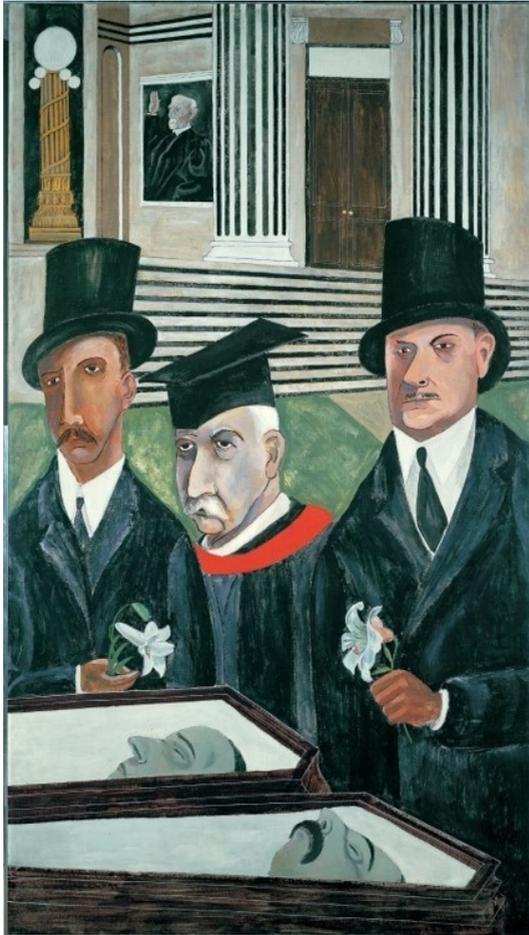


America in the 1930s: Politics, Paintings, Photography

Background notes

Dr Jan D. Cox — 1 December 2021



Ben Shahn, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, 1931-32,
Tempera on canvas, 215 x 122cm, Whitney Museum, New York

America in the 1930s: Politics, Paintings, Photography

The key event that overshadowed the USA in the 1930s occurred at the end of October 1929, when the Wall Street stock market collapsed. The effects of this were felt worldwide but led in America to unemployment on a large scale, reaching a peak of 25% in 1933. High unemployment continued throughout the decade, only reaching 'normal' levels at the onset of the Second World War. This eleven-year period from 1930 to 1940 coincided almost exactly with substantially less rainfall than usual in the High Plains of Western Oklahoma and North-West Texas. Allied to poor farming practices, this led to large-scale soil erosion with resultant poverty and mass migration to more temperate areas.

At this juncture, it is good to remind ourselves of two key art movements of high significance in the decade.



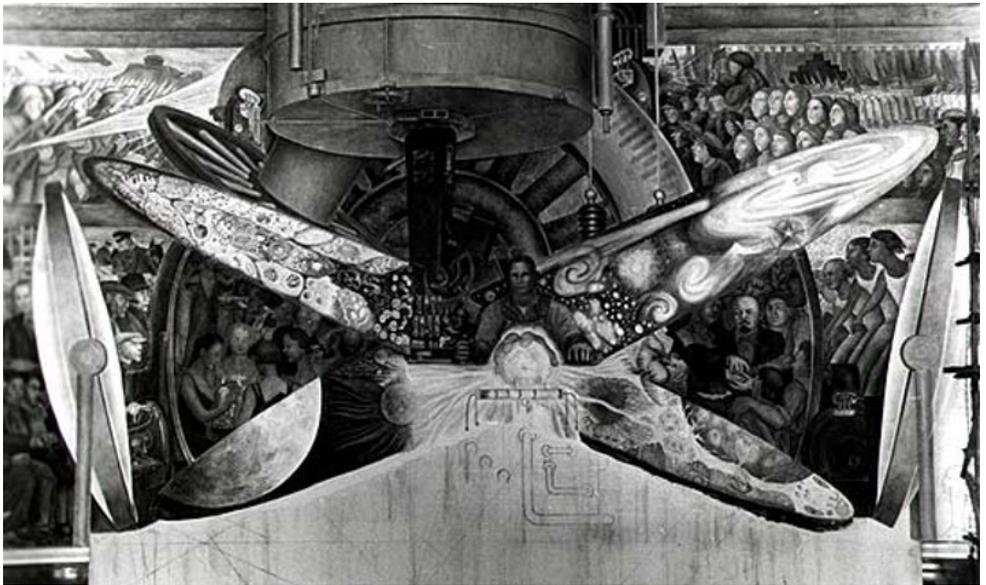
Charles Sheeler, *American Landscape*, 1930 Oil on canvas, 61 x 79cm, MOMA, New York



Grant Wood, *Fall Plowing*, 1931 Oil on Masonite, 62 x 88cm,
John Deere & Co.

The 1920s and '30s saw a celebration of American modernity termed Precisionism by one of its chief practitioners Charles Sheeler. Its cool, clean lines celebrated the new high-rise buildings, and the great industrial factories, incorporating photography in both style and practice. Sheeler's pictures of industry made the process look highly mechanised, with a lack of human input and neatly organised heaps of industrial material. This urban activity is in direct contrast to the Regionalists, a group whose main members were Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry. This trio highlighted the great importance of the rural heartland of America in opposition to the urban, extolling the virtues of the agricultural. Their conservative style of art can be seen as a rejection of the European modern influence that had arrived in America with The Armory Show of 1913.

Much art in the USA in the 1930s was political, sometimes overtly so, and sometimes not explicitly. Many directly political artists had links with Europe through heritage and family and were thus aware of what was happening across the Atlantic; this was in marked opposition to much of the American public who were happy with Isolationism, fearing a repeat of involvement in the First World War. Louis Guglielmi included Hitler and Mussolini in his artwork, Peter Blume showed Mussolini as a jack-in-the-box, while Diego Rivera's inclusion of Lenin in a mural found little favour with the commissioning Rockefellers. Particularly prescient is Mabel Dwight's lithograph *Danse Macabre*, c.1934, in which Hitler holds the head of a Jew, Mussolini echoes the Fuhrer's Fascist salute, while a sweaty John Bull and a shocked Uncle Sam look on from the side-lines. Many of these artists were explicitly left-wing or even Communist, exemplified by Alice Neel whose picture of the union leader *Pat Whalen*, 1935, makes heroic a rather small man, instrumental in the series of strikes that were to lead to the formation of the National Maritime Union.



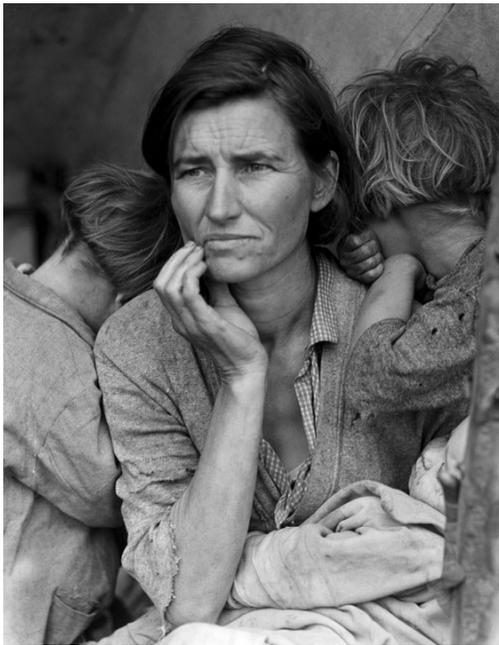
Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads*, Mural 1932-34, Rockefeller Center, New York, Destroyed 1935

There was also a continuing interest in political matters closer to home. Although the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti - two Italian immigrants - had taken place in 1927, its implications continued throughout the 1930s, as profoundly illustrated by Ben Shahn's painting of 1931-32 (front cover), the white lilies a symbol of their innocence. American artists also thought it very important to bring home the impact of the drought in the mid-west, exemplified by Joe Jones (of whom more later) and particularly Alexandre Hogue. Their works incorporated symbolism and stark views of erosion to show the public what was happening in parts of their country. Works such as Hogue's *Drought-Stricken Area*, 1934, served as an alarm to the public and an accusation and rebuke to the powers that - through encouraging poor farming practices - had helped to produce the greatest agricultural disaster in American history.



Alexandre Hogue, *Drought-Stricken Area*, 1934 Oil on canvas,
76 x 107cm, Dallas Museum of Art

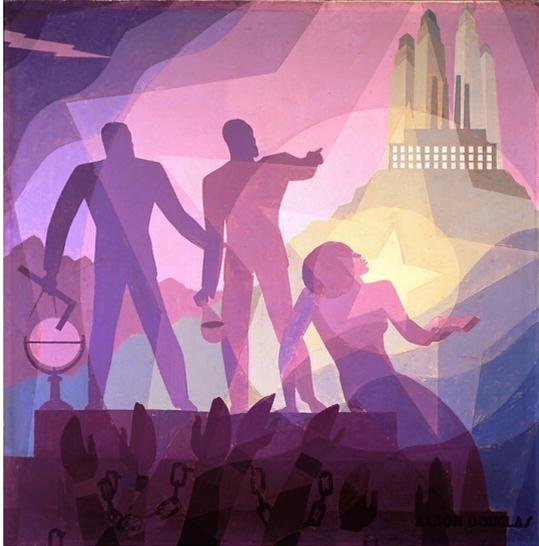
The conditions of the dustbowl also inspired many photographers such as Arthur Rothstein, and the filmmaker Pare Lorentz, who in 1936 produced a powerful documentary 'The Plow That Broke the Plains'. It can be argued that the 1930s were the 'golden age' of American photography in terms of social and political concerns. Photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Marion Post Wolcott depicted the migrations of the poor, the life of rural people, and the overt racial segregation of the south. Much of this photography (and Lorentz' film) was at the behest of the Resettlement Administration – later the Farm Security Administration – who funded this work as part of Roosevelt's New Deal.



Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936, Photograph: Nipomo, California, 1936

Wolcott's photograph of a segregated Mississippi movie house was a reminder that there were still severe racial issues to be confronted, and there were black artists who rose to this challenge. Joe Jones's explicit, *American Justice*, 1933, portrays a black woman, raped and lynched by a mob of Klansmen while her house burns in the background. A harsh condemnation of racial violence, *American Justice*

was painted while Jones was teaching an art class for unemployed black people. Aaron Douglas painted a large four-part mural showing the positive effect of African Americans on US Society, while William H. Johnson, who'd spent time in France, Norway, and Denmark, declared that he wanted to "come back to my own country and paint my own people", exemplified by *Street Life, Harlem*, 1939. It was not only black artists who wanted to portray black communities; Millard Sheets portrayed *The Negro's Contribution in the Social and Cultural Development of America*, 1937-41.



Aaron Douglas, *Aspiration*, 1936, Oil on canvas, 152 x 152cm,
Fine Art Museums, San Francisco

An issue that should have been political but didn't raise immediate headlines was road safety. A subject we don't often think about these days, but back then a combination of fast cars and lack of safety features meant that the statistics for death on the roads were truly horrifying, with some 36,000 dying each year and just under a million injuries. The subject was publicised in Reader's Digest magazine in August 1935 in an article entitled 'And Sudden Death', and it was reprinted a record number of times; eventually five million copies were sold. It is surely no coincidence that in this year Grant Wood painted *Death on the Ridge Road*, full of fatal symbolism, and featuring a large black car and a red pantechnicon heading directly for disaster. Another topic that attracted both

photographers and artists was related to the poverty of the 1930s, namely dance marathons which could last several weeks. People could pay a small amount to watch this, while the contestants received food, shelter, and the chance of prizes. Underwood and Underwood photographed *Marathon Dancers Still Going*, 1930 complete with a man asleep in his partner's arms, while Philip Evergood's painting *Dance Marathon*, 1934 features a collection of grotesques on day 49 of their epic dance. Many may know the 1969 film 'They Shoot Horses Don't They', recipient of nine Oscar nominations, which was based on a 1935 book by a man who had witnessed them.

Not every single piece of art from the '30s was serious. Some paintings matched the need for escapism from reality that was reflected in the Hollywood films of the era. Paul Cadmus's *The Fleet's In*, 1934, depicted inebriated sailors on shore leave chatting up women, with one matelot passed out drunk, and one even accepting a cigarette from an obviously gay man. Retired Admiral Hugh Rodman, former commander of the Pacific Fleet, allegedly saw the picture in a newspaper and had it removed from an exhibition. Perhaps it was too truthful at a time when Germany was beginning to rearm?

Ironically it was the Second World War that presaged the end of the great depression. The American economy prospered, unemployment levels fell to pre-slump levels, and even the climate in the dustbowl returned to traditional conditions.

Further Reading

Acker, Emma. *Cult of the Machine: Precisionism in American Art*, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 2018

Barter, Judith. *America After the Fall: Painting in the 1930s*, Art Institute of Chicago, 2016

Bourguignon, Katherine et al. *America's Cool Modernism: O'Keeffe to Hopper*, Ashmolean, 2018

McEuen, Melissa A., *Seeing America : Women Photographers between the Wars*, University Press of Kentucky, 2004.

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