

Coming of Age: American Art, 1850s to 1950s

BY SUSAN ROSS

In a quick one hundred years, beginning around 1850 and ending in the mid-1950s, American art came of age. While a century may seem a long time, in reality the process moved incredibly quickly. If at the beginning of the nineteenth century the idea of “American art” hardly existed, by the middle of the twentieth, the country had established its own unique and firm aesthetic voice. No longer understood as simply reflecting the achievements of their European counterparts, by the 1950s America’s painters and sculptors were leading the international art scene. The story of this remarkable transformation will be told in *Coming of Age: American Art, 1850s to 1950s*, a stunning exhibition of more than seventy masterpieces of American painting and sculpture drawn exclusively from the collection of the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts.

Fig. 1: Asher B. Durand (American, 1796–1886), *Study of a Wood Interior*, ca. 1855. Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 16¾ x 24 inches. Courtesy of Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass.; gift of Mrs. Frederic F. Durand (1932.1). All Rights Reserved.

Organized by the American Federation of Arts and opening in September at the Addison Gallery of American Art before traveling to five venues, *Coming of Age* explores the manifold impulses and desires that shaped the nation’s artistic destiny. Through a selection of masterworks ranging from Hudson River School landscapes by Asher B.





Fig. 2: James McNeill Whistler (American, 1834–1903), *Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge*, 1859–1863. Oil on canvas mounted on masonite, 25 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 29 $\frac{15}{16}$ inches. Courtesy of Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts; gift of Cornelius N. Bliss (1928.55). All Rights Reserved.

Durand and Frederic Edwin Church to monuments of Abstract Expressionism by Hans Hofmann and Jackson Pollock, the exhibition establishes a striking visual timeline of the formative years in American art. It is, however, much more than a linear survey of the period. Curators Susan Faxon of the Addison Gallery and William Agee, professor of art history at Hunter College, New York, chose objects from the museum's collection that work together to illustrate how complicated this process of maturation was. Both divergent and parallel approaches are emphasized and, when placed side-by-side, it quickly becomes clear that the history of American art between 1850 and 1950 is a much more complex story than is sometimes thought.

Among the themes *Coming of Age* explores is the question of nationalism versus inter-

nationalism, or the American versus the European. For many historians of American art, the driving force behind its development is the desire of the country's painters and sculptors to stand apart from their European counterparts and establish a national artistic voice grounded in uniquely American experiences and values. A quick survey of the period, however, complicates this idea. For every bold attempt to reject European precedents or developments and paint in an "American" way, there is an artist who assimilated European tendencies. While Winslow Homer was working along the northeastern coast to cap-

ture the stoicism of fisherman facing an angry sea, for example, William Merit Chase studied French Impressionism and brought that movement's high keyed, sparkling palette and compositional techniques to his scenes of the beaches in Maine and Massachusetts. By offering a selection of paintings and sculptures that illustrates the commonalities among such diverse approaches, *Coming of Age* recasts the question of nationalism's role in the evolution of American art and presents the history of American art's formative years in a fresh light.

Certainly many of America's artists were concerned with describing what was unique about this country. This is clear in the delight taken by a Hudson River School painter such as Durand in the unspoiled beauty of the young nation. The sparkling freshness of an image like *Study of a Wood Interior* (1847)



(Fig. 1), for instance, seems to belong to a particularly American moment. Although Durand's approach in this work is similar to that of the French Barbizon School, the impulse behind *Wood Interior* is entirely different. Like his colleagues in France, Durand advocated that young artists work only in the "studio of nature." This call for the meticulous study of the natural world was motivated by the painter's belief that in nature, all the laws of art were revealed. A painting, he maintained in his famous *Lectures on Landscape*, "will be great in proportion as it declares the glory of God by a representation of his works, and not the works of man." Such pairing of the natural and the divine was a common theme in American art and literature of the period, as the country's remarkable natural abundance was commonly understood both as a sign of God's favor and proof of the nation's destiny.

At the same time, Durand was an aesthete who was motivated as much by artistic as spiritual concerns. Nature was infinite, and artists believed that in her plentitude she offered painters endless shapes and shades of color they could select and synthesize into

Fig. 3: George Inness (American, 1825–1894), *The Coming Storm*, circa 1879. Oil on canvas, 27¼ x 41¾ inches. Courtesy of Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA; gift of anonymous donor (1928.25). All Rights Reserved.

their own visions of the natural world. This practice of depicting and recombining carefully chosen parts of nature—an idea exemplified by *Wood Interior*—has often been de-emphasized in histories of American art. By starting *Coming of Age* with Durand's work, then, Faxon and Agee effectively cast the history of these one hundred years in more purely artistic terms. Ultimately this emphasis on formal questions allows the history of American art to become intertwined with the history of modern art. In the process, *Coming of Age* establishes a sense of organic evolution between the art of the 1850s and that of the 1950s.

Of course, the aestheticism of painters such as James Abbot McNeil Whistler, who is represented in the show by a beautiful early work entitled *Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge* (1859–1863) (Fig. 2), has long been a topic of study. But Whistler lived and learned in France, as did a number of other artists in

the exhibition who went to Paris to study, such as John Singer Sargent and Theodore Robinson. However, their approach does not stand entirely apart from that of more home-bound painters like George Inness and Thomas Eakins. The self-taught Inness, for example, used a combination of suffused color and gestural marks to produce the iconic *The Coming Storm* (ca. 1879) (Fig. 3). Although generally thought of as a realist, here his technique produces a lack of firm forms or hard edges in a manner similar to that of Whistler. More importantly, these elements, when combined with the artist's thick paint application, allows our attention to focus as much on Inness' medium as on the image itself. The emotional resonance of *The Coming Storm*—the sense of the cool calm before the storm—is produced almost entirely by color and brushstroke, so that the motif actually becomes somewhat ancillary to the sensations produced by paint itself. This is a remarkably sophisticated and modern idea for a man often presented as a regional artist.

In a similar way, the psychological weight of Eakin's *Elizabeth at the Piano* (1876) (Fig. 4)

is established almost entirely by the light in the scene. A master portrait painter, Eakin's work is celebrated for its forthrightness and restraint, as well as for its emphasis on middle-class lives. In *Elizabeth at the Piano*, however, it becomes clear that these attributes of Eakin's style are embedded in the artist's desire to establish a quiet emotional intensity. That he strove to do so with such an uncomplicated moment—a woman practicing the piano—and with such simple means indicates the depth of the artist's ambitions. Here, dramatic tonal contrasts produce a forceful compositional matrix that directs the light and allows it to become a visual metaphor for the pianist's intense concentration. Originating in a source outside the canvas, the light reflects off the sheet music on to the piano to shine on Elizabeth's cheek, allowing her face to emerge from the deep black of her dress and endowing this beautiful image with a profound sense of this woman's psychology.

This use of color and light as independent devices that establish and carry the force of a painting is most often thought of as a characteristic of “modern” art (which, in histories of American art, generally refers to the 1940s and 1950s). Such independence, in fact, is characteristic of abstraction, in which color, line, or light are divorced from their representational function and become expressive elements in their own right. Yet as we can see from the previous examples, this kind of formalism was an integral aspect of the American aesthetic as early as the 1850s. As an intermediate step in this process, *Coming of Age* offers work by several members of the Ashcan School, including paintings by George Bellows, Robert Henri, George Luks, and John Sloan. Begun by Henri in Philadelphia around 1891, the Ashcan School worked according to its founders' dictum: “there is only one reason for the development of art in America, and that is that the people of America learn the means of expressing themselves in their own time and in their own land.” Emphasizing uniquely American themes, particularly life in the slums of New York, the Ashcan School painters worked in a spontaneous, forthright way that captured the authenticity they so ardently



Fig. 4: Thomas Cowperthwait Eakin (American, 1844–1916), *Elizabeth at the Piano*, 1875. Oil on canvas, 72 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 48 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches. Courtesy of Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass.; gift of anonymous donor (1928.20). All Rights Reserved.

believed in. Undoubtedly, these artists had a social conscious, and it is certain that a concern for a national artistic identity drove their work. Yet their dark palettes, thick paint and visible brush strokes are so integral to the effect of their paintings, that the formal choices the Ashcan painters made cannot take second place to their motivations or themes.

Consider, for example, Henri's charming *Mary* (1913) (Fig. 5). This image is not actually an American subject, but features instead an Irish farm girl, Mary O'Donnell, who the artist met during a trip to that country in the summer of 1913. The child is presented at three-quarter length and is situated against a dark, non-descriptive background in a manner reminiscent of Velázquez. This approach allows Mary's healthy, red-cheeked face to shine forth from the darkness, communicating in the process a sense of her youthful vitality and joy. The composition of



Fig. 5: Robert Henri (American, 1796–1886), *Mary*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 24½ x 20 inches. Courtesy of Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA; museum purchase (1933.21). All Rights Reserved.

this painting, however, also reveals the depth of Henri's formal concerns. The painter believed firmly that color and gesture were a visual language that could communicate the essence of a subject to the viewer. Here, Henri employed that language to great effect. The quick, gestural strokes of brilliant red that make up Mary's sweater, for instance, are equally descriptive of her emotional and physical being. Similarly, the quick dashes of blue paint that constitute the young girl's eyes impart perfectly a sense of her spirit.

Eventually, of course, formal elements like color abandoned their representative function, and abstract art itself was born. The starting point for the evolution of abstraction is usually considered to be the opening of the Armory Show in New York City in 1913. Although despised by the critics, this show, which featured works by the most prominent members of the European avant-garde, including Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp, spurred many American painters and sculptors toward new levels of formal and technical experimentation. Artists like Patrick Henry Bruce, Stuart Davis, and Alfred H. Mauer readily absorbed the Armory's lessons, adopting the innovations they found there to uniquely American subjects. Later, a flood of German émigrés to the United States in the 1930s, including Hans Hofmann and Josef Albers, introduced a more pure form of painterly abstraction to our country's artists. The later development set the stage for the emergence of the New York School in the 1950s, the movement which established American art and artists as preeminent forces on the international art scene.

Yet as *Coming of Age* so clearly illustrates, the abstraction of the New York School is based as much in a native tradition of formalism as in American artists' exposure to the European avant-garde. This is evident in the exhibition's culminating statement: Frank Stella's *East Broadway* (1958) (Fig. 5). An alumnus of Phillips Academy and a leading member of the abstract expressionist movement, Stella studied directly the Addison's outstanding collection of American art. That he absorbed this history is clear in *East Broadway*, a monumental canvas that com-



Fig. 6: Frank Stella (American, b. 1936), *East Broadway*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 85¼ x 81 inches. Courtesy of Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass.; gift of the artist (PA 1954) (1980.14). © Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

bines forthrightness and integrity with painterly abstraction. The underlying structure of the work, for example, recalls the pictorial architecture of works by Charles Sheeler and Edward Hopper. At the same time, the gritty “urban” colors of *East Broadway* provide a link between Stella and the Ashcan School.

It is remarkable indeed that by the 1950s, America, a country with a mere one hundred years of artistic heritage, stood at the forefront of the international art scene. Undoubtedly this occurred for reasons too diverse to be synthesized into any single account of the history of American art. Yet as *Coming of Age* shows, formal concerns have long held a place equal to social or nationalistic ideas in the minds of America's artists. When these questions are considered, the history of American art becomes an integral chapter in the history of modern art itself. By emphasizing formalism

and allowing the continuity between the 1850s and the 1950s to emerge, *Coming of Age* forges an organic link between Durand and Stella—and more broadly, between the provincial and the international—offering in the process a deep and sophisticated look into the nation's artistic history.

Coming of Age: American Art 1850s to 1950s opens at the Addison Gallery of American Art in September 2006, after which it will travel to the Meadows Art Museum, Dallas; The Dulwich Picture Gallery, London; The Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice; and The Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue published by the American Federation of Arts and Yale University Press. Further information is available by visiting the American Federation of Arts' Web site at www.afaweb.org or calling 212.988.7700. @

Susan Ross, formerly a curator of exhibitions with the American Federation of Arts, is a Washington, D.C.-based freelance writer and critic.