

Lecture Notes

Syllabus 3/2/05 – AMERICAN MODERNISM



- **01_Music:Pink and Blue II – 1919 – Georgia O'Keefe**
O'Keefe known for her relationship with Alfred Stieglitz, photographer.

Steiglitz:

- His avant garde art gallery 291 was first place Americans saw cubism, futurism, picasso, matisse and kandinsky
- He published Camerawork journal of photography and avant garde art. Published Kandinsky's "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" in 1912. O'Keefe read it and was influenced.

O'Keefe:

- Interested in close up, sensual forms
- Influenced by Kandinsky's theosophy & synaesthesia
- Giving visible expression to the invisible – color and music – through NONOBJECTIVE forms

****Go to Fisk University for one of the best collections of Early Modernism****



- **02_Radiator Building: Night – 1927 – Georgia O'Keefe**

In addition to nonobjective painting, O'Keefe had another style of painting:

- PRECISIONISM:
 - Objective forms
 - Influenced by Cubism (Leger?), & futurism's style of modernity
 - used geometric abstract way
 - to create urban cityscapes with clean lines, as a modern metropolis
 - sometimes applied to rural buildings (see Demuth's grain elevator in book)



- **03_Rolling Power – 1939 – Charles Sheeler**
- Sheeler was photographer, worked in cinema, & produced one of 1st experimental films in U.S. “Manahatta” using 1st aerial views (1919).
 - This painting: PRECISIONISM
 - Wheels turning on train - painted in photographically precise style
 - Associated with Precisionism c/o it shows new, modern American life in modern age



- **04_The Figure 5 in Gold – 1928 – Demuth**
 - Based on Poem (in book)
 - PRECISIONISM
 - Also a POSTER PORTRAIT (style developed out of Precisionism) of William Carlos Williams,
 - Wms. a “modern images” poet – words themselves paint or conjure an image or concept.
 - Wms. Also a physician. One of 1st to do trial test of Insulin in 1924.
 - Demuth a diabetic. Indebted to Williams.
 - Wms. very interested in art. The two were very close.
 - This painting is a portrait of the poem and done in imagist style. Repetition in images suggest movement; “Bill”; red is reference to fire engine; “tart” a play on prostitutes hanging out in Times Square
 - Part of American Modernism is the “Billboard Poetics” of these Poster Portraits. Different from what we see in Europe. Poster Portraits relate to the American scene, landscape and pop culture, drawing on advertising billboards and picking iconic signs / symbols taken from modern & rural landscape and incorporating them in modern art, to convey something specifically American rather than European



- **05, 06_Aspects of Negro Life – 1934 – Aaron Douglas – Slavery through Reconstruction and The Song of the Towers –**
- **NOT IN BOOK! We aren't responsible for this information on test, but it is important information to know anyway.**
 - Major cultural moment happening in 1920's in NY = **Harlem Renaissance**. (Not influential on dominant white culture til 60's and 70's):
 - Writers: Langston Hughes, L.A. Locke, W.E.B. Dubois, James Weldon Johnson etc.
 - Visual Artists, too. Just like Russian Constructivism, this is an example of how the Utopian project of 20th century modernism worked, for a little period of time, because the idea was to have a **New Negro Movement** :
 - The way for the Negro to establish cultural parity with white America was through the production of art and literature.
 - The way to mitigate and combat racism in this country was to show the US and world that black culture was important and could contribute through painting, writing, performing -- making art.
 - Incredible amount of support for young black artists at this time.

Aaron Douglas, young painter from Kansas:

- Went to Harlem in 1925 (“the Mecca of the New Negro”).
- Commissioned to create series of murals on canvas documenting history of Negro civilization at the 135th Street Library in Harlem, what is now the Schomburg Center for Research and Black Culture.
- Often compared to analytic and synthetic cubism. Like precisionists, however, he's adapting modernist techniques to subject matter with important cultural content
- Silhouettes became signature style; based on African art studied at Barnes Foundation in Marion, PA. Also studied Picasso and Braque.



- **07_Report from Rockport – 1944 – Stuart Davis**

Davis and Aaron Douglas both members of an American Artist's Congress organized between WWI & II : Artists Against War and Fascism.

- Both politically active.
- Davis' work not as overt as Douglas' cultural/racial/political content.
- Davis painted the American landscape with a definite modernist flat geometric abstract sensibility.
 - What distinguished him were his rural and urban popular culture references – signs, posters, billboards, everyday materials from the culture – as subjects in his decorative explosions of shapes and colors.
 - Reminiscent of Matisse's later cutouts



- **08_Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti – 1931-2 – Ben Shahn**

Ben Shahn:

- Immigrant - grew up in U.S.
- Socialist
- Outspoken advocate for rights of people persecuted by govt.
- This is one panel in a series.
- Sacco and Vanzetti : immigrants convicted of murder they didn't do and executed
 - Assumed guilty c/o they had been on rosters of anti-govt. lobbying groups and they were immigrants
 - Protestors tried to stop execution with an investigation committee
- Figure in center is judge serving at their trial – involved in scandal and corruption as President of Harvard
- Others holding lilies looking over bodies in coffins
- Style is associated with modernism:
 - pictorial, illustration cartoonish approach
 - uses distortions of perspective, scale to suggest logic of the world is distorted and out of whack similarly
 - political protest art in a straightforward, direct way

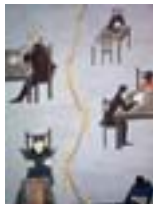


- **09_Migration Series: No. 1, Southern Negroes**

Migrate – 1940-41 – Jacob Lawrence

Jacob Lawrence is ERRONEOUSLY identified as a major member of Harlem Renaissance by all the art survey books. He WAS NOT a major painter of this movement but did have some contact with it since he moved to Harlem at age 14 in 1934 as movement was waning, and took an art workshop with Douglas

- Worked in a series
- Became interested in narrative paintings after studying 16th cent. Genre painter Peter Breugel (see N.Renaissance, Art History I)
- Interested in repeating patterns
- Part of a narrative cycle of paintings that convey story or message of historical/cultural significance unifying with form, color, repetition of patterns
- Simplified abstracted style, flattened, pictorial
- Depicts The Great Migration:
 - Period of Reconstruction after Civil War up to beginning of 20th century
 - Former slaves and families migrated from South on trains to urban centers where there was work
- Titles provide information as to content



- **10_Migration Series: No. 49, They also found discrimination 1940-41- Jacob Lawrence NOT IN BOOK**

- Depicts discrimination found by blacks – gold rope separates black from white



- **11_American Gothic – 1930 – Grant Wood**
AMERICAN SCENE PAINTERS OR AMERICAN REGIONALISM
(NOT AMERICAN MODERNISM!)
 - Rather than emulating European styles of abstraction, a number of American painters went to Europe and came back, fixed in a naturalist style that would portray the American scene
 - Wood went to Dusseldorf, Germany to study stained glass and returned to U.S. with love for medieval stained glass and miniatures
 - Most famous painting
 - Called “gothic” = see pointed, arched gothic window
 - Stylistically, he’s interested in repeated patterns, similarities of shapes, and abstracting them
 - Patterned apron repeated in curtain; striped shirt echoed in house boards



- **12_Early Sunday Morning – 1930 – Edward Hopper**
AMERICAN SCENE PAINTERS OR AMERICAN REGIONALISM
(NOT AMERICAN MODERNISM!)
 - Most well known for paintings of lonely urban scenes
 - Use of light and time of day, subtle variations in color
 - Presented objectively, but light conveys an aura of melancholy / isolation / alienation reflective of the strong isolationism prevalent in U.S. between WWI and WWII



- **13_Migrant Mother – 1936 – Dorothea Lange**
 - Documentary photograprer
 - Lange Employed by U.S. govt. WPA (Works Progress Administration) as part of the New Deal, FDR’s effort to get America back on its feet after stock market crash of 1929, the Dust Bowl and Great Depression of 1930s.
 - To provide govt. with documentation of cultural conditions
 - To provide employment for photographers and artists
 - Captures not only the facts, but also the anxiety and resignation of her situation



- **14_Miner's home, West Virginia – 1935 – Walker Evans**

- Documentary photographer
- Series of documenting homes and villages of various workers, including miners like this one
- Miner's Home is neat but spare and humble



- **15_Fort Peck Dam, Montana – 1936 – Margaret Bourke-White**

- Hired by Life Magazine, a popular periodical which became the way people learned about happenings in US and world
- New technology in printing and photography brought down publishing production costs and weekly/monthly publications like Life became a primary source of pictorial information
- Fort Peck Dam in Montana shown almost like a Constructivist or abstract Futurist painting, suggesting very dramatic embrace of new dam bringing electricity to all and championing public works
- She favored the monumental in boldly simplified compositions of colossal, mainly industrial, structures.