

Realist Art in 20th Century America

Background notes

Barry Venning - 21 November 2018



Leon Golub, *Vietnam II*, 1973
Acrylic paint on canvas, 294 x 1151.1 cm. Tate



WAHG

Winchester Art History Group
www.wahg.org.uk

Realism in 20th Century American Art

For many critics and historians, especially those writing in the third quarter of the 20th century, the greatest achievements of American art appeared to be those of post-war Abstract Expressionist artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko or Willem de Kooning. In his celebrated book, 'The Triumph of American Painting', (1976), the art historian Irving Sandler pictured the abstract art produced in New York after World War II as a US victory over an enfeebled and exhausted European visual culture. Sandler and others viewed Abstract Expressionism as a body of work that was both aesthetically radical and distinctively American. In comparison with the 'heroic' achievements of Pollock and his peers, however, the Realism that dominated pre-war American art appeared to be conservative in form, limited in ambition and parochial in outlook. The dominant post-war artistic theory, which was known as modernism, further marginalised those artists who attempted to render the world around them. According to the most influential proponent of modernist theory, Clement Greenberg, it was the purely aesthetic qualities of an art work – colour, line and form - that determined its value, not its subject matter or its social significance. Greenberg didn't dismiss Realist art altogether; he acknowledged, for example, that Edward Hopper had a distinctive artistic vision, but he also said he "is not a painter in the full sense; his means are second-hand, shabby, and impersonal." He was, in other words, an artist of the second rank.



Edward Hopper, *Cape Cod Morning*, 1950

Oil on canvas, 86.7 x 102.3cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum

Attitudes such as these explain why Andrew Wyeth's painting, *Christina's World*, one of the most famous and popular of all American 20th century paintings, received negative or lukewarm reviews when it was exhibited in 1948. It was both remarkable and fortunate that the Director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, Alfred H. Barr, who is normally associated with avant-garde art, bought the painting on impulse for \$1800. Nonetheless, Robert Storr, who later became the curator of painting at MoMA, would pointedly omit *Christina's World* from the general handbook of the museum's masterworks.



Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009), *Christina's World*, 1948
Tempera on panel, 81.9 x 121.3 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York

By 1976, the year in which Sandler published 'The Triumph of American Art', the tide of critical opinion was turning. Modernism was losing ground and a younger generation of artists, art historians and critics sought to reverse the marginalisation of American Realist art. A new, very different understanding of Realism, began to emerge; one in which the art of Hopper, Wyeth and their like was seen as part of a national tradition in the visual arts that long pre-dated the 20th century, particularly in the work of outstanding painters such as Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins and Thomas Anshutz. Furthermore, this Realist tradition was no less intrinsically American than the abstract paintings produced in New York after World War II. The first notable 20th century Realist group in the USA to build on the achievements of Homer, Eakins and Anshutz was known as the Ash Can School, and its members included Robert Henri, John Sloan, William Glackens, George Luks and Everett Shinn.



Unknown photographer, John Sloan pictured among a group of his friends, including members of the Ash Can School, at his studio in Philadelphia, 1898.

The group got its name in 1916 from a drawing entitled *Disappointments of the Ash Can* by one of its later members, George Bellows. The drawing showed three homeless men in New York rooting around in a rubbish bin with little to show for their efforts. Whatever later critics may have thought, the Realism of the Ash Can School was neither politically nor aesthetically conservative. In artistic terms, they were equally opposed to the European academicism of artists such as John Vanderlyn and to John Singer Sargent or William Merritt Chase's polished depictions of American high society. The work of the Ash Can School was uncompromising and often politically radical. Robert Henri, who was slightly older than the others, encouraged his colleagues to paint the faces and places of ordinary Americans rather than the wealthy elite. George Bellows's *Men of the Docks*, which shows day labourers waiting for work on the Brooklyn docks, is an example of the gritty, unflinching observation that Henri had in mind. And although the palette is muted and tending to grey, the handling of paint is no less vigorous than the American (or indeed the European) Impressionists.



George Bellows, *Men of the Docks*, 1912
Oil on canvas, 114.3 × 161.3cm, National Gallery London.

Realist art was accessible to a far wider public than the narrow social and intellectual elite who admired the work of the avant-garde. It became, therefore, a means of articulating and expressing radical ideas during the politically turbulent inter-war years. One of the most celebrated examples of this form of art was *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, completed in 1932 by the painter and photographer, Ben Shahn. Its subject was a grotesque miscarriage of justice which led to the execution for murder in 1927 of two Italian immigrants, who were guilty only of holding radical political views. *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* is not a conventional piece of Realism; it pillories its Establishment targets using exaggeration and distortion in much the same way that his German contemporary, George Grosz, did under the Weimar Republic.



Ben Shahn (1898–1969), *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, 1931–1932.
Tempera and gouache on canvas mounted on composition board, 213.4 ×
121.9cm. Whitney Museum of American Art

The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti makes the point that Realism is not just another word for naturalism; it is as much about representing social and political realities as it is about capturing appearances. The influential Mexican Muralist painter, Diego Rivera, practiced a form of modern Realism that pictured contemporary life and labour by drawing on his experience of Cubism in Paris in the 1920s. Between 1932 and 1933, Rivera completed a famous series of twenty-seven fresco panels entitled *Detroit Industry* at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The two main frescoes on the North and South walls showed production at Ford's River Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan. In their scale, sophistication and complexity, they demonstrated to North American painters (including Ben Shahn, who worked as Rivera's assistant) that Social Realism need not be conservative in form, limited in ambition or parochial in outlook.

In fact, some didn't need Rivera's prompting. Even before Rivera began work in Detroit, the Regionalist painter, Thomas Hart Benton, had already completed his own monumental series of paintings, *America Today*, (1930-31) for the New School of Social Research in New York. Regionalism is generally associated with modestly sized depictions of rural and small town America in the South and Midwest - most famously in Grant Wood's *American Gothic* – but Benton's *America Today* is staggering in its sweeping depiction of life, labour and leisure in the USA.

Thereafter, it was the US Government that fostered a movement of Realist mural paintings through a series of artistic initiatives that formed part of Roosevelt's New Deal. Many of the 10,000 or so artists who worked for these projects decorated public buildings with socially conscious imagery, and while the majority are now forgotten, there were some schemes like Ben Shahn's frescoes in the community building of the New Deal resettlement community of Jersey Homesteads (1937-38) that rival the work of his admired Rivera. The Federal Art Project continued until 1943, but in the post-war years, Social Realism was increasingly overshadowed by the work of the New York avant-garde. Realism persisted nonetheless, and sometimes took surprising forms such as the work of the idiosyncratic but brilliant George Tooker, who is now admired as the leading chronicler of post-war American anxiety in paintings such as *The Waiting Room* of 1959.



George Tooker, *The Waiting Room*, 1959

Egg tempera on canvas, 61.0 x 76.2cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum

Tooker said of his work that he was "after painting reality impressed on the mind so hard that it returns as a dream". As a gay man and a liberal who strongly supported the Civil Rights Movement, he was well placed to paint the surveillance, alienation and isolation experienced by many during the McCarthy era.

The Pop Art of the 1960s is not normally thought of as a form of Realism, but after two decades dominated by Abstract Expressionism, it reintroduced ordinary life into American art with enormous panache and, in the work of Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg, re-connected with a wide public that had struggled to understand the art

of the avant-garde. But it was one of Warhol's lifelong friends, Philip Pearlstein, who set himself the task of painting directly what was in front of him and, for nearly sixty years, he intensively studied male and female nudes and rendered them in a floodlit, scrupulously factual manner. Pearlstein became the pre-eminent American Realist painter of the late 20th century but he was not alone. Realism continued to be a significant current in American art in the anti-war paintings of Leon Golub, the portraits of Alice Neel and Alex Katz, the hyper-real effigies of Duane Hanson and the meticulously composed images of Catherine Murphy.

Bibliography

Adler, J. 2009. '1934: the Art of the New Deal'. *Smithsonian Magazine*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/1934-the-art-of-the-new-deal-132242698/>

Barter, J.A. et al. 2016. *America After the Fall: Painting in the 1930s*. London: Royal Academy.

Brock, C. et al. 2013. *George Bellows*. London: Royal Academy

Carter, W (ed). 2018. *Art after Empire: From Colonialism to Globalisation (Art and its Global Histories)*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. [The chapter on Mexican Muralism is excellent; the other chapters fall outside the scope of the seminar]

Duff, J.H., Wyeth, A., Hoving, T and Kirstein, L. 1988. *An American Vision: Three Generations of Wyeth Art*. Boston: Little Brown and Company

Harrison, C. and Wood, P. (eds). *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: an anthology of changing ideas*. Oxford: Blackwell. This is an older edition of a huge anthology that contains a section on the theoretical debates around Realism. A free downloadable pdf copy of the text is available at:

https://monoskop.org/File:Harrison_Charles_Wood_Paul_eds_Art_in_Theory_1900-1990_An_Anthology_of_Changing_Ideas.pdf

Prendeville, B. 2000. *Realism in Twentieth Century Painting*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Saatchi Gallery. 1997. *Duane Hanson*. [Online]. Available at: https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/duane_hanson.htm

Wagstaff, S. & Anfan, D. 2004. *Edward Hopper*. London: Tate Publishing

© Text Barry Venning 2018

These notes are for study use by WAHG members only and are not to be reproduced.

Winchester Art History Group
www.wahg.org.uk