METROPOLITAN AMERICANA

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The opening of the new galleries for the Museum’s permanent collection of American paintings and sculpture is an event of special importance to everyone interested in the art of our country. For some years now the greater part of the collection of American paintings of the past and most of the modern paintings purchased in recent years have not been shown in permanent quarters because of the dislocation and shifting of collections occasioned by the reconstruction of the building. But this period is now happily at an end and we are able to show again the historic American masterpieces and old favorites of the past along with an important group of new acquisitions, including the most recent work, drawn from the nation at large, of the leading contemporary artists.

The collection of American paintings and sculpture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is arranged in a suite of three galleries directly adjoining the American Wing. Rooms where American sculpture is separately shown connect them with another suite of three large galleries specially designed to show a selection of modern paintings and sculpture. Many of these contemporary works are large in scale, canvases painted with a vigorous hand and designed to have a tremendous visual impact, speaking forcibly of the present with total freedom of form and mode of expression.

The opening of this exhibition of so much of the Museum’s permanent collection of American art provides an occasion for a review—perhaps in some cases a rediscovery—of some of its great treasures. It is now one of the most complete and important collections of American painting and sculpture in existence, representing every artist of any importance to the history of American art. Some of the pictures have with the passage of time come to be regarded as key pictures in American art history. Among the older pictures in this category one might mention the Copley portrait of Mrs. Bourne, the John Mare portrait of a man, the Stuart portraits of Washington, Monroe, Gallatin, and Señor and Señora de Jaudenes. Then there is Matthew Pratt’s famous The American School, Samuel Morse’s Muse, Cole’s In the Catskills, Bingham’s Fur Traders, and, of a later date, Homer’s Gulf Stream, Eakins’s Max Schmitt, Sargent’s Madame X, and many more that will occur to anyone familiar with the history of American painting.

As we re-examine these paintings they suggest the examination of another kind of picture—a panoramic view of the whole complex subject of American art at the Metropolitan Museum in the course of the last eighty-five years, the big picture of what we might term Metropolitan Americana.

Some details of this interesting composition may have eluded wide notice, but when they are brought to light it is possible to estimate the role the Museum has played over this long span of years in collecting, preserving, exhibiting, studying, and encouraging American art.

A rapid survey of the statistics of the American collection alone gives some indication of its variety and magnitude. Although an itemized accounting has never been made, it is estimated that the collection now amounts to approximately 25,000 items in seventeen categories covering all the kinds and types of works of art produced by American artists and craftsmen since mysterious pre-Columbian times.
First, perhaps, in general interest is the collection of pictorial material, consisting of around 1,500 oil paintings of all periods from the eighteenth century to yesterday and ranging in style from oldest academic convention to boldest modern invention. These paintings are supplemented by about 1,600 water colors and drawings and 400 miniatures. Add to this a portfolio of some 10,000 American prints, engravings, etchings and lithographs, 1,000 silhouette portraits, and an equal number of photographs by Brady, Steichen, Stieglitz, Weston, and others.

The collection of American sculpture—one of the largest belonging to any museum—numbers some 400 pieces ranging in size from the miniature to the colossal, in time from the early nineteenth century to today. American sculpture in the form of medallions, medals, plaques, cameos, and similar forms numbers roughly 1,500 items, many of great historical interest.

In the field of American decorative arts the estimates produce the following: furniture, 800 pieces; silver, 1,400; glass, 1,600; ceramics and pottery, 800; pewter, 300; other metalwork of various kinds, about 200; costumes, costume accessories, and textiles, about 2,400 (a number which includes the important holdings of the Museum’s Costume Institute). In the interesting category of musical instruments there are about 100 examples ranging in type from aboriginal drums, rattles and whistles, and other primitive and folk instruments to the splendid technical sophistications of the prize-winning piano of 1851 in rosewood and mother-of-pearl.

The indigenous arts of North, Central, and South America total about 1,500 to 2,000 additional examples. Perhaps the majority of these are purely archaeological specimens, of importance mainly to the student, but among them we find a respectable number of works that have been singled out by experts as being among
the great works of art produced by the ancient civilizations of the New World. These include Mexican stone and jade carvings, Panamanian gold objects, and extraordinary Peruvian textiles. (The greater part of this material has been de-

posited for many years in the Museum of Natural History and the Brooklyn Museum.)

The Museum’s collection of American art began to grow as soon as the institution found a building in which to operate in 1872. For the record it may be stated that the first American painting to come to the collection was a rather strange local treasure given in 1872—a picture called The Wages of War by Henry Peters Gray, a picture perhaps of more historical than artistic value. The first piece of American sculpture, the statue California by Hiram Powers, was presented in the same year by William B. Astor.

Works of singular importance and interest were received shortly after that date, which marks the beginning of an ever increasing flow of gifts and purchases. For example, in 1876 we received the Dodge collection of six of the original aquatinted copperplates made for Audubon’s famous book, Birds of America; in 1874 one of the rare silhouettes of George Washington, traced from the great man’s shadow and cut by Nellie Custis. Trumbull’s portrait of Alexander Hamilton, a Gilbert Stuart portrait, and The Chess Players by Thomas Eakins were given in 1881.

In 1883 we received the Andrews collection of Whistler etchings and the William H. Huntington collection of historic American portraits. In 1886 the Museum purchased its first piece of pre-Columbian art, a gold breastplate from Colombia. In 1888 the famous “Carroll” portrait of Washington by Stuart was presented by H. O. Havemeyer. In 1896 came the Peale full-length portrait of Washington, given by Collis P. Huntington, and the following year Samuel P. Avery presented what is now perhaps the most valued and important early painting in the collection, Matthew Pratt’s group portrait painted in Benjamin West’s London studio in 1765, titled The American School.

The Museum’s superb collection of American silver, containing some of the most sophisticated artistic achievements of our early craftsmen, is famous for its many rare and handsome pieces by the best silversmiths of the colonial period. This collection started in 1877 when the Museum

Gift of H. O. Havemeyer, 1888

Mrs. Sylvanus Bourne, by John Singleton Copley (1737-1815). Morris K. Jesup Fund, 1924
President Andrew Jackson, by Hiram Powers (1805-1873). Gift of Mrs. Frances V. Nash, 1894
In the Catskills, by Thomas Cole (1801-1848). Given in memory of Jonathan Sturges by his children, 1895

received the Bryant Vase, a large silver urn made by Tiffany craftsmen for ceremonial presentation to one of the founders of the Museum—William Cullen Bryant, the poet and journalist—in honor of his eightieth birthday. This vase, incorporating in its design native American flowers and plants and motives drawn from Bryant’s poetry, is a curiously neglected treasure; it is a New York cultural monument of the first class, representing as it does the finest American craftsmanship of the time, as well as the high regard of the people of New York for Bryant, a man who gave support and luster to many aspects of the cultural life of New York. The nucleus of the present early silver collection, now enriched with many gifts and purchases, came with the Munn collection in 1924 and the famous Clearwater collection, bequeathed to the Museum in 1933.

The Museum has several large collections of Americana that consist principally, though not exclusively, of prints. Earliest among these is the William H. Huntington collection, noted above, of some 2,000 portraits of Washington, Franklin, Lafayette, and other heroes of the Revolution. The Charles Allen Munn collection, also noted above in connection with silver, consists principally of prints—early American views, portraits, and rare illustrated books, some containing the work of the earliest American engravers. This collection also contains a small but distinguished selection of miniatures, pastels, and paintings. Another similar collection, received in 1954 from Edward W. C. Arnold, contains approximately 2,000 New York views. Because of its specialized nature, it has been deposited in the Museum of the City of New York. Modern print-makers have not been neglected—perhaps the largest group of prints was received as a gift from the W. P. A. Art Project. In more recent years we received the John Taylor Arms memorial collection of modern prints.

The development of other phases of the Museum’s activities related to American art parallels the growth of the collection—its exhibitions, beginning with the first loan exhibition of 1874, its series of lectures beginning with those presented by John LaFarge in 1893; its publications, starting with the Gifford catalogue raisonné of 1881; and its efforts to found and maintain
a technical school for the training of craftsmen, designers, and artists. This school was opened in 1881 and was conducted, with many vicissitudes, through 1894, when the growth of other art schools in the community made it no longer necessary for the Museum to continue this endeavor.

In more recent years the problems of the craftsman, designer, and manufacturer have been treated more effectively in series of lectures supported by the Gillender Fund and in a notable series of industrial art exhibitions beginning in 1917 and carried on through 1940. These exhibitions placed before the public the best current work of furniture makers, metalworkers, glass makers, potters, textile and wallpaper designers, architects and interior decorators, and other American craftsmen and manufacturers. This pioneering venture in co-operation between the Museum and industry had its greatest benefit not in any particular field of design or manufacture but in the fact of bringing together the Museum, the designers, the manufacturers, and the public.

The first large exhibition of modern American art put on by the Museum occurred seventy years ago in May 1886 when the Society of American Artists held their eighth annual exhibition and sale in our galleries. On this now historic occasion some 120 modern canvases and a few pieces of sculpture were exhibited by such well-known figures as Hassam, Ryder, Sargent, Thayer, Saint-Gaudens, Brush, Alexander, Chase, LaFarge, Melchers, Weir, and Wyant. With them were shown a number of paintings by less well remembered artists, Helena deKay, J. Carroll Beckwith, Joe Evans, H. Bolton Jones, etc. The important fact about this show was that it consisted exclusively of the works of a new generation of artists, the young rebellious experimental moderns of 1886.

In recent years the largest exhibition of contemporary American paintings and sculpture put on by the Museum was the Artists for Victory show of 1942 in which 1,500 works were shown and over $52,000 worth of purchase prizes distributed. In 1950, 1951, and 1952 competitive exhibitions of paintings, sculpture, water colors, drawings, and prints were staged, at which substantial sums were awarded as prizes to artists from all parts of the country.

There was a rather long period in the Museum's history when it made a practice of holding memorial exhibitions of the works of prominent American artists. Among the more important of these exhibitions may be mentioned: J. F. Kensett (1874), William Morris Hunt (1880), Sanford R. Gifford (1881), F. E. Church (1900), Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1908), James Whistler (1910), Winslow Homer (1911), William Chase and Thomas Eakins (1917), Albert Ryder (1918), Abbott Thayer (1922), J. Alden Weir (1924), George Bellows (1925), John Sargent (1926), Joseph Pennell (1926), Arthur B. Davies (1930), and Robert Henri (1931). But in recent years this in memoriam type of show has been taken over by other institutions devoted to modern art.

In 1896 the Museum held a general retrospective exhibition of American painting in which now well-known colonial and early American painters were represented—Pratt, Badger, Smibert, Feke, Copley, Stuart, etc. This is believed to have been the first exhibition of the kind held in an art museum (or anywhere else). Previous to that time, of course, there had been exhibitions of American historical material that included early portraits. A surprising number of the paintings that were collected for this exhibition have since been given to the Museum, and they form an important part of our collection of early American paintings.

Other notable exhibitions of early American paintings were held, among them Colonial Portraits (1911), Hudson River Landscapes (1918), and Earliest American Landscapes (1952).

In 1927 a large exhibition of American miniatures was held that brought together works of all the best miniature painters who worked in America between 1750 and 1850. In 1932 the Museum organized an exhibition of the paintings of Samuel F. B. Morse that re-established him as one of the most significant figures in the history of American painting. In 1936 a large loan exhibition of the works of John Singleton Copley was opened, an exhibition that was notable for including some of the more important pictures painted by Copley in England and never before exhibited in this country. One of
the most entertaining and influential exhibitions of American painting ever held by the Museum was the Life in America show of 1939, which resulted in a new appreciation of the whole body of American genre, historical, and "primitive" paintings. This exhibition started trends in collecting and resulted in similar shows in other museums and in a number of interesting and valuable books on the subject, principal among these being Marshall B. Davidson's classic, *Life in America*, published in 1951.

The first exhibition of early American furniture, glass, and silver in which these things were treated as works of art rather than as historical relics was at the Museum's Hudson-Fulton exhibition in 1909. This exhibition—one of the most important ever held in the Museum—marked the beginning of a new interest in American arts and crafts that eventually resulted in the building of the American Wing, opened in 1924, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert W. de Forest. This proved to be an adventure in museum practice that directly influenced the formation of countless collections of American art and the preservation and reconstruction of a thousand historic houses throughout the country.

Since 1909 a number of important exhibitions of this kind were held, notably New York Furniture (1934), New York Silver (1911, 1931), and The Greek Revival (1943).

The Museum has sometimes been taken to task for being more interested in American art of the past than in the art of the present, but this is an erroneous impression that is not substantiated by the record. In the past eighty-five years the Museum has held more than a hundred years...

special exhibitions of American art of all kinds. Seventy of these consisted of modern works of art; the rest were devoted to materials of historical nature.

A careful check of the record reveals a little known fact—that the Museum has issued an average of one publication on American art every year since its foundation. The majority, it is true, were exhibition catalogues of more or less ephemeral nature and most of them are now out of print, but on the other hand a respectable number of these publications have become standard reference works in the field or have been important points of departure leading to new studies. One of the first scholarly catalogues devoted to the work of an American artist to be issued by an American museum was put out by the Metropolitan in 1881—the Memorial Exhibition Catalogue of the work of Sanford R. Gifford. Among the books on American art published by or for the Museum or stemming more or less directly from Museum activities, are Harry B. Wehle’s book American Miniatures (1927), C. Louise Avery’s Early American Silver (1920), the American Wing handbook, first issued in 1924, Stephen V. Grancsay’s American Engraved Powderhorns (1945), Barber’s Mexican Maiolica (1918), Kimball’s Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic (1922), Halsey’s Homes of our Ancestors (1925), and Davidson’s Life in America (1951).

It is seldom remembered but the very first public event in the life of the Museum was a party given for the artists of New York. This took place on the evening of February 21, 1872. On that evening artists were invited to a private preview of the Museum’s collection of paintings in the gas-lit hall of Dodworth’s dancing school on upper Fifth Avenue, an occasion celebrated with punch and oysters.

The Museum was founded at a time when the biggest art battle of modern times was simmering towards the grand explosion of 1913, the famous Armory Show which brought forcibly and finally to the attention of the public the opposed forces of modernism and conservatism. In New York in the 1870s a little local skirmish was brewing at the National Academy of Design between the...
aging National Academicians and the artist members who had been admitted to the fold but not accorded the final accolade of N. A., which would admit them to the inner inner circle. From that time to this every contemporary art battle has echoed and reverberated through the halls of the Museum with repercussions of varying degrees of sharpness.

In the fifty years since the establishment of the George A. Hearn Fund (1906) and the Arthur H. Hearn Fund (1911) the income from these two funds has been spent on the purchase of about 600 oil paintings and water colors by living American artists. The spending of this income has always been attended by difficulties because, while Trustees, Curators, and Advisory Committees felt strongly that they should only purchase outstanding works, artists, dealers, and other interested parties have felt that some one artist or group of artists was being neglected.

However, it is perhaps well to draw attention here to the fact that few other American museums have consistently purchased contemporary works in such large quantities and the Hearn collection as it now stands is unique in the annals of American art.

The largest and most interesting collection of modern American art ever given to the Museum is unquestionably the Alfred Stieglitz collection, numbering some 200 works, acquired in 1949. It is particularly noted for its large groups of paintings by John Marin, Arthur Dove, Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, and other pioneers of modern art in America.

This very brief resume of the Museum's American collections, and the summary record of its activities in the field of American art will, it is hoped, add an interesting note of perspective to the view of the present exhibition and to the big picture of Metropolitan Americana.