

TO SEE AS ARTISTS SEE  
**AMERICAN ART**  
FROM THE PHILLIPS  
COLLECTION



**THE FRIST**  
CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

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FRIST CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS



**The Phillips Collection**, America's first museum of modern art, was founded in Washington, D.C. in 1921, a decade before the Museum of Modern Art (est. 1929) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (est. 1930) opened in New York. From its inception, The Phillips Collection has championed the very best American art and artists. Its in-depth holdings of American paintings are broad in scope, yet cannot be characterized as either encyclopedic or strictly historical. Rather, it is a rich assembly of independent-minded American artists, most of whom were actively exhibiting when their work entered the museum's collection. In fact, many of the more than seventy artists included in this exhibition became acquaintances and good friends with the museum's founder, Duncan Phillips (1886–1966), who often acquired their work in large numbers.

A well-regarded critic, in addition to being a collector and museum director, Phillips firmly

believed that we benefit as viewers by giving ourselves over to the direct experience of a work of art. In this way we enter the artist's world "to see as artists see." Phillips responded to individual artists on their own merits, not to artistic movements. In his extensive critical writings Phillips made clear that he was seeking "artists of creative originality and of sincere independence."

*To See as Artists See: American Art from The Phillips Collection* is divided into ten thematic sections, which aim to reveal the breadth of America's modernist vision from approximately 1850 to 1960. The exhibition begins with the great heroes of American art of the late nineteenth century whose work set the course for modern art in the United States. It concludes with a grand display by the Abstract Expressionists, whose efforts to create a new visual language in the 1940s turned American art into a global force.

## Romanticism and Realism



From its beginnings in the eighteenth century, American art has been one of realism tinged with romanticism, whether in storytelling narratives or in landscapes. During the Reconstruction that followed the Civil War, America's younger painters sought an alternative to the sentimentality of American genre painting and the grand theatricality and microscopic realism that characterized Hudson River School landscape painting. In the work of independent-minded artists such as George Inness, Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, and Albert Pinkham Ryder, among others, American art was redefined for the modern era. Phillips believed that the modern spirit in American painting could be found in the work of these "old masters" of American art, who

brought to their work a new vision of nature and humanity that was more subjective and expressive of mood and the inner psychology of the individual.

## Impressionism



For some American artists, trained in the academies of Paris and Munich, exposure to French Impressionism in the 1880s proved to be transformative. Like their French counterparts, they left the studio and took to painting outdoors in a variety of weather conditions; they adopted a brighter palette and substituted color for shadows; they applied pure unmixed color on the canvas in dabs and broken brushstrokes to create a sense—an impression—of reflected light, air, and atmosphere; and, they borrowed ideas from photography and Asian art, including cropping, asymmetry, and multiple viewpoints. Even so, the American Impressionists never lost their foundation in the realist tradition, always keeping three-dimensional volume in form.

The effort to infuse American painting with a French Impressionist style gave a fresh interpretation to countryside and city. Intimate landscape views rooted in the suburban New England countryside became the norm, as did scenes of leisure activities in parks and at the beach, along with urban views that captured the genteel character of the city's upscale neighborhoods. As one art critic wrote in 1916, "American Impressionism and French Impressionism are not identical. The American painter accepted the spirit, not the letter of the new doctrine."



## Forces of Nature



Nature and the land have always held a special place in American art. In the nineteenth century the Hudson River School painters treated the landscape of the new world as a divine gift to humanity. The twentieth-century American artist, however, sought to re-interpret nature in a bold, expressive manner, capturing a personal response to elements seen and unseen, often in styles adapted from those of European contemporaries. Trained as realists in the academies of New York, Philadelphia, and Europe, the generation of American landscape painters who came of age after the turn of the century were generally dissatisfied with Impressionism's emphasis on intimate, domesticated landscape views rendered in soft, atmospheric light. This generation chose to depict the modernist impulse as a utopian longing for nature experienced

in isolation, combining the heroic realism of Homer with the romantic abstraction of Ryder into an unsentimental modernism. In the rugged landscapes and harsh climate of remote northern New England, artists such as Marsden Hartley, Rockwell Kent, Harold Weston and others found an escape from the confines of civilization where they could experience the extremes of nature's beauty and grandeur. John Marin, for instance, advocated that "the true artist must perforce go from time to time to the elemental big forms—Sky, Sea, Mountain, Plain . . . to sort of re-true himself up, recharge the battery."

## Nature and Abstraction



After World War I, artists and writers struggled to define America's modern identity. Some were fascinated by technology, but others searched for an authentically American art rooted in nature. The search for equivalents to different kinds of sensory experience was essential to a select group of American artists between the wars that included Arthur Dove, Hartley, and Georgia O'Keeffe, among others. Their expressive symbolism grew from a shared belief that the experience of the natural world was a spiritual one in which nature's "inner truth" or essence could be made visible in abstract "equivalents" in which color, form, and line are divorced from representation. O'Keeffe captured this idea by stating "it is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things."

Subject matter for these artists was firmly grounded in observable, objective reality

but fueled by their individual sensitivities to geography, weather, the seasons, and atmospheric conditions. Marin, for example, followed Eugène Delacroix's dictum that nature must be viewed through a temperament, writing that "it is this 'moving of me' that I try to express." Getting the "feel of a particular place," as O'Keeffe described it, was key for these painters who sought to convey in their art the essence of nature along with the American land.

The Phillips Collection holds the distinction of being the first museum to acquire works by Dove and O'Keeffe (in 1926) and the first to give Marin a solo museum exhibition (in 1929). Phillips, who acquired more than forty-eight works by Dove and gave him lifelong financial support, attributed his personal evolution as a critic and a collector to the discovery of the artist's work, which inspired him to "see" without anecdote, metaphor, or narrative.

## Modern Life



At the end of the nineteenth century, the urbanization of America was a fact that challenged the very identity of a nation envisioned at its founding as an agrarian society. While the American Impressionists chose to ignore the industrialization that surrounded them, the seamy darkness of modern city life appealed to a younger generation of painters. Led by the charismatic Robert Henri, a passionate realist in the tradition of Eakins, these urban dissidents made it their mission to depict subjects of everyday life in the rough working-class neighborhoods of New York's Lower East Side, as opposed to the genteel social world of Fifth Avenue.

The urban realists chose their subject matter from everyday experience that included street urchins, fortune tellers, and theatrical performers, as well as working-class men

and women. Labeled “apostles of the ugly,” they were eventually nicknamed the “Ashcan School” because of their subject matter. When The Phillips Collection opened in 1921, it included many works by the group associated with Henri. The gritty realism of the Ashcan artists lived on between the wars, particularly in the art of Edward Hopper, whose modernism, always grounded in representation, was infused with psychological insight into the anxiety and alienation of the twentieth century.

## The City



As a renewed sense of nationalism settled over the United States at the end of World War I, the city became one of America's most potent symbols. Brash, young, and electrified, urban America was dominated by new construction; its bridges and skyscrapers were emblems of the nation's advanced technology and engineering. As the city replaced wilderness and countryside as the locus for myth-making, artists began to explore the modern industrialized landscape in small and large cities alike, with New York's streets and skyline a primary focus.

Influenced by European Cubism and Futurism, modern painters looked to the city and America's industrialization as subject matter. Marin, for example, saw the city as something alive and used graphic means to express both buildings and people pushed and pulled by the rhythm and energy of

New York. Others, like Charles Sheeler, Ralston Crawford, and Stefan Hirsch, now known as “precisionists,” were labeled “neo-Cubists” because of their hard-edged style and preference for flat color shapes, cool colors, and invisible brushstrokes. They found inspiration in the geometry of the city in a hybrid style that eliminated both people and nature.

Phillips, who, in 1919, was the first to acquire a John Sloan painting for a museum, found the modern city to have multiple identities: it was not only dynamic and vibrant, but romantic, tough, and psychologically isolating. He featured the neo-Cubists at the museum in early 1926; that same year he was the first to identify the duality inherent in Hopper's paintings in which the loneliness of modern life is paired with the picturesque.

## Memory and Identity



Millions of immigrants began arriving in the United States in the late nineteenth century, remaking the racial and ethnic character of the country. America's demography was further reshaped from within between 1910 and 1940 when the Great Migration brought African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North in search of jobs, better housing, and freedom from oppression. This population shift gave birth to a generation of artists emboldened to give voice to their community experience.

In the 1920s and 1930s, paintings of the American Scene, understood to be about the experience of the people, became increasingly popular and American art began to reflect the country's ethnic multiplicity. Artists from Europe, Latin America, and Asia invigorated America's aesthetic diversity. Phillips, who was far ahead of

his time in seeing diversity as a positive influence on American art and part of its inherent internationalism, was among the few who celebrated the assimilation of various aesthetic ideas into one national heritage known as "American." Artists of color who captured aspects of contemporary American life in their pictures were often overlooked by mainstream critics. Phillips was among the few who valued and collected their versions of the American Scene as an essential part of American life.

## Legacy of Cubism



While critics ridiculed French Cubism when examples by Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, and Marcel Duchamp were introduced to American audiences in New York in 1913 at the famous Armory Show, a small band of America's first generation of abstract artists embraced it, many of whom, like Marin, had spent time in Europe. By the 1920s, elements of Cubist style appeared in the work of increasing numbers of American modernists. There was an effort among some to Americanize Cubism into an original abstract style. Marin, Niles Spencer, and Karl Knaths, for example, developed personal Cubist-related styles to interpret their environment. By contrast, Stuart Davis's Cubism derived from mass-produced utilitarian objects. For others, like George L. K. Morris and Ilya Bolotowsky, Cubism led to a manner of pure geometric abstraction that fused elements of Piet Mondrian with Joan Miró.

Phillips was the first American museum director to champion the work of John Graham and Knaths. He was also the individual to whom Davis turned for financial support and encouragement at the height of the Depression in 1939. Although Phillips's support for artists who drew inspiration from French painting placed him outside the conservative American art establishment between the wars, he was never dissuaded by mainstream criticism from pursuing the work of artists he believed in.

## Transition to Abstract Expressionism



By the end of the 1930s, American artists put increasing emphasis on abstraction as a universal visual language of pure form and color, whether divorced from nature or derived from it. Many American abstract painters looked to mathematics, music, philosophy, psychology, religion, and science to stimulate their experiments and propel their art into new arenas. Some, like Morris Graves, absorbed Far Eastern philosophies such as Zen Buddhism and Taoism and believed in the subconscious as the locus of creativity. The psychoanalytic theories of Carl Jung proved transformative to a young Jackson Pollock as he sought a visual language that could express the unconscious. Others, like Theodoros Stamos, were interested in ancient rituals and Greek mythological themes as metaphors for the postwar era. Milton Avery fused abstraction and color with shape and

spatial relationships in compositions that are at once non-objective and representational, while Alexander Calder thought of himself as a realist interpreting the world around him as pure relationships of color, line, motion, shape, space, and time.

## Abstract Expressionism



The influx of European émigrés into New York before World War II transformed this American city into the art capital of the world and the heart of avant-garde artistic activity. From this international confluence of artists, Abstract Expressionism emerged in the 1940s and 1950s as the first truly international style manifested in the United States. It turned American art into a global force.

In the 1940s, America's avant-garde painters, such as Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Robert Motherwell, among others, reacted against the sentimental figurative realism of American regionalist art that dominated the 1930s. They sought a new visual language that was abstract, but also inherently American. Affected by the political turmoil of World War II and its aftermath, these young painters believed that the contemporary artist faced what they

described as a “crisis of subject matter.” The search for subject matter became a search for meaning, especially the meaning of existence. Firmly believing in the creative subconscious, the Abstract Expressionists looked into their own psyches for inspiration. Theirs was an essentially romantic outlook that favored personal symbols and the “authenticity” of the individual gesture. For these artists, painting was a vehicle for passion, a way to give concrete expression to thoughts and feelings on canvas.

Phillips's romantic nature favored the poetic and lyrical side of postwar painting that seemed alive with light and movement. He was also attracted to postwar American art that was connected to themes and ideas already expressed in the collection, especially evident in the search for one's place in nature or the cosmos.





## Conclusion

Over the course of fifty years, from the 1910s until his death in 1966, Duncan Phillips built a collection featuring the best of American art. With his early and steadfast commitment to artists with fresh vision, The Phillips Collection became an essential force in twentieth-century American art, particularly between the wars. This exhibition, the first organized by The Phillips to showcase the full breadth of its American masterworks, features those exceptional artists who were

able to find their own voices and create work that was deeply personal and expressed with fresh vision, yet connected to the great traditions of the past and the present.

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## Images

*in order of appearance*

Cover: Edward Bruce. *Power* (detail), ca. 1933. Oil on canvas, 30 x 45 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; Gift of Mrs. Edward Bruce, 1957

Inside cover: Charles Sheeler. *Skyscrapers*, 1922. Oil on canvas, 20 x 13 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; acquired 1926.

Winslow Homer. *To the Rescue*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; acquired 1926

Childe Hassam. *Washington Arch, Spring*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 26 1/8 x 21 5/8 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; acquired 1921

Rockwell Kent. *Azopardo River*, 1922. Oil on canvas, 34 1/8 x 44 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; acquired 1925.

Georgia O'Keeffe. *Ranchos Church, No. 11, NM*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 24 1/8 x 36 1/8 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; acquired 1930.

Edward Hopper. *Sunday*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 29 x 34 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; acquired 1926.

John Sloan. *Six O'Clock, Winter*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 26 1/8 x 32 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; acquired 1922. © 2011 Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Jacob Lawrence. *The Migration Series, Panel no. 3: From every southern town migrants left by the hundreds to travel north*, 1940–41. Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; acquired 1942. © 2011 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Stuart Davis. *Egg Beater No. 4*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 27 1/8 x 38 1/4 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; acquired 1939. © Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

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Adolph Gottlieb. *The Seer*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 59 3/4 x 71 5/8 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; acquired 1952. © Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Arthur G. Dove. *Morning Sun* (detail), 1935. Oil on canvas, 20 x 28 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; acquired 1935. © The Estate of Arthur G. Dove, courtesy Terry Dintenfass, Inc.

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