hart **Benton** (1889–1975, *painter*), Albert **Bierstadt** (1830–1902, *painter*), William **Billings** (1746–1800, *composer*), George Caleb **Bingham** (1811–79, *painter*), William Cullen **Bryant** (1794–1878, *poet*), George **Catlin** (1796–1872, *painter*), Frederic Edwin **Church** (1826–1900, *painter*), Thomas **Cole** (1801–48, *painter*), Samuel **Coleridge-Taylor** (1875–1912, *composer*), James Fenimore **Cooper** (1789–1851, *novelist*), Aaron **Copland** (1900–90, *composer*), John Steuart **Curry** (1897–1946, *painter*), Ralph Waldo **Emerson** (1803–82, *philosopher*), William Henry **Fry** (1813–64, *composer*), Robert **Henri** (1865–1929, *painter*), Alexandre **Hogue** (1898–1994, *painter*), Edward **Hopper** (1882–1967, *painter*), Emanuel **Leutze** (1816–68, *painter*), Sinclair **Lewis** (1885–1951, *novelist*), Henry Wadsworth **Longfellow** (1807–82, *poet*), John **Neagle** (1796–1865, *painter*), Carl **Sandburg** (1878–1967, *poet*), Charles **Sheeler** (1883–1965, *painter*), John **Sloan** (1871–1951, *painter*), Edward **Steichen** (1879–1973, *photographer*), John **Steinbeck** (1902–68, *novelist*), Thomas **Sully** (1783–1872, *painter*), Henry David **Thoreau** (1817–62, *philosopher*), John **Trumbull** (1756–1843, *painter*), John **Vanderlyn** (1775–1852, *painter*), Edgard **Varèse** (1883–1965, *composer*), Benjamin **West** (1738–1820, *painter*), Walt **Whitman** (1819–92, *poet*), Grant **Wood** (1892–1942, *painter*)