

# 10: What's American about American Art?

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## A. History at Home and Abroad

### 1. Section title 1 (Miller/Paine: *The Star-Spangled Banner*)

The topic today is “What’s American about American Art?” I have done a certain amount on this in our first class, and also in other courses, so today I am going to pick on various bits and pieces, without any claim to total coverage. My first section focuses on subjects from American history. The title picture is the *Battle of Fort McHenry* by the Baltimore painter, **Alfred Jacob Miller** (1810–74). The music is a short section of the *Concert Variations on the Star-Spangled Banner* (1861), by **John Knowles Paine** (1839–1906), in which he turns the theme into a fugue.

### 2. William Billings, with score of “I am the Rose of Sharon”

Music in Colonial America consisted mainly of dances and hymn tunes. Although it was simple and the work of largely untrained composers, the best of that music had a homespun vigor that you could indeed call American, well before you could identify similar characteristics in the visual arts. The best-known sacred composer of the time was **William Billings** (1746–1800). We will hear one of his more straightforward songs in a moment, but many of them were what are called **fuguing tunes**, containing sections in which the voices enter individually, echoing each others’ lines. The idea was to capture something of the excitement that Handel put into, say, the *Hallelujah Chorus*, without the complexity—and singable by amateurs. This is a more complex example, a setting of text from *The Song of Songs*. But if you look closely, you will see that the note-heads have been replaced by **shape-notes**, a mnemonic system making it easier for amateurs to find the pitches. Let’s hear the opening of it, sung by the **Gregg Smith Singers**.

### 3. Billings: *I am the Rose of Sharon*, first part (Gregg Smith Singers)

And here, also sung by the Gregg Smith Singers, is an earlier Billings hymn, *Chester* (1770), that does double duty as a revolutionary song. And *that* is where the political American identity began.

### 4. Billings: *Chester* (Gregg Smith Singers)

### 5. Three versions of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*

And what could be more iconic than the image of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* before the Battle of Trenton in 1776. Those of you who have taken my courses before may have heard me talk about one or more of these three versions, so I’ll keep it short now. But they make some important points, not least that only one of them was painted by an artist born in this country. Let’s look at the facts.

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

**Thomas Sully** (1783–1872) was born in England. But he was brought over to America at the age of 9, and trained over here, except for a year with the American expatriate Benjamin West back in London. So he could be said to be American in all but birth. His painting, commissioned by the North Carolina State Senate, but too large to fit there, found its way to Boston. Splendid though it is, an observer not recognizing General Washington might think it was French or British, in the conventional mode of heroism-on-horseback.

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

**Emanuel Leutze** (1816–68) was also brought over to his country at the age of 9. But there is a difference in his case; he spent almost 20 years, from his mid-twenties to his mid-forties, back home in Germany. And indeed it was in Germany that he painted the original version of this picture—not for an American commission, but to hearten his fellow German liberals after the failed revolutions of 1848. So which is the more “American” of the two pictures? I would say the one painted by a German in Germany, for two reasons: first, that it is really celebrating an American *idea*; and second, for its realism and lack of rhetoric: this is not heroism-from-a-distance; it gets right down at water level, with Washington, his men, and the ice floes.

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

9. *Bingham: Raftsmen Playing Cards* (NY Met, 1847)

So what can we say about this one, by **George Caleb Bingham** (1811–79)? He is certainly down at water level. He is less heroic, but the sense of immediacy is increased by his point of view, which is directly ahead of the leading raft. And his figures are less military, more ordinary working-class Americans. Bingham is the only one of these artists to be born in America and largely self-taught. Curiously, he also was uprooted at the age of 9, but taken to Saint Louis, in the middle of the country, where he grew up to paint pictures of raftsmen on the Mississippi. We shall come to see his rural, down to earth realism as a distinctive American quality.

10. *Three versions of Washington Crossing the Delaware* (repeat)

I showed you these to demonstrate that the question of American Identity in painting is not a simple one, even when the subject, like these, is a defining moment in American history.

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

So what do you make of this one? I’ll pause a moment before showing you the whole picture, because the realistic picture of **Ben Franklin’s** experiment with the kite in a thunderstorm is combined with elements that look more like **Raphael** than a contemporary American artist. But the artist is indeed American, **Benjamin West** (1738–1820), and Franklin was a personal friend. West was born in Swarthmore, and though entirely self-taught, began his career in this country. He obtained wealthy patrons, who funded a grand tour to Europe. Stopping in London on the way home, he decided to stay, and remained there the rest of his life, eventually becoming President of the Royal Academy. Not bad for an colonial auto-didact!

12. Gavin Hamilton: *Discovery of the Ruins of Palmyra* (1756), with the West below
13. West: *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770, Ottawa)

American subjects were a small part of West's work, but he did paint some. His most famous painting is probably *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770, Ottawa). All right, this took place in Canada—Montreal—not the US, and it represents a British victory, but over the French, and on the right continent. I am showing it with a slightly earlier picture by the Scottish artist **Gavin Hamilton** (1723–98), showing the discovery of the ruins of Palmyra in 1751. Hamilton painted this only five years later, so it was more or less contemporary, but while all the Turkish characters wear their national costumes, the two British explorers, **James Dawkins** and **Robert Wood**, are in Roman togas! Why? Because contemporary dress would have been considered improper! **Sir Joshua Reynolds** advised West to use classical dress for his picture, and for the same reason **King George III** declined (at first to buy it), but West persisted. So you might say that the use of contemporary dress for a history painting was an American contribution; realism certainly is. Note, incidentally, the Indian at bottom left; West's portrayal of the **Native American** as *Noble Savage* is only one view of the matter; it is a topic to which we shall return.

14. Trumbull: *Bunker Hill* and *The Attack on Quebec* (both 1786, Yale)

In London, Benjamin West ran a virtual school for expatriate American painters, who traveled over to England to study with him. One of these was **John Trumbull** (1756–1843), who fought in the Revolution and was at one stage an *aide-de-camp* to George Washington. Many of his iconic Revolutionary War paintings, however, were painted while studying with West in London—that is, in the capital of the enemy they were fighting! The British got their own back by imprisoning him for a few months; when released, he returned to America, but was soon back in London, working with West once more.

15. Trumbull: *Presentation of the Declaration of Independence* (1786–1817, US Congress)

Although it was finished in this country, Trumbull actually made the first sketches for his *Declaration of Independence* in London and Paris, devising the layout and beginning to assemble the portraits. Although it lacks the vigor of his war scenes, it really is a monumental piece of state portraiture. In 2017 the bicentennial of Trumbull's picture, **Ancestry.com** restaged it as a television ad for their services, *Declaration Descendants*, with living descendants of the original signers.

16. **Ancestry.com**: *Declaration Descendants*, trailer 2017

17. — still from the above

## B. The Other Americans

18. Section title 2 (West: *William Penn's Treaty with the Indians*)

I pointed out the **American Indian** in *The Death of General Wolfe* that West treated as a *Noble Savage*. He took a similarly enlightened view two years later in depicting *Penn's Treaty with the Indians* in 1683, a foundation stone in **William Penn's Holy Experiment**, putting his Quaker principles into effect. Penn

did not *take* the land from the Native Americans, he bought it. West was also born into a Quaker family, although he switched to the Anglican Church in London. Pennsylvania was unique among the colonies by not having an army. In place of truce, many of the other colonies were constantly at war with their Native American neighbors, and the views of the Indian appearing in art is more often warlike.

19. Vanderlyn: *Death of Jane McCrea* (1804) with Greenough: *The Rescue* (1837–50)

On the left, we have a painting by another expatriate student of West's, **John Vanderlyn** (1775–1852). The subject is a maybe-true event that soon passed into American myth, the murder and scalping of **Jane McCrea**, a young girl on her way to join her fiancé, who at that time was fighting on the British side in the Revolutionary War. The facts are far from clear, but the notion that her supposed murderers, native scouts working for **General Burgoyne**, were allowed to get away with it, was a great cause of anger for the American Patriots, even though the victim was a Loyalist. The sculpture on the right by **Horatio Greenough** (1805–52) shows a similar subject, except that the Indian is prevented from committing his atrocity. What is interesting is that it was removed from the US Capitol in 1958, presumably for reasons of political correctness.

20. Leutze: *The Last of the Mohicans* (1850)

Nonetheless, there *was* a history of sporadic warfare between Indian tribes and white settlers going back a long way. *The Last of Mohicans* (1850), the most famous novel by **James Fenimore Cooper** (1789–1851), is set against the background of the French and Indian War (1754–63) and involves some wholesale slaughter by the Huron tribe. Basically, though, it is an historical romance, becoming the most popular book of its time, going into many editions and inspiring even our friend **Emanuel Leutze**. It is centered around the figure of **Natty Bumppo** (known as Hawkeye), a white man brought up as an Indian and at ease in both worlds. The final scene of the 1992 movie takes place after all the slaughter is over, and shows **Hawkeye** (Daniel Day-Lewis), **Cora**, the white girl he is protecting (Madeleine Stowe), and his Indian friend **Chingachgook** (Russell Means), the last survivor of the Mohican tribe.

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

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

Cooper did not simply make up things about the Indians; he was friends with an Indian chief. But at the same time, he was clearly romanticizing the Indian people. There were a few artists who spent large portions of their year among Indians, treating them with respect and the desire for understanding. The most famous of these is **George Catlin** (1796–1872), who began his career as an attorney in Philadelphia. But an encounter with a group of Indians who were passing through spurred an interest in what he called "America's vanishing race." Giving up the law, he spent the next several years in the West, visiting 18 different tribes, studying their ways, collecting their artefacts, and obtaining enough of their confidence to be able to paint about 500 portraits.

23. Deas: *The Death Struggle* (1845), with Bierstadt: *The Last of the Buffalo* (1888, NGA)

Another artist, **Charles Deas** (1818–67), set out to emulate his hero George Catlin, and also spent time living among Indians to familiarize himself with their ways. However, the painting shown here, *The*

*Death Struggle*, is not an objective portrayal like Catlin's but an allegory of the struggle between white Americans and the original inhabitants, which he felt could only end badly for both of them. I am pairing it with a late painting by **Albert Bierstadt** (1830–1902), *The Last of the Buffalo Herd*, that seems to address a similar apocalyptic, or at least ecological, theme.

#### 24. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: *Hiawatha* (1855), book covers

Fenimore Cooper's success was partly that he tapped into native lore for a country that had no unified folklore of its own. Inspired by **Elias Lönnrot**, the writer/compiler of the *Kalevala*, **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** (1807–82) used its meter and diction to write his own national epic, made up of Indian characters and stories that were partly derived from Indian lore, partly made up. Published in 1855, this was also hugely successful, inspiring numerous editions, musical settings, and parodies—it is so easy to make fun of! To give you a sample, here is the beginning of *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* in the 1898 setting by the English composer **Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** (1875–1912). I admit to choosing it out of nostalgia; I sang in a performance of it as a boy alto, my first year at boarding school. All those names and the incantatory quality of both words and music appealed to me a lot at 14!

#### 25. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* (1898), excerpt

#### 26. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor

Coleridge-Taylor, incidentally, was Black. Had he been American rather than English, that would have got us into an entirely different category of "The Other Americans," but that is another ball of wax.

## C. Nature and Nature's God

#### 27. Section title 3 (Cole: *The Oxbow*, NY Met)

When I was originally planning this class, I intended to have separate sections devoted to **Landscape** and **Belief** as categories of National Identity. But now I see that the two are almost the same: most artists and poets at the time saw Nature and God as one. I showed this painting by the founder of the Hudson River School, **Thomas Cole** (1801–48), in the first class to show his painting of the New England landscape was inextricably tied up with religion. Besides being a realistic painting of the Connecticut River, it carries a Biblical message. The forest in the distance is clear-cut with the Hebrew name of Noah, the oxbow in the river is the equivalent of the rainbow that God set in the sky as symbol of his covenant, and the contrast between the cultivated land to the East and the wilderness on the West is in turn a symbol of the continent, and the Americans' duty to similarly cultivate it. Cole was another British immigrant, incidentally; he came over here at 17.

#### 28. Cole's Connections

The implications radiating out from these ideas are many and tangled. I want mainly to focus on **literature**, but let me quickly mention a few others.

29. Albert Bierstadt: *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* (1869, Youngstown OH)

30. Emanuel Leutze: *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way* (1861, US Capitol)

First, as I mentioned in the first class, the idea of **Manifest Destiny**, that it was the sacred duty of American's to possess the land that God had given them—and incidentally further displace its original inhabitants. We see it now as a toxic idea, but the paintings of the West by **Albert Bierstadt**, another immigrant and a younger member of the Hudson River School, would have been an inspiration, and **Emanuel Leutze's** mural for the US Capitol turned it into a national epic.

31. Frederic Edwin Church: *Niagara Falls* (1857, Washington NGA)

Secondly, I would mention the idea that Nature reflects God. Bierstadt's paintings of the Rockies would have been seen by many as proofs of God's grandeur, and you can still find Evangelical sites on the web that use the Niagara falls to evidence of His power. Cole painted Niagara from a distance, but the second generation artist **Frederic Edwin Church** (1826–1900), got right up close and personal. I've put it with this orchestral tone-poem from almost the same time, the *Niagara Symphony* by one of the first composers of symphonic music in America, **William Henry Fry** (1813–64). Composed for **PT Barnum's** "Monster Concert" in 1854, it required no less than 11 tympani. Most of these artists were passionately religious; their God does not always speak in a "still small voice" but "out of the whirlwind"!

32. William Henry Fry: *Niagara Symphony* (opening)

33. Asher Durand: *Kindred Spirits* (1849, NYPL)

The painting here, *Kindred Spirits*, was painted by Cole's colleague **Asher Durand** (1796–1886) as a memorial after Cole's death, as a gift for his good friend, the once-famous poet **William Cullen Bryant**. I'll have a poem by him in a moment, but the picture makes as good a cue as any to get me on for the remainder of the hour to **literature**.

34. Portraits of Emerson, Thoreau, Bryant, and Whitman

35. Emerson: "The American Scholar" speech, opening

**Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803–82) first, not for any of his poems, but for a speech he gave at Harvard in 1837, which has been described as "The Declaration of Independence of American Literature." Here are parts of its opening paragraphs. The first addresses the need to create an authentic American art; that phrase about opening the iron eyelids is a call to action. The second, talking about Nature as "this web of God," takes the Romantic idea of God being revealed in Nature, but makes it more secular, suggesting that Nature and Man are spiritually one. Secular, yes, because Emerson was an ordained Unitarian pastor, but he left the church three years later, finding its doctrines too restrictive.

36. Thomas Cole: *Home in the Woods* (1847)

This is a not-very-special Cole painting of 1847, showing a rustic home in the woods; there is clearly a whole family living there. But at least one person built a cabin in the woods to live alone...

37. Thoreau: *Life in the Woods*, with Cole paintings

At exactly this time, **Henry David Thoreau** (1817–62) was bringing to an end his two-year experiment of living alone in a cabin he built on Emerson’s land at Walden Pond. I had hoped to give you a reading of one of his poems, but I don’t find them very inspiring. But then he famously said, “My *life* has been the poem I would have writ—but I could not both live and utter it.”

### 38. Bryant: *To a Waterfowl*

And what about Cole’s friend, **William Cullen Bryant** (1794–1878)? He was a very popular poet in his day, but now he appears rather stilted. An abiding concern of his was the **Journey of Life** from birth to death. His longish and once-well-known poem *Thanatopsis* (thoughts about death), finds consolation in the fact that, when we die and are buried, we lie next to all who have died before us and will die after, becoming a part of the unbroken texture of Nature. Here is the beginning and end of a more accessible poem, *To a Waterfowl*, in which he relates the flight of a migrating goose or duck to his own journey through life—paying explicit tribute to a guiding God. I found a version of it on the website produced by a college undergraduate, **Carl Peterson**. He takes his time over reading it, but it is well done, and his unexpected choice of *Quiet City* (1940) by **Aaron Copland** (1900–90) as background music is brilliant.

### 39. Bryant: *To a Waterfowl* (video by Carl Peterson)

My final poet is **Walt Whitman** (1819–92). I hope I am not insulting anybody by playing an excerpt from his *Leaves of Grass* (1855, and numerous subsequent expanded editions) read by an Englishman, **Tom O’Bedlam** (obviously a pseudonym). But I think he catches the tone very well, and besides the words are right there with the video. This is the section in which he examines the whole **grass** metaphor. The poem seems to encompass all we have been looking at today: Cullen’s ideas of the rightness of death, Emerson’s of the sacredness of both Man and Nature, and something like Thoreau’s in his desire to live with animals. It is also a vision of democracy, hopelessly idealized, but no less American for that. I looked up the line “Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff”; he is referring to a Canadian, a Native American, a white legislator, and a black slave.

### 40. Walt Whitman: *Leaves of Grass* (Tom O’Bedlam)

### 41. Whitman: *A noiseless, patient spider*, text

And if that is too much to take in at one sitting, how about this quite short Whitman poem, *A noiseless, patient spider*? There is a site on the web where this is interpreted by three readers and three different animators. I’ll just play the first of them, illustrated by **Jeremiah Dickey**, and read by **Mahogany Brown**, who I assume is African American.

### 42. Whitman: *A noiseless, patient spider*, illustrated by Jeremiah Dickey

### 43. Intermission title (Frederic Edwin Church: *Our Banner in the Sky*)

## D. Badges of National Identity

### 44. Section title 4 (Badges of National Identity: History)

Time to take stock. Think back to our class last week, and to the first hour of this class? What themes can artists find to assert their national identity, regardless of country? One is indisputable: **History**; it is where we started this morning.

### 45. Badges of National Identity: Myth

Another, that we saw playing an important role in European nationalism last week, is **Myth**. The trouble is that America has no unified national myth; it had to borrow one. Longfellow's *Hiawatha* was popular at the time, but it is not a complete answer.

### 46. Badges of National Identity: Faith (Angel)

### 47. Badges of National Identity: Faith (Niagara)

Religious **Faith** plays an important unifying role in many countries, but the new Americans did not have a single faith either. I illustrated this with an angel from a series of paintings that Thomas Cole painted on William Cullen Bryant's idea of *The Voyage of Life*, but really overt religious images are rare in American art. I would be much better to substitute something like Church's *Niagara*, as a symbol of divine power taken from the American landscape.

### 48. Badges of National Identity: Reality

### 49. John Neagle: *Pat Lyon at the Forge* (1829, Philadelphia)

My fourth "badge of identity" is **Reality**, something that I think of as particularly American, and I shall devote the rest of the class to it, with works from the 20th century. This one, though, *Pat Lyon at the Forge* (1829) by **John Neagle** (1796–1865) comes from quite early in the 19th century; I include it as one of the earliest example of American Realism. There is something of a folk myth here too. In 1798, the vaults of the Bank of Pennsylvania were broken into and the bank's cash reserved stolen. **Pat Lyon**, the blacksmith who had recently installed new locks, was accused of the crime and imprisoned. Even after the true culprit confessed (and was pardoned), Lyon was not released for another three months. The pamphlet he produced about his experiences made him a working-class hero. Lacking a myth of its own, America tended to mythologize its history, its landscape, and those of its ordinary citizens who happen to catch the headlines. It still does.

## E. Out of the Ash Can

### 50. Section title 5 (Robert Henri: *Snow in New York*; 1902, NGA)

With this 1902 painting by **Robert Henri** (1865–1929) we enter the 20th century. Henri trained in Philadelphia, but also in Paris, and he came back as a convert to Impressionism, painting in light colors.



But a second trip to Paris between 1898 and 1900 convinced him that Impressionism was in danger of becoming the “new academicism.” He urged his friends and followers—he was a magnetic personality who attracted many—to paint the everyday world in all its roughness, and to reject the popular taste for prettiness. In the words of critic **Robert Hughes**, he “wanted art to be akin to journalism... he wanted paint to be as real as mud, as the clods of horse-shit and snow, that froze on Broadway in the winter.” Collectively, Henri and his followers became known as the **Ashcan School**, a name they proudly adopted (much as the Impressionists had) from a negative critique complaining that there were “too many ashcans and girls hitching up their skirts.” Let’s compare the work of two of them, **George Bellows** (1882–1925) and **John Sloan** (1871–1951). I am interested particularly in how they treat people.

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

52. John Sloan: *Sixth Avenue and Thirtieth Street* (1907, Philadelphia)

53. — details from the above

Does either of these have a story? There is an implication, I think, that the man at the bottom left of the **Bellows** has been laid off, or perhaps cannot find work, but Bellows does not belabor this. There is no doubt, however, that the woman in white in the **Sloan** picture is drunk, and that the two younger women are laughing at her. Both treat their figures with respect, but Sloan gets more into their lives.

54. George Bellows: *Cliff Dwellers* (1913, Los Angeles)

55. George Bellows: *New York* (1911, Washington NGA)

Bellows is the most monumental of the group. His scenes of New York tend to be massive and vast, and dwarfing the people, who are nonetheless an essential part of the scene. His combination of buildings and people is found again in a documentary made in 1921 by another artist, **Charles Sheeler** (1883–1965) working with the photographer **Paul Strand**. It takes its inspiration from the poem *Manhatta* by **Walt Whitman**. I have mashed together three clips, and added some music: *Amériques* (also 1921) by the French-American composer **Edgard Varèse** (1883–1965).

56. Sheeler and Strand: *Manhatta* (1921), excerpt

57. John Sloan: *Six O’Clock, Winter* (1912, Washington, Phillips)

58. John Sloan: *Election Night* (1907, University of Rochester)

59. John Sloan: *McSorley’s Bar* (1912, Detroit)

Sheeler’s treatment of people as a faceless mass can be a little chilling, despite the excellence of the photography. So it is a joy to go back to the human warmth of John Sloan, even on a cold winter’s night. I have taken some details from the paintings of his that we have seen (plus one other) as a montage to introduce my next section. The music is **WC Handy** (1873–1958) playing his *Saint Louis Blues* in 1914.

## F. Silence

60. Section title 5 (Hopper: *Automat*; 1927, Des Moines)

61. Edward Hopper: *Nighthawks* (1942, Chicago)

There is a soundtrack implied in those Sloan paintings, and even in the Bellows ones—not to mention the many jazz-influenced semi-abstracts of other artists of the period that we may look at next week. But the pictures of **Edward Hopper** (1882–1967)—this one, *Automat*, and his iconic *Nighthawks*—live in a world of silence. The young woman sitting alone is in an **automat**, where you put your coin in the slot and take out your food, without human intervention. *Nighthawks* takes place in a diner, late at night, across an empty street. If anyone is talking, the plate glass window prevents us from hearing. In contrast to the Ashcan painters, Hopper’s subject is isolation.

62. Carl Sandburg: *The Skyscraper Loves Night*, with Steichen: *Flatiron Building* (1904)

There are other silent images of the period too. This is a 1904 photo of the *Flatiron Building* in New York by **Edward Steichen** (1879–1973), the photographer who also ran an art gallery that promoted many of the *avant-garde* artists of the time, including **Georgia O’Keeffe**, whom he married. With it, I have put part of a quiet poem by **Carl Sandburg** (1897–1967). [I would also have included a much more raucous poem of his, *Chacago*, but don’t have time; I will post a couple of readings, though, on the web.]

63. A New York high-rise in three media, by Charles Sheeler

Charles Sheeler, whom we saw before as a film-maker, had a long career as a painter of buildings and machinery, pristine, without the slightest sign of human presence. He was a realist, yes, but for him the realism consisted in the precise depiction of subjects that took his eye—though one suspects he chose his subjects very carefully indeed. I think he was impressed by structures and patterns revealed by **Cubism**, but he would achieve them without artifice by painting American constructions just as they are.

64. Charles Sheeler at the Ford plant, River Rouge (1930–31)

65. — the same with titles: *American Landscape* and *Classic Landscape*

In 1930, he was hired as both a painter and photographer to document the Ford Motor plant at River Rouge, near Detroit. Seen purely as designs, the results are clean and beautiful. I wonder if you can guess the titles he gave to these two?

## G. Regional Realities

66. Section title 7 (Benton: *Boom Town*, 1928)

To paint for Ford, Sheeler had to go out of New York, to the Midwest. There was already an active community of painters and writers, all realists at heart, celebrating the country and customs of their native regions. For much the same reason that the Ashcan School had rejected the artiness coming out

of Europe, so the regionalists rejected New York sophistication, and focused instead on the down-to-earth attitudes of middle America. This particular painting is another industrial site, *Boom Town*, by **Thomas Hart Benton** (1889–1975). Close though they are in subject and date, it would be hard to imagine a greater contrast between this and one of the Sheelers we have just seen.

67. — the last two Benton and Sheeler paintings contrasted

68. John Steuart Curry: *Baptism in Kansas* (1928, NY Whitney)

69. Grant Wood: *Stone City, Iowa* (1930, Omaha)

There is always something slightly satirical about Benton; we will see more by him in a moment. More typical of midwestern family values are the two artists I shall show now: **John Steuart Curry** (1897–1946) from Kansas, and **Grant Wood** (1892–1942) from Iowa. You might call them the **Sloan** and **Sheeler** of their generation. Curry is interested above all in the people; Wood is pristine and often unpopulated; if he paints figures, they have the same sharp-edged precision as a white clapboard house.

70. Sinclair Lewis: *Main Street* covers

It is not surprising that a publisher should have used a Grant Wood painting on the box of an audiobook of *Main Street* by **Sinclair Lewis** (1885–1951), but a little anachronistic, since Lewis published the first of his novels about small-town life in middle America, *Main Street*, in 1920. And Lewis was no meek celebrant of Midwestern culture, as this video begins to explain; I will put a link to the full thing on the website.

71. Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, documentary video

72. Curry: *Tornado Over Kansas* (1928) and Benton: *Spring on the Missouri* (1945)

The best Regionalists did not confine themselves to pretty pictures of midwestern life. They were capable of tackling the hard stuff too, as in these pictures of natural disasters by **Curry** and **Benton**. But for the biggest disaster of the lot—the combination of the Dust Bowl and the lingering Depression—I have to turn to a painter who was not really a Realist at all but some kind of Symbolist, **Alexandre Hogue** (1898–1994). I will preface it by another painting by Grant Wood, *Fall Plowing* (1931), which I think Hogue must surely have had in his mind when painting *Mother Earth Laid Bare* in 1936.

73. Wood: *Fall Plowing* and Hogue: *Mother Earth Laid Bare*

And if we are talking about the Dust Bowl and Depression, its greatest literary chronicler is surely **John Steinbeck** (1902–68), another American winner of the Nobel Prize like Sinclair Lewis. There is a wonderful film of his masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*, directed by **John Ford**, but rather show you some scene of suffering and rejection, let me give you something kinda upbeat; the YouTube site where I found it gives it the title “How Empathy Kinda Works.”

74. Steinbeck/Ford: *The Grapes of Wrath*, diner scene

75. Thomas Hart Benton: *America Today* (1931; reinstallation at the Met)

Finally, and still in the upbeat mood, a kind of postlude/summation of the hour. This is a series of murals that **Thomas Hart Benton** was commissioned to paint for the **New School** in New York, showing all

aspects of American life, in the regions as well as in the cities. Called *America Today*, it has been moved a couple of times, and is now in the Metropolitan Museum. As you will see, the style of the individual figures is basically realistic, but they are combined in ways that owe much to **Cubism**, with interesting uses of raised moulding to break up the surface. I will show all nine of the large panels without further comment, to a snatch of *Music for the Theatre* (1925) by **Aaron Copland**.

- 76. Benton: *America Today* (1931), with Aaron Copland's *Music for the Theatre*
- 77. Class title 3 (Benton: *America Today*)