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Defining the American Vision:  
The Whitney Museum of American Art’s Role in Changing the Landscape of  
American Art History  

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Introduction

Paradoxically, the culture of the Great Depression created a productive environment for the arts in the United States, in part due to governmental support programs and in part to an American public’s search for escapes that would bring them peace in a time of turmoil. For many, this peace came in the form of the visual arts. The economy of the country crumbled, unemployment soared, and poverty became widespread, and yet, although many individual artists struggled, the arts in general thrived. The public flocked to cinemas and theaters, and it was during this time of economic difficulty and artistic boom that the Whitney Museum of American Art was founded.

This thesis began as an exploration into why the Whitney Museum of American Art, an institution immortalizing and championing American art, would be founded in 1931 as the country was plunging into the Depression. How was the Whitney Museum funded, and how did it sustain itself during a time of such extreme economic difficulty? I quickly learned that the Whitney Museum was the brainchild of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, an heiress of the Vanderbilt fortune. Despite the stock market crash of 1929, Mrs. Whitney had more than enough funds to begin an art museum, especially since she had the support of her husband, Harry Whitney, also from a wealthy family. These circumstances only raised more questions as to the beginning of the Whitney Museum. What did the Whitney Museum have to say about American art during the Great Depression, during a time in which the arts flourished because Americans did not know where else to turn?

This paper begins with Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. She was a force with a passion for American art. A sculptor herself, she befriended other artists and became familiar with their issues and needs. In the early twentieth century, American artists did not receive the recognition
that Mrs. Whitney believed they deserved. Rather, they were overshadowed by European artists who were garnering the most attention for their radical works and unconventional styles. Additionally, American artists were having difficulty selling their work and making a living.

Mrs. Whitney had the drive and power to change this situation. She founded a gallery and club which created a welcoming, supportive environment for living, working American artists. Besides buying the art of her fellow American artists, she aimed to raise awareness of their work and encourage others to make purchases. This sympathy for American artists eventually led her to found the Whitney Museum. Mrs. Whitney’s story is important to tell when revealing the story of the Whitney Museum, as her beliefs constantly drove the mission of the museum and, ultimately, helped to shape the course of American art.

The rest of the paper focuses on the activities and exhibitions of the Whitney Museum between 1931 and 1937. In these early years, the identity of the museum took shape. How did the museum establish itself? I found a slim volume titled, Whitney Museum of American Art; History, Purpose, and Activities, with a complete list of works in its permanent collections to June, 1937. This brochure included not only a complete list of exhibitions, publications, and lectures; it also included a complete list of works in the collection and acquisitions between 1931 and 1937 and included a concise statement of the Whitney Museum’s goals and educational activities. This brochure guided my research and formed a jumping off point for this paper.

The second chapter begins a discussion of the Whitney Museum’s themed exhibitions, focusing on the years between 1931 and 1934. I concentrated on themed exhibitions rather than exhibitions titled “works from the permanent collection” or the biennials, because I believe that the themed exhibitions told a self-aware story that advanced the museum’s goal to establish a narrative of American art. The museum was dedicated to promoting a narrative of American
realism, as well as endorsing a broadly inclusive definition of “art,” accepting into the museum’s galleries works as varied as political cartoons and Shaker handicrafts. The Whitney Museum also made an effort to show art from beyond New York, exhibiting a range of works from across the country.

In the third chapter, I evaluate selected themed exhibitions from 1934 to 1937. At this time, the Whitney had already begun to establish a distinct reputation among the museums of New York. In these exhibitions, the museum continued to develop its genealogy of American realism, advancing it as the strongest indigenous strain in the nation’s art. It was also in this time that the museum put on an exhibition of American abstract painting, much to the surprise of the public. The Whitney also participated in American art scholars’ anxious quest to find qualities in American art that made it distinct from Europe, as scholars were constantly apologizing for the “inferior” quality of American art compared to European art. Throughout these early years, the Whitney Museum was always an inclusive place for working artists, as they consistently asserted that they showed a variety of different styles and showed artists that had never been shown in a gallery space before. In line with this goal, the Whitney Museum staff also contributed to the federal art programs during the Great Depression, as they served on national committees supporting them. Never before had such a government patronage art program existed, nor has one existed since.

The fourth and final chapter explores the complexities of the educational programming and publications produced by the Whitney Museum between 1931 and 1937. While not drastically different from the themed exhibitions, they acknowledged modernism as an important topic of discussion. Many programs considered the role and future of modernism, while most
publications related to the story of realism. The lectures and publications put forth by the
Whitney Museum contributed to its narrative of American art.

Most of the information in this paper came from primary sources: exhibition catalogues
and newspaper articles, which revealed the ideology of the time period and the rhetoric of the
museum staff. Other information was gleaned from enlightening secondary sources, such as The
Whitney Women and the Museum They Made by Flora Miller Biddle, as well as Rebels on
Beyond these works, not much literature exists specifically on the early history of the Whitney

Before Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney founded the Whitney Museum, American art was
not seriously considered by most art historians and art collectors. This was further complicated
by the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in 1929, which was promoting European
modernism in New York City, in stark contrast with the Whitney Museum. These two
institutions created two different narratives of art, which at times diverged and at other times,
united. The two museums were, at once, constructing differing versions of the history of art.

The Whitney Museum of American Art’s earliest years were immensely important in
establishing a definition of American art. The goals of no other institution in New York City
came close to those of the Whitney Museum. This paper will answer the following questions:
how did the Whitney Museum of American Art come into existence? Why was it necessary?
What did the museum say in its earliest years about the past and future trajectory of American
art, and how did it say it? I investigate the meaning of the Whitney’s ambition, as stated in its
1937 brochure History, Purpose, and Activities: “not that of merely conserving a tradition, but
that of playing a part in the creative processes of our own time.”¹ The Whitney Museum of American Art still today stands in New York City, transforming and contributing to the continuing narrative of American art.

Chapter 1
The Whitney Museum’s Beginning

Contrary to popular assumption, the story of the Whitney Museum of American Art does not begin when it first opened its doors on West Eighth Street in New York City on November 18, 1931. Nor does the story even begin on January 3, 1930 when a “museum devoted exclusively to American art” was first announced in the New York Times. The story begins many years before that, with a woman named Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Without her vision, there would have been no Whitney Museum. Yet Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney rose to the challenge establishing a museum that would bring American art to the forefront in a time when there was a widespread belief that European artists were superior to American artists. The narrative of the Whitney Museum would not be complete unless we first learn her story.

As the founder of the museum, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney had a very strong vision of her museum’s mission. Steadfast in her beliefs, she and her trustworthy colleague, Juliana Force, drove how the Whitney Museum defined American art during the Great Depression, a tumultuous time in America’s history, until her death in 1942. When the museum was first established, it stood out among the other New York City institutions; the Museum of Modern Art had just opened in 1929, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art had been founded in 1870. These institutions were shaping the narratives of the history of art that focused on the achievements of European artists. The Metropolitan Museum of Art was adamant in its conservatism; its director refused to accept that American art could contribute as much to the art world as European art. The Museum of Modern Art, while more liberal towards American art than the Metropolitan, was still primarily focused on showing European artists. The Whitney Museum’s focus on

primarily on contemporary American artists made the museum stand out; yet, the Whitney was different from other museums because, from the beginning, it offered support for living artists. Some evidence lies in the fact that the executive staff was comprised of artists. Whitney, as a sculptor herself, sympathized with the needs of artists. This dedication to providing a space for artists guided the museum’s exhibitions and administration. She was more than aware of the financial difficulties of being an artist; and, as a Vanderbilt, she knew she had the means, or more compellingly, the responsibility, to make a difference to American artists.

On January 9, 1875, Gertrude Vanderbilt was born to Cornelius and Alice Vanderbilt. Her father, Cornelius Vanderbilt, was the grandson of “the Commodore” Cornelius Vanderbilt who founded the Vanderbilt fortune. The Vanderbilts lived a life of extravagance that was splashed all over the gossip columns. As reported on the first page of the Times, at one costume ball that the family attended, costumes cost an average of $155,000 each. Cornelius appeared dressed as Louis XIV and Alice as “Electric Light” in an intricate costume of white satin and diamonds. In this world of the Vanderbilts, Gertrude Vanderbilt could have anything that money could buy. Luxurious goods, summer mansions, and regular visits to art museums, for her, were normal. Because her family was very wealthy, she had the privilege of being exposed to art at an early age. Her grandparents had an impressive collection of art in their mansion, which her family visited many times before her grandfather died when she was ten years old. It was not until she visited museums in Paris with her future sister-in-law, Pauline Whitney, when she was fifteen years old that she realized the grandeur of the art and architecture in her grandparents’ collection. In a journal, young Gertrude Vanderbilt wrote on her revelatory visit: “We talked about the fine pictures and other articles which belonged to Grandpa and now to Grandma. I had

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4 Friedman, back cover.
no idea Grandpa had such fine things. I knew of course they were very expensive, etc., but I hardly thought of them as she said.”

Gertrude Vanderbilt also became exposed to fine art through extensive travel to places like Paris and London with her family. Abroad, the Vanderbilts immersed themselves in cultural affairs, through visiting art museums, going to operas, and listening to concerts. She learned French and German, making her, in nineteenth and twentieth century terms, a well-rounded, intellectually versed young lady.

Gertrude Vanderbilt was acutely aware of the limitations of her privileged life. Even at a young age, she was crippled with self-consciousness that people were only friendly to her because of her last name and her family’s enormous wealth. As a young girl, she longed for adventure; something she felt she could not have in the life she was in. An avid writer throughout her life, she wrote privately in journals that reveal many of her personal thoughts. At age nineteen, she wrote in a diary, “I come to you for solace. How I long for excitement, for emotions, provided they are of the right sort…Understand, I don’t want to fall in love, that would be both bothersome and useless. But I want for a little while to live completely.” She had no interest in forming a romantic relationship, as she believed that there was no way a man could love her without taking her massive wealth into account. She wanted a man that would love her for her personality, not for her money, and she lived in fear that she would never attain that wish. She wrote in her journal,

You don’t know what the position of an heiress is! You can’t imagine. There is no one in the world who loves her for herself. No one. She cannot do this, that, and the other simply because she is known by sight and will be talked about.

6 Ibid.
Everything she does or says is discussed, everyone she speaks to is suspected of going to marry, everyone she loves loves her for what she has got, and earth is hell unless she is a fool and then it’s heaven…Of course, worldly goods surround her. She wishes a dress, a jewel, a horse – she has it, but not all the money in the world can buy her a loving heart or a true friend.\(^8\)

By age twenty, she had already had several marriage proposals. She had no interest in any of them, fearful that her suitors cared only for her wealth. This all changed when she met Harry Whitney, a young man who came from another wealthy family. Gertrude Vanderbilt married Harry Whitney in 1896 when she was twenty-one years old. A great transformation of her view of art occurred when she first moved into a house with Harry Whitney. She realized that her personal taste in art was not the same as her family’s taste. She wanted to be original and have innovative works of art. She wrote in a diary called *Beginning of Autobiography*:

> The house I had stepped into after my marriage was furnished, complete and full. Beautiful Renaissance tapestries. Furniture of all the Louis. Old French and Italian paintings hung on the walls. It was the very same atmosphere in which I had been brought up, the very same surroundings. Just as physically I had moved some fifty feet from my father’s house into my husband’s, so I had moved some fifty feet in feeling, environment, and period.\(^9\)

The new Mrs. Whitney, yearning for something different, decided she wanted to redecorate her home. She continued in her diary: “…it was a very big jump for me when I began to realize the possibilities of something new in art.”\(^{10}\) While Mrs. Whitney was planning the new decorations, Harry’s father, William C. Whitney, introduced her to John La Farge, then a noted

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\(^8\) Ibid. 
\(^{10}\) Ibid.
stained glass designer.\textsuperscript{11} Honored to meet this artist, it was at this moment that she began to realize her power. She continued in her diary, “From then on I took an interest in American art. I began to realize the opportunity I had of acquiring.”\textsuperscript{12}

As early as 1898 when was 23 years old, Mrs. Whitney became disillusioned with the social world she was living in. She did not want to be a party hostess; rather, she was interested in pursuing art.\textsuperscript{13} She wrote in a journal, “I had always drawn and painted a little, now I wanted to try modeling.”\textsuperscript{14} She dove into her sculpture work ever deeper in the coming decades as her marriage became more and more difficult. Harry’s bipolar disorder and infidelity made her quite unhappy. Sculpture became the vehicle through which she could escape. She wrote in 1908, “I love my work because it has made me happy and given me confidence in myself, and because it stretches into the future offering me always happiness. It is not dependent on humanity, it is something that I have made for myself and that I possess and cannot lose for it is a part of myself.”\textsuperscript{15} Sculpture gave Whitney self-confidence and allowed her to express her feelings. In spite of the issues in their marriage, Harry was highly supportive of her art-making and encouraged her to find the best teachers and to establish multiple studios in Newport, Westbury, New York, and Paris.\textsuperscript{16} She visited numerous ateliers and met many other artists as she dove into her practice. Unfortunately, she had difficulty gaining respect as an artist and receiving commissions, due to her reputation as a woman of wealth. Although she was an imaginative sculptor, she lacked the many years of training that other sculptors had. Because she was not

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{11} John La Farge was an American painter and decorative artist. He is most known for his innovative stained glass techniques.
\textsuperscript{12} Friedman, \textit{Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney}, 160.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Biddle, \textit{The Whitney Women and the Museum They Made: A Family Memoir}, 37.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 38.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 40.
\end{flushleft}
working as much as she would have liked as an artist, she had the time and energy to devote to another pursuit: supporting other American artists.

In April 1906, she started a new journal and titled it, “a record of Artistic Possibilities, thoughts relating to art, subjects for statues, composition, symbols, all manner of substance which affects my Artistic life.” She only wrote in this journal diligently for a week, but in that time, she wrote about her growing interest in the arts and her art world friends. One friend she wrote about was Robert Winthrop Chanler, an American painter and designer. She clearly admired him; she wrote in the journal, “To see Whistler etchings and lithographs with Bob Chanler is a treat.” Chanler inspired her to delve deeply into her passion: art. “To hear him talk about art, to hear his ideas, to see the great truths coming from him is worthwhile…He says live—live—get all you can out of life…” Her dedication to art was becoming ever stronger at this time. These early friendships with artists surely inspired her future mission with the Whitney Museum to focus on the needs of artists.

Whitney was especially fond of one group of artists: the Eight. The Eight, based in New York, had a goal of creating a native American style of painting. In 1906 Whitney became friends with two members of the group, Arthur Davies and Robert Henri. Consisting of these two men, Ernest Lawson, George Luks, William J. Glackens, Maurice Prendergast, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan, the group reacted against the conservative academic style of the National Academy of Design. The National Academy of Design was founded in 1825 and was modeled after the Royal Academy of London. Students were trained in the traditional academic manner, students were trained in the traditional academic manner,

17 Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 231.
18 Ibid, 233.
19 Ibid, 232.
20 It is interesting that this group wanted to create a “native” American style; Native Americans already developed their own styles, before Europeans colonized the Americas.
drawing from plaster casts and studying anatomy to create the most realistic illusions in their art.\textsuperscript{23} The Eight’s artists’ works varied in style, differing from those of the students of the National Academy of Design. All were inspired by Impressionism; some members painted in a realist style and were members of the Ashcan School. Although they were all very different, for Whitney, these men represented the possibilities in American art.

In 1907, Whitney organized her first art exhibition at the Colony Club, an exclusive “social, artistic, mental, and physical club.”\textsuperscript{24} The exhibition seemed conservative at first; it featured a collection of miniatures by members of the Academy as well as antique lace.\textsuperscript{25} She also included the paintings of several young conservative artists, like Paul Dougherty, Jonas Lie, and Barry Faulkner, and paintings of more established painters, like Sargent and Whistler.\textsuperscript{26} However, the exhibition took an unexpected turn when she included a collection of contemporary American paintings by Davies, Lawson, and Jerome Myers. Myers depicted the urban landscape in his paintings; Lawson painted New York’s semi-industrial landscapes, along the Hudson River; and Davies painted classical, dream-like scenes. These artists painted works that the upper class was not used to seeing. Over twenty years before the Whitney Museum, Whitney took a chance on showing art that was nontraditional. She could be the bridge between the unknown artist and the wealthy collector. She was keenly aware of the power she had to provide support for unknown American artists. This exhibition was a precursor to her museum; it was her first taste of how an exhibition could bring attention to artists. Because this was a private exhibition, it did not receive critical attention. However, artists began to recognize Whitney’s


\textsuperscript{24} Friedman, \textit{Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney}, 239

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} Avis Berman, \textit{Rebels on Eighth Street: Juliana Force and the Whitney Museum of American Art} (New York: Athenaeum, 1990), 82.
dedication, kindness, and generosity. After this exhibition, she purchased two paintings by Lawson. Lawson wrote, “Such things give a good deal of incentive for younger men.”\(^{27}\) Whitney entered the market as a new and powerful patron of American art.

In the early twentieth century, European art, especially French and German art, dominated the contemporary art market in both Europe and the United States. European artists had more ease of selling their work in the United States and gaining a place in the collections of American museums. Even in New York galleries, European artists were preferred over American artists. In comparison to the modern art greats of Europe like Picasso and Matisse, American artists were criticized for being too “provincial.” Lawson recognized the gravity of cultivating new, wealthy buyers for contemporary American art. It would encourage other American artists to continue to produce new art to build an American aesthetic. Davies wrote to Whitney, “Mr. Fraser [a sculptor] has spoken to me of your desire to insist on a more vital movement in those American artistic qualities as yet not sufficiently perceived elsewhere…Believe me, I hope you may be a turning point in this movement, a means of attainment for an art of style and true beauty.”\(^{28}\) It seems that, at this time, Davies could tell that Whitney had the power to redefine American art through her patronage.

Whitney was consistently thinking about how to be the best patron of art. She was passionate about art in every way; she appreciated works for their meaning and aesthetic, and she also cared about the artists who made them. This affected her manner as a patron of American art. In a journal entry, she thoughtfully wrote ideas on how to best support American artists:

To see artists and find out [their] wants would be a good start…to find a Beaux Arts—with painting and modeling in connection. Tuition low. Scholarships.

\(^{27}\) Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 240.

\(^{28}\) Ibid.
Exhibition rooms in connection…raise money for building…$1,000,000 at 7% interest [she crossed out 7 and changed it to 5]. $50,000 for me to pay. Work government to give some. Best teachers such as [she left a large space.]

In this entry, she started off by saying that she needed to educate herself on the needs of artists. Rather than assuming that she understood these requirements, she decided to make an effort to find out. This insistence on personal connection with the artist strongly affected the way she ran the Whitney Museum years later. She also says that she wants to keep tuition low and help provide scholarships for artists; although she does not assume she knows all of the needs of the American artist, she does know that money is always desired. She then discusses the necessity for an exhibition space and brainstorms how to pay for the space. Collectors needed to recognize that American art was making a meaningful contribution to the arts, and buy their work. If this were to happen, American artists would be able to sustain themselves, encouraging younger artists, who may have been discouraged by the lack of financial prospects in art, to continue their work.

Also in 1907, Whitney opened a studio in Macdougal Alley in Greenwich Village for her sculpting. In her visits to ateliers and the Art Students League, she noticed that many young artists could not afford extensive schooling or trips abroad from which she had the privilege of benefitting. She was particularly sympathetic with the New York realists, as she felt that they were fighting for something new in art. Through their paintings, realists were dedicated to commenting on the issues in American society that occurred due to economic, social, and political changes. At a time when it was in fashion to be abstract or sentimental, being a realist

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was considered almost radical. Whitney knew that she had the ability to provide help to these artists. She bought four paintings at an exhibition at the famous 1908 Macbeth Gallery in New York: Henri’s *Laughing Child* (Figure 1), Shinn’s *Revue* (Figure 2), Lawson’s *Winter on the River* (Figure 3), and Luks’s *Woman with Goose* (Figure 4).\(^{31}\)

From 1907 on, she began to hold informal exhibitions in her studio by fellow artists. Her double role as artist and patron put her in a significant position. As closer she became to other artists and the more she learned about their needs, the more she wanted to help. She could leverage her wealth to support them. With her wealth, she had the means of accomplishing both: she exhibited the work she purchased in her studio.

In 1914, Whitney converted the house adjacent to 8 West Eighth Street into an official gallery space and called it the Whitney Studio. She recognized “the difficulties which faced the American artist in reaching the public.”\(^{32}\) It was at about this point that Juliana Force joined her in running the art-related activities of the gallery.\(^{33}\) Juliana Force and Whitney became acquainted around 1912 when Force began to work for Whitney as her manager and assistant. Their partnership continued for thirty-five years. Force and Whitney were an unstoppable team. They perfectly balanced each other; Whitney was sensitive, aware, and sophisticated, while Force was an activist and fearless about fighting for what she believed in. Whitney had a vision and the money to finance it, while Force had the ability to plan and execute that vision. Whitney trusted Force wholeheartedly; Force had just as much of a voice in shaping the future Whitney Museum’s definition of American art. Together, these two women led the Whitney enterprise with drive and focus.

\(^{31}\) Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, 92


The next year, in 1915, Whitney formed the Friends of Young Artists, as another way to show her support for her fellow artists. This group put on shows in the gallery; the exhibitions were open to any artists working in the United States who were desirous of showing their work. The Friends of Young Artists also held competitions to which young artists could submit work; prizes would be awarded to the winners. The Friends of Young Artists was another step towards the ultimate formation of the Whitney Museum; the Friends served to assist artists economically, and to inform the public of these local working artists.\(^{34}\)

The most prestigious shows in New York City at the time were juried, with prizes awarded. Whitney saw this as competitive and not conducive to creating a supportive environment for all artists. In 1917, she announced that there would no longer be a jury awarding prizes at her gallery’s exhibitions. The money that would otherwise be given as prizes to artists would instead be used by the gallery to purchase art.\(^{35}\) This deletion of the jury reinforced the idea of inclusion. She did not want to assert that one kind of art was better than the other; she instead wanted to support them all, and purchase as much art as she could. It turns out that these exhibitions succeeded in helping Whitney reach her goal of expanding the audience for American art: “exhibitions were attended with gratifying results.”\(^{36}\)

As the exhibitions became more popular, Gertrude Whitney formed a new group called the Whitney Studio Club in 1918 as a place for artists to come together and consult each other on artistic matters. The Club was formed when Whitney asked artists how they spent their time when they were not working; according to Whitney, “The answers opened up a vista of dreariness which appalled me, revealing a terrible lack in our city’s capacities.”\(^{37}\) Juliana Force

\(^{34}\) Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, 116.
became the director, and the clubhouse was placed at 147 West Fourth Street. On principle, the club was not exclusionary. Although the club had yearly dues, artists rarely paid the five dollars; and the club rarely attempted to collect them. Whitney recognized that as an artist, it was difficult to always come up with the money for yearly dues. As long as a person was a living, working artist, they were welcome in the club. The club offered a warm, welcoming environment where artists could join together to discuss their work.

The Whitney Studio Club was responsible for a number of one person exhibitions. The artists who had solo exhibitions included Edward Hopper, Guy Pène Du Bois, Charles Sheeler, Glenn O. Coleman, John Sloan, Allen Tucker, William Glackens, Andrew Dasburg, Stuart Davis, Ernest Lawson, Joseph Stella, Oscar Bluemner, Kenneth Hayes Miller, Henry Schnakenberg, Reginald Marsh, John Curry, Katherine Schmidt, Ernest Fiene, Henry Mattson, Reuben Nakian, John Flanagan, and Carl Walters. This was a somewhat diversified group. It included sculptors, realist painters, American modernists, printmakers, regionalist painters, and even a ceramicist. Some of these artists are now considered important in the canon of American art history; others have today slipped into oblivion.

Throughout the 1920s, the Whitney Studio Club put up a variety of exhibitions besides one man shows; many of the rising generation of progressive artists had their first public showing in these exhibitions. By drawing attention to artists that had never been featured in a gallery space before, Whitney and Force were beginning to shape New York’s perception of American art in direct contrast to the Metropolitan and MoMA. While the Metropolitan was focused on giving a conservative view towards art and MoMA was focused on the contemporary art of Europe, the Whitney Studio Club showed a completely different demographic: American contemporary artists.
The exhibitions at the Whitney Studio Club grew each year, and eventually even rivaled the large academic shows in other, larger institutions, such as the National Academy of Design. In 1923, the Whitney Studio Club moved its headquarters from West Fourth Street to West Eighth Street. Thus, the club expanded both in size and scope of programming. This expansion implies that the Club was highly successful, and was always aiming to improve and give as much as it could to its artist members. Several things changed at the Club after its expansion. At this time, the Club gained a new assistant director: Alexander Brook. Brook was the gallery assistant at the Club, but was promoted due to his ability to spot talent and to his tireless dedication to keep the gallery running. Additionally, the Club began offering evening sketch classes. This new activity at the Whitney Studio Club was intended to foster relationships among artists. Beginning in 1924, the Club even began a traveling exhibition program, in which some exhibitions were sent to other American cities.

Additionally, the Whitney Studio Club not only sent works to American cities, but it also sent an exhibition overseas to Venice, London, Sheffield, and Paris for the International Art Exhibition in Venice. Called the Overseas Exhibition, it included 115 pictures by 32 different American artists, all of whom were living, with the exception of Thomas Eakins. Why would Gertrude Whitney, the champion of American art, choose to send art to Europe? As she explained it: “To me it has always seemed a good plan for artists working in America to show their work in Europe—the oftener, the better.” Promoting American art in the United States just was not enough. In order for American artists to gain the attention they deserved, they needed to be shown in Europe as well, and the invitation to participate in the International Art Exhibition

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39 Ibid, 170.
40 Goodrich, The Whitney Studio Club, 4-6.
41 Ibid, 6.
served as the perfect opportunity. This seems to complicate the mission of Gertrude Whitney; although her main goal was to gain the attention of American art collectors to bring her artists commissions, she understood the importance of Europe as a potential market.

The Whitney Studio Club did everything it could to support artists. Beyond just holding exhibitions of up-and-coming artists and purchasing art for Whitney’s personal collection, the Whitney Studio Club spearheaded a marketing campaign to help artists sell even more works and gain more commissions. One of the marketing campaign’s convincing slogans was, “What is Home without a Modern Picture?”42 The Club never took commissions from its artists who benefitted from the campaign and sold works.

Beyond the Whitney Studio Club, Whitney supported her artists in other endeavors as well. She was highly involved in the New York art world; she donated $1000 to support the Armory Show (an event organized in part by Arthur Davies). Although American artists were featured in the Armory Show, they did not receive nearly as much recognition as the European artists. When shown alongside artists like Matisse and Duchamp, they looked conservative. In addition to donating to the Armory Show, Whitney served as the director of the Society of Independent Artists for fifteen years.43 The Society of Independent Artists was a group that sponsored annual exhibitions that were open to anyone who wanted to share their work. This inclusive attitude strongly related to her philosophy for her own institutions.

In 1928, the Whitney Studio Club had hundreds of members and a waiting list with many more. The executive staff of the Club realized that the club could not get any bigger and still remain a cohesive entity; and at the same time, they did not want to reject any artists, because

42 Ibid, 4.
43 Ibid, 6.
that would go against the original mission of the Club.\textsuperscript{44} In the fall of 1928, Whitney released this announcement: “The pioneering work for which the club was organized has been done…The liberal artists have won the battle which they fought so valiantly, and will celebrate the victory as other regiments fighting for liberty have done—by disbanding.”\textsuperscript{45} The Whitney Studio Club had achieved its main objective of getting collectors, dealers, and museums to be receptive to contemporary American art. According to a New York Times article published in 1931, “After the club had been in operation nearly fifteen years, Mrs. Whitney felt that the need for it had passed, since during that time conditions had so changed that it was no longer impossible for an unknown artist to get a showing in commercial galleries.”\textsuperscript{46}

In between 1928 and 1930, the Whitney Studio Club was replaced by the Whitney Studio Galleries, which was more selective than the previous club; it also was more focused on elegance and presentation. A promotional program from 1937 by the Whitney Museum staff explains the introduction of this transitional program: “In its stead the Whitney Studio Galleries were formed, with the purpose of providing a place where artists, particularly the younger men who had no dealers, could show their work without cost or complications.”\textsuperscript{47} The Galleries existed for three years before disbanding.

In 1929, Mrs. Whitney realized that contemporary American art needed to be recognized in an official, immortal space.\textsuperscript{48} At this time, no institution dedicated to American art existed in New York City. Although there existed the Museum of Modern Art, which was founded in 1929, the Newark Museum in New Jersey, and the Philips Memorial Gallery in Washington DC, these institutions focused heavily on European art. Whitney decided that the best place to put her

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Goodrich, \textit{The Whitney Studio Club}, 6-7.
collection of American art would be the Metropolitan Museum of Art; her parents had been prominent donors to the museum.\(^{49}\)

The highly respected Metropolitan was the major New York art institution. Its mission statement at the time of its founding was that it was “to be located in the City of New York, for the purpose of establishing and maintaining in said city a Museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, of furnishing popular instruction.”\(^{50}\) In 1929, Whitney, through Juliana Force, offered her collection of art to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Before she was able to offer to donate money to build a wing in the museum devoted to American art, the director the Metropolitan, Edward Robinson, flatly refused the gift.\(^{51}\)

Still determined to create an official space for American art, Whitney, Force, and Forbes Watson, an art critic and friend of Whitney, began to brainstorm to found their own museum.\(^{52}\) Thus, the Whitney Museum of American Art was born. The birth of the museum is explained by Lloyd Goodrich, one of the early curators of the Whitney Museum: “The Whitney Museum of American Art embodies in permanent form the idea that had been in active operation for two decades through the agencies of the Whitney Studio Club and the Whitney Studio Gallery.”\(^{53}\) In direct contrast to the beliefs of Robinson when he refused the gift, the museum promoted the idea that American artists could make an important contribution to the arts.

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\(^{49}\) Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, 261.


\(^{52}\) Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 526.

Shortly after the idea for the Whitney Museum was born, in October 1929, the stock market crashed and the United States was turned upside down. Many lives were interrupted; in the beginning of the Depression, uncertainty reigned throughout the United States. American citizens were unsure if they would lose their jobs or savings. How did this affect Gertrude and Harry Whitney, the couple that never had to be concerned about money? Neither of them became poor, suddenly; although exact numbers do not exist, their wealth decreased, but they were still wealthy. How did the Great Depression affect the Whitney Museum? When Gertrude and Harry Whitney’s wealth was slashed by the stock market crash, they could have been disheartened and given up on the Whitney Museum. The museum was going to cost between $100,000 and $125,000 per year to run.\textsuperscript{54} Harry Whitney could have very easily withdrawn his support for the museum after the stock market crash, but he did not. Without Harry Whitney’s blessing, Gertrude could not have founded the Whitney Museum of American Art. Although the Whitneys’ marriage was wavering at best, he was always very supportive of her art.

In 1930, after being ill for years, Harry died at age 58 due to liver disease.\textsuperscript{55} Mrs. Whitney grieved in seclusion for six weeks, missing the initial planning meetings of the Whitney Museum, leaving the planning in the hands of her trustworthy staff. When she emerged from her mourning, she was just as dedicated to her vision of the Whitney Museum as before, saying in a letter to Royal Cortissoz, art critic, “...with the sincere approval and aid of people who really care about what goes on in the art world, I am sure that with time the Museum will become what I dream of.”\textsuperscript{56}

In the first years of the Great Depression, Gertrude Whitney and Juliana Force noticed that artists bore the brunt of the challenging economy. Although they continued to purchase

\textsuperscript{54} Berman, \textit{Rebels on Eighth Street}, 267.
\textsuperscript{55} Biddle, \textit{The Whitney Women and the Museum They Made: A Family Memoir}, 37.
\textsuperscript{56} Berman, \textit{Rebels on Eighth Street}, 291.
works of art by artists they supported, Whitney and Force were disappointed to find that private wealthy individuals could not singlehandedly support all of the artists in the United States.\footnote{Eventually, when the New Deal federal art programs began, Juliana Force was the head of the New York regional office. Although she did not support the Roosevelt administration, she did believe that government support for artists was necessary and embraced it. The New Deal and the Whitney Museum will be discussed further later in this paper.}

They forged forward with the plans for the Whitney Museum, always keeping in mind that the needs of the artist had to come first. Throughout the early years of the Whitney Museum, the administration of the museum ran it with the Depression in mind; there was no entrance fee, keeping the museum available to the public. Also, many shows had works of art that were clearly labeled for sale, as Whitney and Force believed that the most effective way of supporting artists was to purchase their art and make their art available for purchase to others. Artists needed recognition, but they needed to survive as well. Interestingly, the Whitney Museum had a policy of not accepting gifts of art from other patrons. While this freed the Whitney Museum from being influenced by outsiders, this also allowed the collection to fully consist of works that were purchased (and therefore, supporting artists), or could be purchased. There were actually a number of exhibition catalogues that were clearly labeled, “all works available for purchase;” a concept that was unprecedented in the museum world. This kept the vision in the hands of Gertrude Whitney and Juliana Force.

In a time when national morale was dropping due to economic uncertainty and struggles, the founding of this museum asserted the patriotism, confidence, and hope that New York needed. An institution founded entirely on the importance of American art surely increased Americans’ national pride. In a New York Times article, the purpose of the museum was stated clearly: “Although the purpose of the museum is eventually to offer a cross section of American
art from its beginning, the emphasis is to be placed on contemporary work, in order not to overlap the work of other institutions."58

On January 6, 1930, the founding of the Whitney Museum of American Art was publicly announced.59 Although Whitney financed the museum, she left all of the administration to her executive staff. The founding director was, of course, Juliana Force. Because the vision for the museum belonged to Whitney, Force consulted with her on all important decisions. The curatorial team consisted of Hermon More, Lloyd Goodrich, Edmund Archer, and Karl Free.60 These men were not just curators; they were also artists. More had experience in running an art gallery and had an especially good eye for curating meaningful exhibitions.61 Goodrich and Free were both students of the National Academy of Design. This choice of artists as executive staff for the museum underscored that the Whitney Museum was a place for artists, run by artists. It always put the artist first and paid attention to the artist’s needs.

*The New York Times* reported, just before the museum opened, “Much interest has attached to the opening of this institution.”62 Helen Appleton Read, art critic, wrote an article for *Vogue Magazine*, published on March 1, 1930.63 In the article, she expressed her surprise that a museum devoted to American art had not yet been established: “It is curious that, with the many museums which have sprung up in this country within the last twenty-five years, none has concentrated on American art.”64 The article is a glowing review of Whitney’s mission, and ends

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61 Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, 274.
63 At this time, Vogue Magazine had a national circulation of over 100,000, and was published for an audience of the fashionable elite.
with the line, “Mrs. Whitney’s museum is the inevitable culmination of her campaign for American art—a vital monument to her work.”

The museum officially opened on November 18, 1931 to great fanfare; according to a *New York Times* article, the Columbia Broadcasting System broadcast the program for the museum’s opening day. The program showed just how much power Whitney and her staff had; a message from President Hoover was to be read. The message stated:

> It is an enterprise which makes a strong appeal to my own interest and I am sure that this permanent, pioneer museum devoted exclusively to American paintings and sculpture will appeal to the country as a benefaction of nation-wide interest. It is a promising step toward placing American art in the position of importance and dignity which its excellence and individuality merit. It should quicken our national sense of beauty and increase America’s pride in her own culture.

Between opening day and June 1, 1937, 461,575 visitors walked through the Whitney Museum’s front doors. After opening, the museum “was and continues to be enthusiastically greeted by crowds of visitors” according to Bryson Burroughs in 1932, the curator of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum from 1909 to 1934. He reviewed the atmosphere of the museum favorably: “There is a comfortable and intimate atmosphere about the place; one feels at home there and free to look at the pictures and sculptures as household objects rather than as museum specimens.” Even in its first few years, the purpose of the Whitney Museum was acknowledged by critics. Burroughs realized that the museum served mostly to display works by living artists,

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67 Herbert Hoover, “Herbert Hoover: 1931: containing the public messages, speeches, and statements of the president, January 1 to December 31, 1931.” *The Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, 559, quod.lib.umich.edu/p/ppotus/4731690.1931.001/621?view=image&size=100.
69 Ibid.
“without the unfair competition of the well-winnowed art of past ages which they would be subjected to in a museum of wider scope.” Burroughs also recognized that there was an “admirable prejudice in favor of the younger and less well-known artists,” which provided a “convenient opportunity” for visitors to pass their own judgments on American artists, a practice that was certainly not typical of museums of the time.

The Whitney Building consisted of four residences at 8, 10, 12, and 14 West Eighth Street, which were remodeled and converted into the Museum by Noel & Miller, Architects (Figure 5). The building, 12 West Eighth Street, used to belong to Daniel Chester French, “noted sculptor, whose former studio has been incorporated into the museum building and will be used for sculpture.” A New York Times writer reviewed the design of the building: “The old brick walls have been faced with stucco of a yellowish-pink tone, borrowed from the color scheme of the ancient Moroccan city of Marrakesh. The style of the entire building is modern, but an attempt has been made to preserve a classical feeling.” In a different article, the design is explained in greater detail: “The entablature and columns of the main entrance are an adaptation of the Greek, in white marble, and over the doorway will be a bas-relief of an American eagle.” The American eagle atop the doorway integrated into the otherwise classical design provides a further example of the complexity of the “dignified façade.” A clearly American symbol was inserted into the foreign-styled façade.

Designed by Bruce Buttfield, interior decorator, the interior design of the museum also received attention. According to an article published in the New York Times on March 24, 1930, “An innovation will be introduced into the museum by Mrs. Whitney, who intends to have the

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70 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
paintings hung in more or less furnished rooms, thereby relieving the galleries of the bleakness characteristic of some museums."75 This created a welcoming environment for all visitors. The Whitney Museum was innovating in direct response to other museums in the United States at the time.

The founding collection of the museum held Whitney’s own collection that she had been building for twenty-five years. It consisted of more than 600 works of varied media: oil and watercolor paintings, sculpture, drawings, etchings, lithographs, and other graphic works.76 This allowed for a focus on artists who were working in the time period, reacting and responding to current events and trends through the subjects of their art. This emphasis affected the way the Whitney Museum of American Art shaped the definition of American art in its early years. The acquisitions throughout the museum’s early years, as the museum’s promotional brochure from 1937 states, came from contemporary exhibitions which were national in scope.

Another reason the Whitney focused on contemporary artists, according to the museum staff, was that they could not accommodate artists of the past due to space limitations. “We conceive the Museum’s most important function to be, not that of merely conserving a tradition, but that of playing a part in the creative processes of our own time.”77 Another stated goal of the Whitney Museum was promoting new artists: “In every exhibition a considerable proportion of the work has been by artists who have not been represented in a museum before.” It is important to note, however, that the goals of the museum were more complex than simply promoting new artists. It also showed work by past artists, such as Thomas Eakins and John James Audubon. Interestingly, in a New York Times article published in 1930 before the Museum opened, Juliana Force was quoted saying, “The museum will not serve to introduce new artists. Although this

77 Ibid.
museum will emphatically not be merely a repository for relics, no museum can be a place for experiment.”78 This displays the complicated and morphing attitudes of the staff’s vision for the Whitney Museum of American Art.

What were the museum’s main activities between 1931 and 1937? The Whitney was actively engaging in defining American art. The Whitney Museum set aside a fund of $20,000 each year for new acquisitions. This number was prominently displayed in the 1937 promotional brochure, making clear the museum’s dedication to buying art and supporting artists. Since money was a central issue during the 1930s, we know how important it was for the Whitney staff to advertise they were actively supporting artists.

In its first year of operation, at the leading edge of the Great Depression, the Whitney Museum hosted an exhibition of works from its permanent collection. The exhibition included artists who were members of the American Society of Painters, Sculptors, and ‘Gravers, such as Edward Hopper, Peggy Bacon, Charles Sheeler, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Charles Demuth, and George Luks.79 The museum also held an exhibition of “provincial paintings,” focusing on folk art, coming directly from Juliana Force’s personal collection. The museum had permanent rooms of Shaker furniture (another personal interest of Force’s that came from her collection); eventually, the museum had an exhibition focused on Shaker handicrafts. The museum also held its first biennial of contemporary painting, aiming to showcase the most current trends and widest variety of painting. The museum’s staff invited a variety of artists to show their work in the biennial, including Stefan Hirsch, Arthur Dove, Georgia O’Keeffe, Karl Knaths, Ivan Albright, Marsden Hartley, Grant Wood, Ben Shahn, Theodore Roszak, John Kane, Louis Eilshemius, Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan, Joseph Stella, Oscar Bluemner, Konrad Cramer, Arnold

79 Berman, Rebels on Eighth Street, 314.
Friedman, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Florine Stettheimer, John Graham, Abraham Walkowitz, Max Weber, and Isabel Bishop. It was also in the museum’s first year that it commissioned a set of murals by Thomas Hart Benton, “The Arts of Life in America.” As the museum gained its footing, it strongly focused on artists in New York. Although it was meant to be very inclusive, there were distinct exclusions: photography, design, and architecture were left out of the Whitney’s definition of American art. The museum began as a repository for Gertrude Whitney’s personal collection. As the collection grew and Force and Whitney continued to acquire, this shaped the museum’s definition of American art.

Each season, the Whitney Museum of American Art would hold special exhibitions, which will be further discussed in later chapters. These special exhibitions helped to shape the developing narrative of the history of American art. The exhibitions fell into different categories: genre-focused exhibitions, style-focused exhibitions, artist-focused exhibitions, and regional-focused exhibitions. Genre shows consisted of, for example, American genre painting, American landscape, and abstract painting. Style exhibitions featured provincial painters of the nineteenth century and a group of New York realists from 1900-1914. The museum also held one man shows for certain men (and only men), including Winslow Homer, David G. Blythe, Maurice Prendergast, Robert L. Newman, and Arthur B. Davies. The Whitney Museum also put on regional exhibitions to familiarize New York audiences with art trends from other areas of the United States, including Chicago, Philadelphia, and Cleveland. These exhibitions will be explored in depth later in this paper.

The museum also participated in various educational activities. It loaned exhibitions to other museums; docents gave gallery tours; and art critics and curators gave lectures. The
museum held debates by artists and critics and published various books at their own expense. According to a *New York Times* article published in 1931, Juliana Force explained that the museum would “not only [put out] the publication of twenty books on as many artists each year, but also general books on American art.” Additionally, the museum had a reading room, decorated with the murals by Thomas Hart Benton. Through these activities, the Whitney Museum very vocally defined American art.

Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney began as a young woman frustrated with the enormous wealth that burdened her. She married a man who loved her, but the troubled marriage led her to focus on the passion that had been slowly growing since her childhood: art. She became a sculptor, but quickly realized she could make a much greater contribution to the arts as a patron. Her studio grew into a gallery space, and eventually into a club. The club then grew into a museum: the ultimate immortalization of art. As an artist herself, she was sensitive to the needs of the artist. She realized her power as a woman of wealth, and used this to her advantage. Her collection formed the foundation of the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and as the first museum of its kind, it took the lead in defining American art. In between 1931 and 1937, when the definition of American art was especially volatile, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and her museum played an enormous role in shaping both academic and public perception of the history and character of “American art.”

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Chapter 2

Defining American Art at the Whitney Museum: 1931-1934

The Whitney Museum of American Art, in its earliest years, crafted its definition of American art. The museum’s exhibitions, lectures, and publications reveal its program to develop the narrative of American art and direct its present and future. In 1937, the museum published a brochure (mentioned earlier) entitled The Whitney Museum of American Art: History, Purpose, and Activities with a Complete List of Works in its Permanent Collection to June, 1937, which offers an explicit statement of its purpose: “We conceive the Museum’s most important function to be, not that of merely conserving a tradition, but that of playing a part in the creative processes of our own time.”\(^1\) Juliana Force, in an early exhibition catalogue for the museum, also described its mission as presenting “a general picture of art in America.”\(^2\) This mission will be explored thoroughly in the next three chapters. The Whitney Museum’s choices of themed exhibitions contributed both to the establishment of a “usable past,” constructing a specific story of American art, and to the development of the creative processes of the time, advancing its mission. In the museum’s first seasons between 1931 and 1934, the exhibitions made strong statements about its definition of American art, promoting the strain of American realism.

The museum held between four and eight exhibitions each season. Some lacked a specific theme, focusing on selected works from the permanent collection, which consisted of Mrs. Whitney’s private collection. The museum also hosted a loan exhibition from the Addison Gallery of American Art, which was founded in Andover, Massachusetts by Thomas Cochran in

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2 Ibid.
1931 (the same year as the Whitney was founded).\(^3\) The Whitney Museum aimed to be collaborative with other institutions, hoping to spread knowledge and create a discourse on American art. The museum also hosted an exhibition of artists who received the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. This exhibition featured artists who received the prestigious fellowship to study and create art abroad, underscoring the Whitney’s desire to exhibit new artists in its galleries. The museum also held its first biennial exhibitions during these opening seasons, further demonstrating its commitment to displaying the newest trends in contemporary art.

The Whitney Museum of American Art was, first and foremost, a place for living, working artists. Certainly during the early years of the Great Depression, having a space of support and enrichment was particularly important. In the back of most exhibition catalogues, a short statement read, “Most works in this exhibition are for sale.” This notion of selling works that were on display in museum galleries was certainly not usual at the time, yet the Whitney staff was always thinking about the living artist’s needs. As at the Whitney Studio Club, the Whitney staff understood the best ways to support artists: give them a gallery space to show their work, and buy their work. One related goal is stated in the Whitney Museum’s 1937 publication: “In every exhibition a considerable proportion of the work has been by artists who have not been represented in the museum before.”\(^4\) This provided artists with an opportunity to establish their reputations. Their dedication to showing the work of unknown artists was a source of great pride and satisfaction for the Whitney staff.

During the 1930s, art historians, critics, and curators were shaping the history of American art. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Juliana Force, and the other curators at the Whitney

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Museum had the opportunity to contribute their own version of this story. American art historians generally agreed on their definition of the history of American art, as it ranged from “provincial” paintings, to the impact of European influences. No one could dispute that American artists were influenced at least to some degree by European artistic styles. Some historians included a discussion of Native American art in their histories, while some others did not. Besides Native American art, historians identified folk painting as one of the earliest distinctly American arts. The geographical boundaries in these histories did not spread far beyond the east coast of the United States.

However, in the 1930s, members of the art world had different ideas about the trajectory of American art. Some historians believed that art was going in the modernist direction, while others believed in the realist direction. Holger Cahill and Alfred H. Barr (director of MoMA) edited a book, published in 1934, which was called Art in America in Modern Times. The book discussed American painting and sculpture, but also included architecture, stage design, photography, and film, which the Whitney Museum did not include. MoMA was, at this time, promoting European modernism (and its impact on American art) as the most vital strain in the art of this country, in contrast to the Whitney Museum’s promotion of American realism.

Royal Cortissoz was not in agreement with Cahill and Barr, his ideas being more in line with the Whitney Museum’s definition of American art. In his book, The History of American Painting (1936), he bluntly undermined the modern movement, calling it “an order of ill-equipped ‘self-expression’.”\(^5\) He did not believe in the importance and longevity of modernism, asserting “that the bulk of American painting is untouched by modernism.”\(^6\) In Suzanne La Follette’s book, Art in America (1929), she describes a course of American art history which is

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\(^6\) Ibid.
similar to that of the Whitney’s definition, focusing on American realism, mentioning “the Eight” (specifically Maurice Prendergast) and Glenn O. Coleman. La Follette, an American journalist, also discusses the art of Native American artists, acknowledging that they created art that is worth studying. The Whitney Museum did not include Native American artists in its collections or exhibitions. La Follette also writes about modernism, accepting it rather than demeaning it like Cortissoz. However, she does speak of it with skepticism, saying, “Whether we shall ever understand the moderns—a constant visitor to the galleries hears frequent complaints that the works are incomprehensible—whether we shall understand them is another question.”

At this time, critics and scholars had varying opinions on the track of contemporary American art.

Some of the themed exhibitions from the Whitney Museum of American Art aimed to create a wide definition of American art by showing a variety of artists, mediums, and styles. The Whitney Museum recognized that it was very New York-centric; the staff made a conscious effort to show regional exhibitions, which showed work by artists from different parts of the country. Despite this goal of covering a wide range of artistic styles in the United States, for the most part the museum focused on the realist strand of American art history. This focus differentiated the Whitney Museum from the Museum of Modern Art. On the other hand, the Whitney sometimes strayed from this path as when it put on a memorial exhibition for Maurice Prendergast, a member of “the Eight” and a Post-Impressionist.

Although the museum showed the work of American contemporary artists, the museum was not as liberal (in the sense of accepting and appreciating all different kinds of artistic styles) as expected. The museum’s founding collection consisted primarily of the traditional art forms of

painting and sculpture although it also included works on paper, such as drawings and prints, demonstrating the Whitney staff’s acceptance of works on paper as high art. However, some kinds of art were neglected in the collection; photography was not present, nor were architectural drawings and other aspects of design, such as stage design and decorative arts.

According to Cahill and Barr’s 1934 book, “The one clear note in contemporary American painting is a new emphasis upon social and collective expression.” The Whitney Museum staff was not afraid to include such politically charged works in their galleries, as is evident from their commissioning of Thomas Hart Benton’s “Arts of America” murals for the museum’s library which critiqued racial segregation. However, the Whitney Museum had garnered a reputation in such that works could only be political within certain unstated boundaries; works that were too radical would attract criticism from art critics. The inclusion of political cartoons and Glenn O. Coleman’s socialist painting also demonstrates the Whitney’s commitment to sharing political art.

In Cahill and Barr’s book, in an essay on “Contemporary American Painting,” they home in on the main concern of American artists, curators, and critics: “In any event, there is a demand in this country for a distinctive note of Americanism.” All were struggling with the perceived superiority of European art, and were eager to discover and define ways in which American artists had distinguished their work from that of their European counterparts. They seemed to constantly apologize for American art while, at the same time, attempting to defend it. Nevertheless, the nationalist approach to art in America was predominant in American art scholarship. The Whitney Museum participated in the search for this “distinctive note of Americanism” in both the past and present, particularly through its themed exhibitions.

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8 Cahill, Holger, and Alfred H. Barr. *Art in America in Modern Times*. (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1934), 44.
9 Ibid, 43.
An Environment of Inclusion: Creating a Wide Definition of American Art

The Whitney Museum staff was interested in creating an inclusive environment in the Whitney’s galleries. While somewhat limited in style of art (straying from realism only occasionally with a bit of Post-Impressionism), the museum embraced works of various mediums and genres. Beyond easel painting and sculpture, it included scientific illustrations, newspaper political cartoons, and murals.

The Whitney Museum’s first themed exhibition, held in 1932, bore the unwieldy title: “Provincial Paintings of the 19th Century, Audubon Prints, Colored Lithographs, and Thomas Nast Cartoons from the Permanent Collection.” Through this multi-part exhibition, the museum showed that it was committed to presenting a variety of different mediums and styles, making a statement about the breadth of its definition of American art. First, it made clear that it was not going to limit itself to only exhibiting high art forms, such as paintings and sculpture; it also showed prints, drawings, and works on paper in the exhibition. In terms of style, with the “Provincial Painting” section of the exhibition, the Whitney announced its embrace of nonacademic styles, in this case folk painting. The Whitney had a collection of “provincial” paintings, watercolors, and pastels that were likely used in the exhibition. Many of the oil paintings are not attributed to a specific artist. The show consisted of representational still lifes, portraits, and landscapes. With the inclusion of Thomas Nast’s political cartoons in the exhibition, the Whitney Museum made a powerful statement, asserting that widely published illustrations could be considered art. The staff believed in the significance of cartoons and

The third part of the first themed exhibition focused on John James Audubon, with an essay in the exhibition catalogue written by Karl Free, an artist and curator at the Whitney. Audubon was known as a naturalist, dedicated to documenting the birds of America. By including Audubon’s colored plates, the museum promoted the idea that scientific drawings could be art, especially since they had a “bold, balanced design” and “refined clarity of contour.” Yet the Whitney, in showing Audubon’s prints, was not necessarily expanding the accepted boundaries of American art; Audubon had already been canonized as a significant American artist in William Dunlap’s 1834 *History of the Arts and Design in the United States*, and described as a “very enterprising ornithologist and artist.” Dunlap said, “It is gratifying to see the arts of design enlisted in the cause of science.”

Finally, this exhibition contained colored lithographs, which were displayed in the same room as the Audubon plates. Free, who additionally wrote the essay on colored lithographs in the exhibition catalogue, gave a background on the history of lithography in America. Alois Senefelder invented the relatively new process of lithography, and the process came to America in 1819. Free says that, “…by 1850 the country was dotted with enterprising little lithographic establishments, even as far west as San Francisco.” Again, the inclusion of lithographs shows that the Whitney Museum was dedicated to including different mediums of art. Such prints were not considered to be a high form of art because they could be reproduced and distributed widely and inexpensively. However, the Whitney celebrated the affordability characteristic; Free
explained that the artists “supplied the avid artistic tastes of the American people with a profuse output of colored prints.” This democratization of this art form characterized prints.

The subject matter of these different styles of art varies. The folk paintings included still lifes and portraits; the Audubon plates were scientific, realistic renderings of birds; and the Nast political cartoons were charged with political commentary. The colored lithographs were most likely scenes of American life. By combining all of these different works in a single exhibition, the Whitney Museum of American Art was showing that “art” was not confined to painting and sculpture nor was it meant only for the well to do. Rather, American art was an art for the people and could cover a wide range of topics, although this was never explicitly stated. The Whitney Museum was building upon the already established definition of American art; Audubon’s ornithological drawings were already referenced in published histories of American art, and the Whitney Museum was embracing the growing interest in American folk art. Yet, it was adding to the definition of American art by including newspaper cartoons and colored lithographs, none of which were mentioned in the early publications on the history of American art.

The Whitney Museum of American Art displayed such work in its exhibitions, and was in advance of other museums in collecting it. The Metropolitan Museum of Art began collecting Nast cartoons in the 1920s, but the Addison Gallery did not begin collecting Nast illustrations until the late 1930s. Audubon prints did not enter the Metropolitan Museum’s collection until the 1970s, or the Addison Gallery’s collection until the 1960s. The Museum of Modern Art did not include Nast or Audubon in their collection, as they instead constructed a different narrative. The Whitney Museum’s collecting patterns differentiated it from other cultural institutions in the United States and added to its image of inclusiveness.

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In 1934, the Whitney Museum hosted a memorial exhibition of the works of Maurice Prendergast, a member of “the Eight.” While the other members of this group were urban realists, producing non-idealized pictures of city life, Prendergast worked in a colorful, decorative Post-Impressionist style. In oils, watercolors, and monotypes, he represented the leisure time activities of the well-to-do, mostly women and children, promenading at the beach or in well-manicured parks. The Whitney Museum exhibitions, for the most part, seemed to be championing gritty realists, but the inclusion of a Post-Impressionist gave a nod to that style of painting. Prendergast, as a member of “the Eight,” had a personal connection with Whitney and Force, which surely also helped him get an exhibition in honor of his memory. Prendergast was highly connected with the Whitney Studio Club and was acquainted with Whitney and Force prior to the establishment of the museum.

The introduction of the exhibition catalogue was written by Walter Pach, a New York City-based, modernist art critic and artist.\(^\text{11}\) Pach stated, “The work of Maurice B. Prendergast is so single, so clear, and so unshadowed by doubt, that one's impulse to-day is to respond to his ‘ode to joy’ by an answering fullness of satisfaction-both in the beauty of the world he saw, and in his success at rendering it.”\(^\text{12}\) As Pach said, “His works tell that the current of ideas may flow as richly in a mind concentrated on questions of art as in one intent upon matters of statecraft or philosophy.”\(^\text{13}\) This variety in showing different styles of art lends itself to the inclusive essence of the Whitney Museum.

Thomas Hart Benton’s murals, “The Arts of Life in America,” created for the Whitney’s library, offered a wide definition of American art. The opening of the murals to the public in


\(^{13}\) Ibid, 6.
1932 was accompanied with an essay written by Benton, explaining his thought process as he created them. He discusses the meaning of the title of the murals. They were named “in contrast to those specialized arts which the museum harbors and which are the outcome of special conditioning and professional direction….On the one hand, it is not inclusive enough, and, on the other, a point or two would have to be stretched to consider as arts some of the things represented.”\(^{14}\) Benton explains at length how he defines “art.” He defines Art as the “objectification of emotion.”\(^{15}\) He calls the activities of regular Americans “art;” this is an interesting contrast to the art that is typically hung on the walls of the Whitney Museum, which consisted of art, sculpture, and works on paper. Benton defined “art” as being anything that could create an experience, whether it was hard labor or leisure. “These popular outpourings have a sort of pulse, a go and come, a rhythm and all are expressions—indirectly, assertions of value.”\(^{16}\) Benton made the definition of “art” very wide; far wider than the definition of American art originally asserted by the Whitney Museum. However, the commission of these murals showed that the Whitney Museum was accepting of this wide definition of art; at least, until the reading room was closed to the public in 1933.

In addition to these themed exhibitions, the Whitney Museum held biennials of new works by currently working artists, which showed a range of different styles and mediums. A wide definition of American art was essential to the Whitney Museum mission in order to encourage working artists to continue to work on their art freely without concern that they would never gain support. The Whitney Museum sought to create an environment of acceptance. The museum’s definition of art was inclusive, rather than exclusive.

\(^{14}\) Ibid, 4. 
\(^{15}\) Ibid. 
\(^{16}\) Ibid.
Discovering “American” Art

During the 1930s, American art historians attempted to discern what made American art “American.” What made American art different from European art? Were there truly non-derivative characteristics that made American art unique? The Whitney Museum participated in this quest for distinctive national characteristics. The “provincial” paintings and the Maurice Prendergast works all contributed to this search for the “American note” in “American” art.

The Whitney Museum’s collection included works by “provincial” or “folk” artists. These works were seen as being “native,” since they were completed by artists who neither traveled in nor trained in Europe, nor learned European painting techniques at American art academies. The artists also painted specifically American subject matter. In the 1930s, American folk art garnered a large and appreciative following. Mrs. John D. Rockefeller began purchasing folk art in 1931.17 Alexander Girard, another private collector whose collection was contributed to the Museum of International Folk Art in 1978, began his collection of folk art in the 1930s.18 The Whitney Museum was part of this growing trend as private and public collectors became interested in the nostalgic style of these works. Their popularity was bound up with the search for a distinct “American” style of art.

Always, during these years, curators and American art scholars were overly apologetic. They defended American art, claiming it had value, yet, at the same time, they pointed out that it did not have the same quality as European art. As 1930s curator from Colonial Williamsburg James L. Cogar said, “It is a collection which appeals even to a public accustomed to the paintings of professionally trained artists.” Cogar explained, “It is a native art, honest and

straightforward, worthy of serious attention from the public as well as from historians and students of art. The collection serves not only as an artistic record, but also as an authentic document of life in America during earlier days, and furnishes valuable data for specialists in many fields."

In the Whitney exhibition catalogue for the “Provincial Paintings of the 19th Century, Audubon Prints, Colored Lithographs, and Thomas Nast Cartoons from the Permanent Collection,” Hermon More, one of the head curators at the Whitney Museum, gave his explanation of “provincial” paintings:

Outside of the urban centers, cut off from direct communication with the great tradition of European art, there grew in America an unsophisticated and idiomatic type of painting created to meet the needs of a rustic and middle-class society—a popular art exactly suited to the requirements of a provincial environment.\textsuperscript{19} These paintings had a flatness and lack of depth of color that scholars deemed unsophisticated. The patrons of this art were Americans of “rustic” society. More explained that when American artists wished to improve their craft, they would travel to Europe to study. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, not all American artists had the ability to do this. Because they could not travel to Europe, they were forced to learn from other American artists who did go to Europe. A consequence of this was that they learned the European style of art “in diluted form.”\textsuperscript{20}

More believes that this influence had a positive outcome: “Fortunately, lack of skill prevented too facile imitation and, out of necessity, developed a self-reliant attitude, a fresh, unspoiled vision, which, in the more richly endowed of these painters, resulted in an art of candor, simplicity and considerable originality.” This is the crux of the argument. The key words in his statement are “self-reliant” and “unspoiled.” Although the provincial paintings were not as

\textsuperscript{19} An Exhibition of provincial paintings..., 1.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
refined as the works from Europe or those by formally trained American artists, they represented a “native” American art, providing that individual sense of “Americanness.”

More goes on to say that “we may be inclined, in the enthusiasm of discovery, to overestimate the importance of this work, but we cannot deny its unaffected and awkward grace, the modesty and sincerity of its purpose, nor ignore, when at its best, the high order of its aesthetic qualities.” This hardly seems to be complimentary; yet, More was asserting that the American aesthetic was worthwhile and meaningful, raising a certain nationalistic air in the exhibition.

Edward Alden Jewell, art critic for the New York Times, explained his definition of “provincial” paintings: “The term ‘provincial,’ as applied to work of this sort, is much happier than the term ‘primitive,’ often confusing, whether used in connection with work done in this country or with contemporary painting in Europe.”21 Jewell notes that most of the provincial works had no artist’s name attached to them. Nonetheless, Jewell was impressed; he noted the specific works “Nature’s Bounty” and “Lady with Lace Handkerchief,” calling them “outstanding works.”22

Another review in The Art News, written by Ralph Flint and published on March 12, 1932, looks upon the exhibition favorably as well. Flint said, “The portraits, especially, teem with character and determination and are an authentic addition to the history of American aesthetics.”23 Both the essay in the exhibition catalogue and critics consistently used words such as “determination,” “self-reliant,” and “modest.” The interest in folk art during this time period was very strong, and the Whitney Museum perpetuated this interest, especially since it included these paintings in its first themed exhibition.

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22 Ibid.
Flint also makes a note in his review that relates to the search for “Americanness.” He said, “Since these were for the most part wrought in a state of splendid isolation – they are mainly by unknown artists who plied their trade without benefit of school or tradition – we can look directly back without refraction of vision into the beginnings of our art and see exactly how things looked and had their being.”24 Flint, like other critics and scholars, was concerned with finding this native, unaffected version of American art; and he believed that the Whitney Museum was successful in contributing to that conversation.

In the catalogue for the Maurice Prendergast memorial exhibition in 1934, Walter Pach, artist and critic, complimented Prendergast’s ability to create original works, despite being inspired by artists from abroad. He argued that artists could be inspired by European artists, but still create “American” works of art, if they did not imitate but instead were in conversation with European art. “To attempt to repeat the work of the past along its own lines is to fall into the ditch of academic anachronism; to continue the work of the masters as the living thing that it is, one must have an outlook of one’s own on the world one is born into.”25 Prendergast’s work complemented the work of European artists; it did not copy it.

Our countryside and our people form the inspiration of these exhilarating pictures which, since they stand well beside the best European painting of their day, tell that the old formula for art has been tried and found true once more: a man loves the world about him, studies it, takes counsel of the masters and—with these several elements in hand—works on from year to year for his greater happiness and for ours.26

The Whitney was striving to find that unquestioned “Americanness.” This was difficult, considering that American artistic styles generally derived from European sources.

24 Flint, Ralph. “Provincial Art of America in Fine Exhibition.”
26 Ibid, 7.
Constructing the American Realism Narrative

In these early years, the Whitney Museum of American Art promoted American realism in its galleries. By specifically highlighting realist artists, such as members of “the Eight,” the Whitney Museum asserted that the strand of realism was the most vital strain in American art. The Whitney Museum was dedicated to showing realist works of art: works that, instead of idealizing, romanticizing or sentimentalizing life or being set in a fantasy world, sought to show life in all its boring, ugly, disturbing, challenging, and sometimes exuberant complexity. While the Whitney Museum acknowledged a variety of mediums and genres in its galleries, it had somewhat limited offerings in terms of style: perhaps due to Mrs. Whitney’s and Mrs. Force’s personal tastes, the Whitney Museum promoted realism as the most important current in contemporary American art.

One such realist painter was Glenn O. Coleman (1884-1932), who, in 1932, was the subject of a memorial exhibition at the Whitney Museum. Coleman, who studied under Robert Henri and Everett Shinn, members of “the Eight,” was an urban realist artist. He was a contributing member of the realist movement in the United States, which picked up speed in the first decades of the twentieth century. The retrospective exhibition surveyed Coleman’s entire career, including his realist works and experimentation with abstraction. In the exhibition catalogue, Hermon More notes that there was a brief period of time in which Coleman experimented with abstraction, yet, he explains, this phase did not last long: “aesthetic doctrines being foreign to his temperament and outside the main purposes of his art.”

Was the Whitney Museum unprepared for abstraction? More felt the need to defend this period in Coleman’s career, hinting at a conservativeness in the Whitney’s selection of works. In this exhibition, visitors could see how Coleman’s earlier works had a romantic mood, while his

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later works were more sober and restrained. More makes a final statement, summing up the
importance of Coleman’s work: “Like some of the strongest American artists of the past he was
an individualist and a realist, his art growing naturally out of his own experience.”

Next in the exhibition catalogue were several short essays by other artists, recounting
their memories of Coleman. First was Stuart Davis; he provided his personal impression of
Coleman as a man of good humor, and summarized his attitude towards life: “Nothing much was
to be expected from anything was his general idea.” Next was John Sloan who wrote on
Coleman’s affection for New York and his realist approach:

        His pictures are love letters to the great lady of his heart – Manhattan. They reveal
        his love and his understanding of his mighty mistress – no sentimentality, no blind
        devotion – but the deep, quiet love that loves the faults and weaknesses – that
        loves too wisely to find glamour – that loves deeply, strength to strength, as the
        sailor loves the sea.

Sloan goes on to say that “His technique grew naturally out of his simple desire to express what
he saw in New York City.” The inclusion of this statement is further evidence of the Whitney
Museum’s construction of a realist narrative. Last in the catalogue, Guy Pène Du Bois wrote of
Coleman. “He had something to say, a so very particular thing that [other painters’] language
could not in any way help him to round it out.” These three artists clearly admired Coleman.
The contributions of other American artist to the exhibition catalogue support the idea that the
Whitney Museum was a place for artists.

Edward Alden Jewell reviewed this exhibition for the New York Times:

        Glenn Coleman, to my way of thinking, was supremely the artist, the painter. He
        was always a ‘colorist’ of distinction, even long before he had begun to key up his
        palette. Light was generally employed as a servant to form, as a formal

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid, 6.
30 Ibid, 8.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid, 10.
concomitant of design, rather than as an adjunct to picturesque-ness; and in this respect he is called a classicist.  

Jewell said, “Coleman remained to the end allegiant, as well, to the less grandiose vistas of the Village.” He also said the Coleman was very original, never borrowing from European modernists. This seems important to point out, as the Whitney wanted to promote American artists, and when American artists did not base their work on European modernist models, they were more likely to be contributing to a distinctively American aesthetic.

Ralph Flint reviewed this exhibition for *Art News*; he related the work of Coleman to the current art scene. “Coleman was not one to be affected by any School of Paris innovations and his few attempts to reach into more or less abstract phase of design never seemed to go lead anywhere.” Coleman was seen as an artist who did not derive his style from European artists; this was relevant to the Whitney Museum’s mission to find purely American art unaffected by outside influences. Flint also said, “Coleman’s career is a timely commentary on the general state of art in this country at this particular time, when more and more the artistic urge is reaching further afield and with increasingly fine results.” However, Flint also expresses a concern: “But what we lack is men of such dominant nature as to command more than a local following. The modern masters still hail from Paris.” Despite the Whitney’s depiction of American art, Flint still believes that the art is not strong enough to compare to European modernists.

In 1932, Thomas Hart Benton’s “The Arts of Life in America” murals opened to the public in the museum’s reading room. In the early 1930s, the crumbling American economy had

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34 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
taken its toll on many American artists, even Thomas Hart Benton, one of the leaders of the regionalist movement in the United States. The Bentons were in such trouble that they were in danger of losing their property due to high levels of debt. Juliana Force admired Benton’s work, already having purchased oils for the museum. When Rita Benton, Thomas Benton’s wife, contacted Force to explain their situation (they would lose their home unless they were to come up with $12,000), Force loaned $3,000 of her own money to help.

Although the $3,000 helped to save their home, the Bentons were unable to repay the loan, still struggling with finances. Benton and Force came to an agreement: Benton would paint murals for the museum to repay the loan. Force aided Benton financially as he travelled to the American South to sketch and research for the summer. She also promised him $1,000 as payment, despite the fact that the murals were meant to repay the original loan. After the murals were completed, Force paid Benton $1,000. However, he seemed to have forgotten their bargain, and took great offense at being paid “less than a commercial decorator for a hotel or restaurant.” He returned the check, claiming to make the murals a gift, in hopes of shaming Force into giving him more money. This put her in the uncomfortable position of trying to remind Benton of their agreement and that the money consisted of her personal funds, not the museum’s funds. Eventually, Benton accepted the check.38

Although Edward Alden Jewell stated in his review for the New York Times that “the room is a gem,”39 the murals were also attacked for their provocative and unwholesome nature, because they included activities such as shooting and gambling. Many critics questioned the

murals’ placement in a museum reading room. Flint in a review for *Art News*, said, “His figures, too, have an extra wriggle and shake to them that is hardly in keeping with the general sense and order of a reading room.” Perhaps due to such negative reviews, the reading room was closed to the public in 1933.

At the time Benton produced the Whitney murals, he was known as a leader of the Regionalist movement, along with Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry. The movement “opposed European modernism and focused on scenes of American heartland.” The Whitney Museum’s inclusion of regionalists contributed to their narrative of realist art, as well as their focus on showing work that had American themes rather than European themes.

These exhibitions in the Whitney Museum’s first seasons were only the beginning of the Whitney’s continued dedicated to creating a genealogy of American realism. The exhibitions focused on specific realist artists as well as realistic scenes from American life. In the following seasons, the Whitney Museum pursued this realist narrative with more energy and fervor.

**Political Art in the Whitney Galleries**

Some of the works in the Whitney Museum galleries had political messages. These works generally had liberal leanings, tending towards a promotion of socialist and populist ideals.

Glenn O. Coleman created works suffused with socialist ideas, while Thomas Hart Benton’s murals bluntly and unapologetically critiqued American society, including its racism and religious fanaticism. However, the museum, in general, steered away from politically

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42 Ibid., 28.
43 Ibid.
inflammatory art. If works ignited too much debate, they were deemed inappropriate for the Whitney Museum.

Thomas Nast’s political cartoons, featured in the Whitney’s first themed exhibition, set the stage for the Whitney Museum to include works with a political stance. Lloyd Goodrich, a Whitney curator and influential American art historian, argued strongly in the exhibition catalogue for Nast’s importance. “ Purely as a caricaturist he ranks with the greatest, while the massive power of his form and design places him among the strongest American artists in any field.” In his defense of Nast, Goodrich leads with Nast’s political power (power in the hands of the people, and in this case, the artist), and then comments on the power of his artistic strengths.

Goodrich called Nast “the father of American political cartooning and the greatest of American cartoonists.” He explained Nast’s qualities and bravery: “A good hater, absolutely fearless, and uncompromising in his opinions, he wielded a pencil that combined mordant wit and crushing force.” Nast started out as a poor immigrant, but his talent and wit eventually brought him fame and fortune, and he had a strong impact on politics in America. As Goodrich explains, “…he exercised an influence unequalled by any cartoonist before or since, his most famous achievement being his part in breaking up the Tweed Ring.” The Tweed Ring was a corrupt group led by William Marcy Tweed, or “Boss Tweed,” who was elected to the House of Representatives and Senate. Tweed controlled New York City’s finances up until 1870. The inclusion of Nast’s political cartoons demonstrates that the Whitney Museum embraced populist politics.

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44 An Exhibition of provincial paintings..., 2.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
Glenn O. Coleman, featured in the 1932 solo exhibition discussed earlier, created politically-charged works. While other artists were depicting landscapes, Coleman, a socialist, aimed to be political and make a statement about the social scene in New York City. According to Hermon More, who wrote the exhibition catalogue, “His independent character, always susceptible to liberal influences, immediately responded to the ideas which brought into being the Whitney Studio Club and Galleries and culminated in the founding of this Museum.” Additionally, in the rhetoric of the catalogue, the Whitney Museum described its own environment as liberal, seeing itself as a venue for politically-charged art.

In the same season that the Coleman show went up, the Thomas Hart Benton’s murals, “The Arts of Life in America,” opened in the museum’s reading room. The murals consisted of four major panels and four smaller ceiling panels. It “represented a conscious attempt to bridge the gap between the high arts, such as painting and classical music, and the popular arts of ordinary Americans.” The murals are filled with “provocative juxtapositions that contrast wealth and extravagance with depravation and squalor.” These murals are a major example of how art was responding to the economic distress of the time. It showed that the Whitney Museum was aware and understood its responsibility to make commentary on the current state of American society.

The murals themselves were painted in the regionalist style, each one filled with caricatures of American people and activities. One mural, *Arts of the City* (Figure 6), shows a chorus line, a movie theater, a pianist, and dancers. The people in this mural are urbanites; some are wealthy, some are poor. Some are artists, and others are mobsters. The diverse combination of people highlights the segregation of the American city. The bright colors and strong motion in

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49 Ibid.
the mural are different from the works of the Ashcan realists that were also shown in the Whitney galleries; other realists used a somber color palette to show the grimness of the city. Another mural, *Arts of the South* (Figure 7), shows a different side of American life. We see agrarian culture and more African Americans than in any other panel in this series, making racial divides clear. The *Arts of the West* mural (Figure 8) shows men gambling, playing instruments, and shooting. The overall tone of the panels is somewhat critical, as they show corrupt aspects of American life, such as gambling and violence; an unforgiving view of the good, the bad, and the ugly side of American life.

Perhaps the most unsettling and economically relevant murals were *Unemployment*, *Radical Protest, Speed* (Figure 9) and *Political Business and Intellectual Ballyhoo* (Figure 10). These murals were the most satirical and directly addressed the social, political, and economic issues at hand in the United States. According to Henry Adams, “[Benton] wishes to contrast the enticements of capitalism, such as fast cars and new clothes, with the brutal methods used to maintain social control.”\(^{50}\) The murals received mixed reviews; the almost distorted figures and brash style did not appeal to everyone. One of the most biting critiques was from Paul Rosenfeld, who wrote for the *New Republic*:

The lack of feeling for the rooms and the walls given him to decorate displayed by Benton is unfortunately characteristic of his art itself. Were it less thoroughly so; were his mural in the Whitney reading room the product of fine, true feeling, no matter how irrelevant to the spirit of the place itself, one would scarcely be impelled to dwell on his neglect of all considerations of fitness and taste.\(^{51}\)

Interestingly, Rosenfeld claimed that the murals, “Arts of Life in America” were “irrelevant” to the Whitney Museum of American Art. The legal courts even deemed the murals “immoral.” In a custody trial for ten-year-old Gloria Vanderbilt, the court decided that Mrs.

\(^{50}\) Ibid, 30.
Whitney was not fit to be a guardian because her museum housed art with questionable morals; the main example being Benton’s murals.\textsuperscript{52} The Whitney Museum’s goal was to share the art of the United States, so why did Rosenfeld (as well as some other critics) believe that it did not belong in the Whitney Museum? The Museum, although having only just opened, must have already been establishing itself as a conservative space without highly politically and socially charged works. The murals make powerful social statements by juxtaposing the hard labor of working people with the leisure of the upper class. Especially during these early years of the Great Depression, many people were struggling with the wealth gap between the rich and the poor. Flint defended the murals in his review: “You may not like Mr. Benton’s new murals but you can’t get away from them any more than you can close your eyes to the headlines in the morning’s paper.”\textsuperscript{53} He goes on to say that the murals are Benton’s “best work to date.”\textsuperscript{54} The “Arts of Life in America” by Benton caused a stir in the New York art community; attention that the Whitney Museum was not expecting. In 1954, the Benton murals were sold to the New Britain Museum of Art in Connecticut.

The Whitney Museum included socially and politically conscious art in its galleries, in accordance with the trends of American art in the 1930s. Because the museum was showing contemporary artists, the works on the walls showed art that was responding to the social and political conditions of the present. As the Thomas Nast cartoons responded to the conditions of the past, the Whitney created a short narrative of politically conscious art in its galleries. It aimed to create an environment of liberation for artists, although sometimes the Whitney Museum did not quite hold up to this goal.

\textsuperscript{52} Adams, \textit{New Britain Museum}, 33.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
Extending the Art World from New York to the Rest of the United States

The Whitney Museum staff seemed to view the art world in the United States as mostly centered in New York City. Yet they were dedicated to showing works from around the country, in hopes of supporting artists everywhere by helping them gain exposure. The museum represented the arts of life in America in a different way after the Benton murals went up; it held regional exhibitions, being sure to represent other parts of the country, not just New York. In February of 1933, the Whitney Museum opened up its first regional exhibition, featuring paintings and prints by artists who were associated with the Art Institute of Chicago. The exhibition of artists from Chicago features regionalist artists, another strain of realism.

Juliana Force wrote the introduction to the exhibition catalogue. The exhibition consisted of a “selection of works by a group of talented individuals who are especially associated with the contemporary art development of Chicago—a selection which would present a concise statement of the various trends of painting produced there.” Although the artists of Chicago were creating a variety of works in different styles, Force described the common factor as “robustness of approach” and “refreshing unconventionality in the choice and treatment of subject material.”

A number of Chicago artists were featured in this exhibition. For the most part, the artists were realists. Some were abstract painters; others were Post-Impressionists. Importantly, Archibald Motley, Jr., an African American painter, was included in this exhibition. He depicted scenes of African Americans and their daily life; this work was created in the spirit of realism. This exhibition accomplished multiple goals; it prominently displayed the work of Chicago artists, effectively underscoring the Whitney’s dedication to showing artists from across the

56 Ibid.
country. The artists in this exhibition also promoted the Whitney’s definition of American art, which focused on American realism as the direction of contemporary American art.

The exhibition was reviewed by Edward Alden Jewell in the New York Times. Jewell tries to find the common thread that connects the artists in the show: “In examining the pictures chosen for this display one can hardly fail to agree that various trends are indeed illustrated. Robustness, too, is frequently in evidence and many a pictorial adventure leads away more or less from beaten tracks.”\(^5^7\) The trends included regionalism, and he also points out that the Chicago artists are influenced by European modernists, much like other American artists. “At the same time one is not surprised to find that some of the Chicago artists—like American artists all over the country—have been leaning up against the tall, stout hitching-post of European modernism.”\(^5^8\) Jewell points out the difficulty for American artists to claim an artistic style as their own: “Particularly in the realm of abstraction does it appear to be difficult for our American artists to get away from the dictatorship of Parisian ateliers.”\(^5^9\) At this time, the Whitney Museum did not include too much modern art, as that was not its main goal. However, it did include some modernist art when the exhibition called for it. Jewell also draws attention to the fact that the exhibition cannot possibly be all-inclusive; some choices must be made, and those choices are made by the curators, determining which artists get a spot in the Whitney galleries. “There are probably thousands of artists in Chicago, but no exhibition undertakes to cover the entire range of a community’s output. There must be careful sifting, so that the result may be sufficiently representative without being over-inclusive.”\(^6^0\)

\(^5^8\) Ibid.
\(^5^9\) Ibid.
\(^6^0\) Ibid.
Not every critic believed that it was necessary for the Whitney Museum to include other cities in its exhibition seasons. Ralph Flint, reviewing the exhibition for *Art News*, made a biting remark: “There is little for the New York artist to learn from his Chicago confreres, judging from the present display, and it only goes to prove that, after all, New York is the beginning and the end of contemporary American art, except for certain isolated out-of-town communities like Woodstock and Taos.”⁶¹ Despite such views, the Whitney Museum was dedicated to showing work from across the country.

The Whitney Museum’s Contrast with Other Institutions

It is important to consider what other museums in the New York City area were exhibiting during the Whitney’s early years. The Metropolitan Museum of Art was showing a wide variety of art from around the world, focusing on painting, sculpture, and decorative arts. The Museum of Modern Art hosted a variety of exhibitions, some of which were similar to the exhibitions given by the Whitney Museum, while others were completely different.

MoMA also included certain classes of work that the Whitney did not, such as architectural plans and models. However, both institutions shared an interest in murals, which were seen as an art for the people, part of the populist orientation of 1930s art. While the Whitney had commissioned Benton’s murals, MoMA held a mural exhibition, which was, at the time, seen to be a failure. The exhibition featured 65 painters and photographers, most with no mural experience, who were asked to create a mural with the subject “The Post-War World.”⁶²

Interestingly, MoMA held some American art exhibitions that were parallel to the exhibitions of the Whitney. In 1932, an exhibition called “American Folk Art” opened at

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MoMA; an exhibition very similar to the Whitney’s 1931 exhibition featuring “provincial” paintings.\textsuperscript{63} The exhibition catalogue’s introduction read, “This exhibition represents the unconventional side of the American tradition in the fine arts.”\textsuperscript{64} MoMA followed this with a string of more American art exhibitions, challenging the Whitney’s status as the premier New York institution dedicated to American art. However, MoMA always brought the American art back to the topic of modernism, while the Whitney brought the art back to the path of realism. For example, MoMA held an exhibition called “American Sources of Modern Art.” MoMA did not completely ignore realism, though, as it included a one man show of the work of Edward Hopper.\textsuperscript{65} Although some of the exhibitions in the Whitney and MoMA had similar content, many of the exhibitions’ themes were quite divergent of those of the Whitney.

Through its first three seasons of exhibitions, the Whitney Museum both shaped its institutional identity and crafted a specific definition of American art. By the end of the third season, critics and the public had a firm idea of the type of art they were likely to encounter in the Whitney’s galleries. While MoMA was promoting the significance of European-influenced modernism, the Whitney Museum, through its exhibitions, was advocating for American realism. The Whitney Museum staff also made an effort to showcase artists from parts of the country other than New York. The museum’s regional exhibition of works from Chicago was only the first in a series of regional exhibitions that would follow in the upcoming seasons.

The Whitney’s definition of American art was never rigidly set. We should not expect it to be. Its exhibitions set a framework for showing a variety of different kinds of artists and works; while the museum focused on realism, the staff still veered from that path to display works by Post-Impressionists and other modernists. In the museum’s first seasons, it was still

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, 41.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, 41-46.
gaining its footing and determining its position in the New York art world. In the next few years, the Whitney’s themed exhibitions would add even more layers of complexity to its definition of American art. With putting American art in the public eye in an institution of such permanence and being a venue for working American artists to show their work, encouraging them to continue working, the Whitney was already accomplishing its goal of “contributing to the creative processes of our time.”

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Chapter 3
Continuing the Realism Path: Whitney Museum Exhibitions, 1934-1937

When the Whitney Museum of American Art opened in 1931, it had a clean slate with which to establish its reputation within the New York art world. In its first few years, it did just that, holding eighteen exhibitions that announced both its commitment to and its definition of American art. By featuring a variety of works such as Chicago art, folk paintings, scientific drawings, and political cartoons, the museum offered a broad definition of American art, encompassing a range of media, styles, and regions. Also, in direct contrast to the Museum of Modern Art’s modernist narrative, the Whitney portrayed realism as the most vital current in American art of the past and present.

In the following years, between 1934 and 1937, the Whitney Museum staff expanded their narrative of American art within the galleries of the Whitney. They maintained their emphasis on realism, yet certainly showed other aspects of American art, including one exhibition devoted to abstract painting. The Whitney also showed exhibitions that highlighted works with a political and social consciousness, a trend of particular importance to American artists at the time.

The Whitney Museum maintained and deepened their commitment to living artists, holding more biennials of contemporary art and sculpture in these early years. Exhibition checklists still noted that many of the works were for sale. During these difficult economic times, the Whitney Museum always tried to support its artists, whether it was by giving them exposure in the galleries or helping them sell their works.

Although the Whitney was New York-centric, it reached beyond its New York base to display art of different cities and regions of the United States. In addition to its earlier show of Chicago artists, the museum held a show of artists from Philadelphia in 1934, as well as a show
of artists from Cleveland in 1937. Scholars believed that the mainstream art world in the United States would expand away from New York City. Holger Cahill, American arts administrator and curator, said, “It is possible that in the next decade we may see the rise of numerous community centers which will challenge the leadership of great art capitals like New York.” However, at the time, New York remained the hub of American art.

**The Continuation of American Realism**

As in the first few seasons of the Whitney Museum, the seasons between 1934 and 1937 promoted American realism, but with more fervor. Through its exhibitions, publications, and lectures, the museum constructed a narrative that showed the path of realism. According to the Whitney, the genealogy of American realism included nineteenth-century artists, such as David G. Blythe and Joseph Boggs Beale, Winslow Homer, and Thomas Eakins. However, it was not until the development of the Ashcan School that realism began to make revolutionary changes in American art. Helen Appleton Read, who frequently contributed to the Whitney Museum’s publications, wrote of the members of the Ashcan School: “For not only did [the Ashcan school] prepare the way for the inquiring liberal spirit which made the modern movement an inevitable next step, but they implanted in our subconscious minds the belief that significant art has its roots deep in the soil that produced the artist, and that we must link our present with our past.”

This group, according to the Whitney Museum, was especially transformative in the history of American art. Robert Henri (1865-1929), the leader of this movement, gathered a group of newspaper illustrators from Philadelphia, including Everett Shinn, John Sloan, George Luks, and

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1 Holger Cahill, and Alfred H. Barr. *Art in America in Modern Times.* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1934).

William Glackens. They formed a group of urban realists, who were “deeply concerned about the social problems of the day, and wanted to comment on these directly and unambiguously.”

Like all artistic movements, realism in the 1930s was multifaceted and within it had different camps, including the “Regionalists” and the “Social Realists.” The 1930s realist movement was called, by critics of the time, the “American Wave,” having a strong nationalistic essence. It was characterized by Peyton Boswell, Sr., editor of *The Art Digest*, who said the American Wave was “a movement looking forward to the production of works of art that, avoiding foreign influences, actually expressed the spirit of the land.” Realism was seen as a particularly “American” style.

Although Social Realists and Regionalists disagreed on content (Social Realists tended to produce politically-charged art with an activist edge, while the Regionalists celebrated the rural areas of the country), they did agree to reject elitist art and Parisian modernism. In several exhibitions between 1934 and 1937, the Whitney Museum showed both works of both Regionalism and Social Realist work.

Between 1934 and 1937, through exhibitions such as “American Genre: The Social Scene in Painting and Prints,” the Winslow Homer’s Centenary, and “New York Realists: 1900-1914,” the Whitney constructed its history of American realism. The staff at the museum took historic information to build a “usable past” to fit their needs.

The exhibition, “American Genre – The Social Scene in Painting and Prints (1800-1935),” was on view from March 26 to April 29, 1935. It strongly contributed to the narrative of American realism being put forth by the Whitney Museum. The works in this exhibition depicted daily life in America. The exhibition catalogue cast the works as realist in their attention to

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5 Ibid, 18.
6 Ibid, 58.
scenes of ordinary life that were neither idealized nor romanticized. The introduction, written by Lloyd Goodrich, argues that the history of American genre painting begins with the work of John Lewis Krimmel (1786-1821), a young German-born artist. According to Goodrich, genre painting was little practiced before 1810, due to a “prevailing neo-classic aesthetic [which] condemned vulgar subjects.” Goodrich wanted to show that this kind of art was revolutionary and a step forward for American art in its choice of subject matter.

Goodrich argued that in the 1830s, tastes began to change, bringing “a new sense of importance of the common man, and a strong nativist sentiment.” He rather condescendingly described the patrons of this early genre art: “A comfortable bourgeois class was arising whose interest in art, though still limited and provincial, went beyond the perpetuation of their own faces. Artists, released sometimes from the yoke of portrait-painting, looked more to American life for subjects.” The first artist to have success with such themes was William S. Mount. Mount’s work represented themes to which the American public could relate. “These virgin themes [farmers bargaining for horses, rustic fiddlers, country dancers] he handled with a skill, a fresh observation, and a truth of character and action that still make him one of the most genuine figures in our art.” Goodrich admired the genuine quality of such genre paintings; it is this sincerity that characterizes American genre paintings. The artists do not try to invent a new world; they are not ashamed to paint the one they live in.

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
Nineteenth-century genre images rarely represented urban life.\textsuperscript{13} Goodrich writes: “As was natural in a nation still largely agricultural, rural life was the favorite theme – corn-husking bees, cider-making, goose raffles, turkey shoots – all the picturesque and pleasant side of the old American farm life.”\textsuperscript{14} At this time, when painting scenes, American artists preferred to focus on the countryside rather than on the city.\textsuperscript{15} Goodrich explained this preference: “Our cities were not decorative and to reveal them in all their bare ugliness would have required a more drastic realism than most of our painters possessed.”\textsuperscript{16} Early realist artists imposed their own limitations, not willing to be brutally honest in their works. The paintings were imbued with sense of national optimism and “a good deal of humor, of a genial, good-natured kind, without lewdness or brutality.”\textsuperscript{17} Their work was “honest, fresh, and real.”\textsuperscript{18} It was this honesty which set the stage for the twentieth-century American genre artists, who began to take more risks and show the American world as it is.

Goodrich located the turning point for American genre: “The paralyzing spell of gentility that had settled over American art was broken about 1908 by a group of young rebels who exhibited at the Macbeth Gallery under the name of ‘The Eight.’”\textsuperscript{19} The members of “the Eight” ventured into painting New York City scenes, and all aspects of city life. “They painted these things realistically, in all their sordidness and garishness.”\textsuperscript{20} By drawing out these differences, Goodrich has set up the genealogy for the growth of American realism. As he said in his essay, “Machinery and skyscrapers no longer seem ugly to the artists, but the idealization of them is

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 6.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 6-7.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 7.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 9.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 10.
Goodrich brings up certain qualities that are characteristic of American realist paintings and prints, educating readers of the exhibition catalogue on the defining qualities of realism and genre painting. He wrote that “Our gaze is here and now;” a quality of genre and realist painting is that it depicts the contemporary world in which we live. The paintings of “the Eight” exhibit “sympathy with the working class.” This influenced other artists and led them to include a “strong element of satire, sign of a deep change in the artist’s attitude towards the social order in which he lives.” This acute awareness of social order and its inclusion in their work is another distinct characteristic of genre painters. The American Genre- The Social Scene exhibition presented a pathway and history of realism in America.

The exhibition was organized and presented to construct a clear history of American genre painting. Nineteenth-century paintings were on the first floor, twentieth-century paintings were on the second floor, and both centuries were on the third floor. The organization of this exhibition allowed visitors to understand the transformation and growth of this movement as they moved up through the galleries, finally culminating in a room in which the different centuries’ paintings were commingled. This makes clear the Whitney Museum’s ambition to educate visitors in the chronology of American realism.

The Winslow Homer centenary exhibition helped to establish the Whitney’s history of American realism. Homer was born in 1836, and passed away in 1910. Like some of the early members of the Ashcan School, he worked as an artist-reporter, completing now iconic drawings for Harper’s during the Civil War. In the exhibition catalogue essay, Lloyd Goodrich, a

\[\text{\textit{Ibid.}}\]
\[\text{\textit{Ibid.}}\]
\[\text{\textit{Ibid.}}\]
\[\text{\textit{Ibid.}}\]
champion of Homer and Eakins, explained, “With the outbreak of the Civil War he went to the front as artist-correspondent for Harper’s. In the drawings he sent back the predominant note was naturalism. The prosaic, everyday side of military life—the daily chores, the rough recreations, the slapstick humor—interested him more than battles.”

According to Goodrich, Homer did not want to idealize war or dramatize situations; rather, he aimed to present the arguably uninteresting side of war. Goodrich added, “Homer was almost a pure naturalist. He painted only what he himself had seen and observed, giving little rein to fantasy.”

“Homer’s art,” he continued, “was a comparatively simple one, neither complex nor sophisticated.” Homer did not create imagined situations in his works; like a true realist, he drew and painted from life, setting the stage for future realists of the twentieth century.

Although Homer did not idealize, his drawings and paintings were aesthetically pleasing, according to Goodrich: “It is clear that Homer was not a merely photographic naturalist, but that he had a sense of design, though not highly conscious. He saw a pattern in nature and expressed it largely, simply, and forcefully.” He continued to explain: “His decorative quality seems a natural outgrowth of his vision of reality. He presents an intriguing paradox of an artist who was primarily a naturalist, but one in whom refinement and a sense of decoration were innate.”

The Whitney Museum used Winslow Homer as an example of a nineteenth-century American realist, and by giving him a solo exhibition, emphasized his prominent place in the realist narrative.

Opening on February 9, 1937, the exhibition, “New York Realists 1900-1914,” emphasized and solidified the place of these artists in the history of American realism. The show featured the

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26 Ibid, 12.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid, 8.
works of Robert Henri, George Luks, John Sloan, William Glackens, Ernest Lawson, George Bellows, Everett Shinn, Glenn O. Coleman, and Guy Pène du Bois. The drawings, colored drawings, and paintings, showed a range of mediums. The foreword of the exhibition catalogue, by an unknown author, explained the complexity of grouping these artists together, pointing out that limitation of calling them all realists, and that it is more accurate to call them individualists.\(^{30}\) Although these artists had individual aims, they had a commonality that strung them together: “All these men had this in common: that they turned directly to nature and did not scorn any phase of [the] human scene as fit subjects for their art.”\(^{31}\) Hermon More, in his essay for the exhibition catalogue, emphasized that these artists were developing a native American art, saying that these artists were dedicated to the ideal that the artist must paint the life he knew best if a genuine American art was to develop.\(^{32}\)

The Whitney staff chose to focus the exhibition on the years 1900 to 1914, the “pre-war decade when to be a realist and paint the American scene was to be regarded as an iconoclastic radical.”\(^{33}\) This is in contrast with what was seen as radical during the 1930s, which was modern art. Additionally, More wrote, “Curiously enough, because of the war and the aesthetic innovations which coincided with it, this pre-war realism has become one of those forgotten periods which sometimes occur in the history of art, neglected because contemporary taste looks elsewhere for inspiration, or because it has not as yet been invested with period patina.”\(^{34}\)

Hermon More seems to defend realism in his exhibition catalogue, calling it radical in its own way. He wrote, “The generation which made the daring experiments of the period after the Armory show, could not be expected to concede aesthetic trail-blazing to a group whose

\(^{30}\) *New York Realists*..., 3.
\(^{31}\) Ibid.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
radicalism went no further than the choosing of unorthodox subject matter.”\(^{35}\) Although the paintings of the realists were not abstract and daring in one sense, they were radical because they addressed subjects that were not typical at the time. The artists showed urban poverty and the disruptive impact of modernity, in contrast to genteel scenes of leisure, studio models, and landscapes, being produced then by the American Impressionists and other member of the conservative National Academy of Design. More placed the work of the New York Realists in context of the American art canon and explained their role in directing American art. “For not only did they prepare the way for the inquiring liberal spirit which made the modern movement an inevitable next step, but they implanted in our subconscious minds the belief that significant art has its roots deep in the soil that produced the artist, and that we must link our present with our past.”\(^{36}\) The work of the New York Realists was revolutionary, and it proposed an “integration of art and society.”\(^{37}\) This particular exhibition clearly demonstrated a stage in the history of American realism.

**Defining the Present by Learning From the Past: Historical Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum**

Although the Whitney Museum’s self-proclaimed focus was on contemporary, living artists, through its exhibits of historical American art, the museum was seeking to discover and define what made American art “American” – a central ambition of scholars of American art in the 1930s. This goal continued in full force in the Whitney’s 1934-1937 exhibition seasons, in the “American Genre,” “Winslow Homer,” and “New York Realists, 1900-1914” shows already discussed, as well as in an exhibition of Shaker handicrafts and shows focusing on the

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\(^{35}\) Ibid.  
\(^{36}\) New York Realists..., 6.  
\(^{37}\) Ibid.
nineteenth-century genre painters David G. Blythe (1815-1865), and Joseph Boggs Beale (1841-1926). The authors of the exhibition catalogues discovered in their subjects, freedom from European modernism, populist ideals, a subject matter that focused on the American life, and traits such as simplicity and heroism.

Historical works were directly juxtaposed with contemporary works in the “American Genre – The Social Scene” exhibition in 1935. The exhibition was split between nineteenth century and twentieth century American genre prints. In the exhibition catalogue, Goodrich explained that the state of the American art world in the nineteenth century “was comparatively small and simple. Little foreign art was imported; few of the art public had been abroad; taste was homemade.”

Goodrich set the parameters for understanding American art of the nineteenth century, painting a picture for twentieth century readers to see how American art had developed since then.

Goodrich connected Currier and Ives prints, Eakins, and Homer with American Genre painting. According to Goodrich, Currier and Ives prints were “an art for the people if there ever was one,” emphasizing the populist aspect of American art. He also said, “The nineteenth century genre school reached its culmination in Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins.”

In connecting Homer, Eakins, and Currier and Ives, the Whitney Museum was building a canon of American art.

In discussing these works, the Whitney’s authors highlighted their “American” characteristics. For example, the city or country environment of the subject of the painting and the qualities of “a freshness, a masculine vigor, and an originality of style” characterized

38 American Genre : The Social Scene, 7.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid, 7.
American painting. Other such characteristics which defined “American” art and differentiated it from European art were “sturdy optimism, independence, [and] good humor.”

In the Winslow Homer centenary exhibition, the Whitney staff used Homer’s work to define the specific “Americanness” of American art. Winslow Homer was seen as the epitome of American; what was it about his work and subject matter that made him so? According to Goodrich, “Genius often has to shut out the world and be sufficient to itself to accomplish what it does. And this was especially true in the America of his time, with its lack of a mature native tradition.” Because America did not yet have a “mature native tradition,” Homer was able to contribute to building an American tradition.

Homer was seen as a true “American” artist, because he focused on specifically American subject matter. His interests did not lie in the city. His works had more rustic content, according to Goodrich: “For subjects he turned to American country life. The city he endured only for professional reasons.” Additionally, in the exhibition catalogue, Goodrich expressed the values that Homer found important: “democratic, healthy, delighting in youth and physical action, in nature, and in sturdy men and women and children.” Goodrich writes of one of Homer’s later paintings in the exhibition, *The Life Line* (1884):

Homer, having turned his back on society and returned to nature, was celebrating the primary human virtues of physical strength and courage pitted against the impersonal force of the sea. It was an escape from the modern world with its complexity and intellectualism and its manifold ills, into a more primitive life, the survival of an earlier day. This preference for the simple and ‘natural’ as against the complex and sophisticated reveals the sound physical vitality that underlay Homer’s art, and its genuinely heroic quality, as well as its intellectual and emotional limitations.

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42 Ibid, 6.
44 In the nineteenth century, rural subject matter was seen as being truly American, while in the twentieth century, city scenes were considered American.
46 Ibid, 7.
These qualities of simplicity, a return to nature, and heroism were important in the construction of the history of American art.

From April 7 to May 7, 1936, the Whitney Museum presented an exhibition, “Paintings by David G. Blythe and Drawings by Joseph Boggs Beale,” focusing on two nineteenth-century genre painters. The 1935 American Genre exhibition had helped the Whitney staff “discover” David G. Blythe, a Philadelphia artist born in 1815, while Arthur Colen, an artist and curator at the Philadelphia Modern Galleries, championed Joseph Boggs Beale, another Philadelphia artist born in 1841. Colen assisted in organizing the Beale aspect of the exhibition. An author for *Art Digest* found a common thread linking these two artists: “Delving from an amusing angle into America’s near-past, the Whitney Museum is exhibiting the work of two earlier Pennsylvania artists- David G. Blythe (1815-1865) and Joseph Boggs Beale (1841-1926)- who had in common a sharp sense of satire and a lively feeling for genre.”48 As the Whitney Museum aimed to construct the history of American art, they highlighted artists of the nineteenth century who were satirical and realistic.

Although Blythe and Beale were artists of the past, their work influenced the artists of the 1930s, fitting into the narrative of American art as built by the Whitney Museum. The museum asserted that these artists were “American” because they offered a satiric vision of the American scene, a populist appeal, and a freedom from European influence. The exhibition catalogue featured two essays: one by Goodrich on Blythe, and the other by Colen on Beale. Goodrich wrote that Blythe created “honest works showing a genuine sense of character, but marked by the woodenness and meagerness typical of a provincial painter.”49 Goodrich places Blythe into

context, comparing him to the “provincial” painters of America’s past. Colen describes Beale as “one of the greatest reporters, pictorially, of scenes of American life of his time.” Both Goodrich and Colen insert Blythe and Beale into the narrative of American art history, as they contributed a sense of satire and humor. The Whitney Museum’s narrative of American art history placed a strong emphasis on this humor and satire, as is evident in Goodrich’s essay: “All his love of the ridiculous, his sense of the humors of everyday life, his satirical appreciation of foibles of fashion and oddities of character, his relish of the low comedy of drinking and vagabondage, found expression in these works.”

The Whitney promoted the notion that true “American” art was populist in its orientation, meant to be enjoyed by all, not by exclusively upper class art patrons. Goodrich further said of Blythe, “It was a racy art, of the people, passing no moral judgments, delighting the squalor, knavery, and mischief of a frontier community, pleased equally with the spectacle of a boy picking pockets and of a lawyer hypnotizing the morons of the jury.” Blythe spoke the voice of the people in his works.

Colen’s depiction of Beale distinguished him from the artists of Europe. Although Beale was influenced by Gustave Doré, a Bible illustrator, “He elected to record his knowledge and experiences with American subjects and life.” Additionally, when he inserted stories into this work, he was not inspired by European authors, but by American authors. As Colen asserts, “Plays and stories that were America’s, and America’s only, commanded his interest.” This information helped the Whitney staff craft the purely American art history canon.

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50 Ibid, 23.
51 Ibid, 11.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid, 23.
54 Ibid.
In contrast, the Shaker handicrafts exhibition, on view in 1935, showed a different aspect of American art history. The exhibition helped the public draw connections between the past and the present. Up until this point, the Whitney did not emphasize historical decorative arts in their collection, but Juliana Force had a personal interest in Shaker arts. The Shakers, according to Edward Deming Andrews, a scholar of Shaker society during this time, were “an unspoiled culture, an ‘unhelped people,’ with a native instinct for good workmanship, and a regard for form and design which was given direction and meaning by certain moral-scientific-inspirational values of unusual import.” The Shakers had a lasting artistic influence. This insistence on the longevity of the Shaker culture gave the Shaker furniture a sense of permanence that came along with being displayed in the Whitney galleries.

The Shakers had “a vigorous spirit of independence.” In all aspects of their life, Shakers put religion first. In order to be completely focused on prayer, they withdrew connection to the rest of the United States and the world. “A completely pure and an essentially spiritual life, [Ann Lee] taught, must be divested of all ‘worldly’ elements.” Without the distraction of worldly pleasures, they were able to delve into their spiritual souls. The goal for the Shakers in their way of living was to find purity. “If purity was to be achieved, the Shaker leaders argued, men and women must unite in a common bond, with a common spirit of consecration—apart from the world.” With this common goal among the people of this communal sect, they found a sense of unity.

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57 Ibid. 5.
The Shaker traits of purity and separation from the rest of the world manifested themselves in the products that they developed. As Andrews wrote in the exhibition catalogue, “Architecture, industrial products, textiles, and furniture demonstrate, each in its own way, the values and requisites of community life, the high regard for ‘strict utility’ and the belief that ‘true gospel simplicity…naturally leads to plainness in all things.'” The Shaker values affected how Shaker craftsmen made their handicrafts and furniture. “The merit of the finished piece must depend on form alone, on rightness of proportion and linear composition.” To the Shakers, a lack of decoration was aesthetically pleasing and satisfying.

Andrews also argued that the Shakers were uninfluenced by European sources, as well as other Americans. “There is no record of derivation and indeed little opportunity for borrowing existed.” This lack of derivation was significant for Andrews to observe, as during this time, American art history scholars were preoccupied with the search for what was purely “American.” It was under these conditions of separation from the rest of the world that the Shakers could develop an uninfluenced “unmistakable ‘Shaker look,’ a reticent, impersonal quality of pure usefulness unobscured by superfluous detail.” This individualized style of the Shakers both aesthetically and in how they lived seems to complement the history of American art, being a product of traditional “American” values. The Shaker exhibition was reviewed by *The Art News* for its November 30, 1935 issue. The writer of the article claimed that the Shakers were “the first functionalists in art.” This critic mentions the Shakers’ lack of derivation from other societies, also finding this information to be of importance in examining the handicrafts. This exhibition of

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60 Ibid, 8.
61 Ibid, 9-10.
Shaker handicrafts added to the Whitney Museum’s mission of constructing a history and usable past of American art.

These historical exhibitions in an institution primarily focused on contemporary American artists created a richer definition of American art. By showing art of the past, visitors were able to more fully understand the path of American art through history. These exhibitions also show what the Whitney staff saw as being distinctly “American” in the country’s history. The themes of realism and freedom from modernism, simplicity, heroism, and a populist appeal defined American art of the past and influenced the art of the present.

The Whitney Museum and Modernism

While the Whitney Museum was heavily promoting American realism, the Museum of Modern Art, located just across the city, was focusing on European modernism. This divergence clearly distinguished these New York institutions. However, with its exhibition “Abstract Painting in America,” on view from February 12 to March 22, 1935, the Whitney Museum briefly acknowledged modernism’s place in American contemporary art. This journey into modernism was surprising. A writer for the American Magazine of Art wrote in an article, “If someone had told me that there was an exhibition of ‘Abstract Painting in America’ and had not told me where it was, I should have trundled up to Fifty-third Street to the Modern Museum and found myself forty-five blocks out of the way, for this exhibition is at the Whitney Museum of American Art on Eighth Street.”

The exhibition featured many artists, including Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth, Arshile Gorky, Oscar Bluemner, Glenn O. Coleman, Arthur Davies, Stuart Davis, Arthur G. Dove, Karl

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64 “Abstract Painting in America.” American Magazine of Art, March 1, 1935.
Knaths, John Marin, and Georgia O’Keeffe. Some artists, like Hartley, Demuth, and O’Keeffe were members of the Stieglitz circle, while others were not. This created a broad definition of abstraction. These artists drew inspiration from the European avant-gardes. The foreword of the exhibition catalogue explained the purpose of the show: “This exhibition attempts a general survey of a movement in art, as practiced in this country during a period of about twenty-four years [since the opening of the Armory Show in 1913], which may be defined in the broadest terms as ‘abstract painting.’”

Stuart Davis, “one of the brilliant exponents of the movement,” (according to the author of the catalogue’s foreword) wrote the introduction to the catalogue.

In his introduction, Davis explained the importance of abstract art in America. Marking the Armory Show as the beginning of abstract painting in America, he stated, “…the American artist became conscious of abstract art by the impact of the Armory Show in 1913.” Davis then contrasted the values of abstract art with those of the National Academy of Design. “The final charge was touched off in the foundations of the Autocracy of the Academy in a blast which destroyed its strangle hold on critical art values forever.” Davis introduced the idea of abstraction, saying, “What is Abstract art? The question will be answered differently by each artist to whom the question is put.” Essentially, Davis boiled down abstract art to the notion that “Art is not and never was a mirror reflection of nature. All efforts at imitation of nature are foredoomed to failure. Art is an understanding and interpreting of nature in various media.” He also claimed that the greatest level of activity and development in abstract art in America was from 1915 to 1927.

Although the “Abstract Painting in America” exhibition was the Whitney Museum’s most obvious nod to modernism, it did address modernism in other exhibitions as well, even the

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66 Ibid.
“Shaker Handicrafts” exhibition. In the exhibition catalogue, written by Andrews, “The geometric simplicity of Shaker cabinet-work and its straightforward adaptation to everyday use suggest a kinship with modern furniture design.”

These themed exhibitions were the only ones to address modernism directly.

Social Consciousness in the Whitney Museum

From its opening in 1931, the Whitney Museum was dedicated to showing art that had a political and social consciousness. The exhibition of the political cartoons of Thomas Nast, which brought down the Tweed Ring, and the commissioning of Thomas Hart Benton’s “Arts of Life in America” murals which redefined American art as the ordinary activities of people of varied races and regions are prime examples of the Whitney’s interest in politically-engaged art.

The Whitney Museum had a mission to aid and support American artists, offering them a place to exhibit and even sell their works. If these works were politically minded or socially charged, the artists could still share their works in the museum without fear of censorship. This continued commitment to artists naturally led to the Whitney Museum staff participating in New Deal programs to support artists. They reinforced this commitment by holding an exhibition of works from the Federal Art Projects. The historically-focused exhibitions of these years underscored the museum’s openness to works with a strong social content. They featured artists, such as Blythe and Beale, who created works filled with satirical commentary on American life, as well as work by the New York Realists who drew class and other social issues to the fore in their work.

In the catalogue for the “The New York Realists, 1900-1914” exhibition Hermon More wrote of the 1930s, “A quickened sense of social responsibility characterizes political and economic

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life, a responsibility which includes the obligation to preserve the art spirit as an essential leaven in our society. It is scarcely necessary to comment upon the ‘going American’ trend of the past decade.”

More also asserted that “art should be a means of uniting men.”

According to Hermon More, “The pictures [of the New York Realists] vaguely suggested a questioning of the rightness of the social order and they showed a dangerous unaccustomed mingling of art and life.”

Their work connected American society to politics:

They were interested in social and political ideas, in the writings of Edward Bellamy and Henry George, the optimistic Americanism of Walt Whitman, the humanitarianism of Tolstoy, the economic and historical theories of Karl Marx, in the labor movement, in the whole complex of late nineteenth century idealism which ranged from old-fashioned liberalism to socialism and communism.

The works of the realists had populist tendencies, as noted in the New York Realists exhibition catalogue: “Bellows believed that painting was not meant for the few but should be an interpretation of common experience of being shared by all.”

Van Wyck Brooks, an American literary critic and historian, said, “No true social revolution will ever be possible in America until a race of artists profound and sincere has brought us face to face with our experience and set working in that experience the leaven of the highest culture.”

The New York realists brought Americans face to face with their own reality; something that was uncommon in the beginning of the twentieth century. As these particular realists were originally newspaper illustrators, their art inspired change, as they “enraged a public which had accepted William Dean Howells’ dictum that ‘the smiling aspects of life were the more American.”

Through their work, the New York realists aimed to raise awareness of urban conditions and ignite change.

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69 Ibid.
70 Ibid, 7-8.
71 Cahill, Art in America, 31.
72 New York Realists, 9.
73 Ibid, 10.
74 Ibid, 7.
During the 1930s, American artists were struggling with difficult economic conditions. The federal government began to sponsor art programs, and the Whitney Museum staff, especially Juliana Force, became involved in organizing these programs. The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), one of a number of New Deal art programs, paid artists to make murals in public buildings, as well as to create easel paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, photographs, designs, and to teach. This program ran from 1933 to 1934. The country was divided into geographic sectors, with each having a regional office. Treasury official Edward Bruce and artist George Biddle hoped Gertrude V. Whitney would be in charge of the sector which encompassed New York, northern New Jersey, and southern Connecticut. However, she suggested Force to serve in her stead. Although Force was a Republican and opposed the Roosevelt administration, she was dedicated to helping artists, and she believed that these federal art programs would be beneficial. Lloyd Goodrich said, “Mrs. Force called me up in a state of great excitement, and said, ‘A wonderful thing has happened. The government is going to do something about the artists, and I’m going to be chairman of the regional committee.’”\textsuperscript{75} Juliana Force wrote a press release which was published in favor of the programs: “For the first time in America the Government is behind the artist, recognizing him not only as an individual but as an important spiritual force. There can be no future without a present, and now the future looks good to me.”\textsuperscript{76} The subject matter of the works produced for the PWAP depended on the project. Edward Bruce hoped that the subjects would focus on the American scene and keep politicians calm.\textsuperscript{77}

The Whitney Museum honored its involvement with the federal art programs by holding an exhibition from October 6 to November 6, 1936, called “Treasury Department Art Projects: Sculpture and Paintings for Federal Buildings.” The exhibition featured “characteristic examples

\textsuperscript{75} Berman, \textit{Rebels on Eighth Street}, 337.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, 344-345.
of the various phases of work done under the Treasury Department Art Program.”

In this particular program, the Treasury Department held competitions in which artists submitted ideas for art in federal buildings.

The exhibition featured murals, mural sketches, models, watercolors, and sculpture. The catalogue introduction, written by Forbes Watson, is complimentary of the program: “The Treasury Department has thus become one of the greatest, if not the greatest architectural client in the world.” He explains that “the present program is the first completely organized plan to coordinate painting, sculpture and architecture. This cooperation between the three great arts is what gives the program its essential character of permanence and its social and educational force.”

The Treasury Department art programs, like the other federal programs, were very nationalistic; they aimed to raise morale and bring art to communities all over the country, not just the large urban centers. Watson said in the final paragraph of his exhibition essay:

Through its objective clarity it gains its potentialities to bring homogeneity to a heterogeneous people. It is a social and realistic expression rather than the exercise of a highly specialized aestheticism. And as long as the American artists in general meet their new opportunities with enthusiasm and capacity already shown by many of them the optimistic can enjoy the pleasant feeling that the faith that is America’s will find its full-grown expression and that our art, instead of being a metropolitan specialty, will become a natural, national enrichment.

Watson sums up the hope for art in America; art will be important, and make a significant difference. It will raise awareness for social issues, and it will educate. The artist’s role will not be taken for granted, but rather, appreciated and widespread throughout the country, in both small towns and big cities.

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79 Ibid, 2.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid, 3.
A Tale of Two Museums: The Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art

Comparing the Whitney’s exhibitions of 1934-1937 with those held at MoMA in the same years sharpens our understanding of the Whitney’s identity in the New York art world of the time. The Museum of Modern Art, in its seasons between 1934 and 1937, put up exhibitions that both converged and diverged with the Whitney’s. For example, both museums held one-man exhibitions for Gaston Lachaise, yet at MoMA, they were meant to help explain their connection to modern art, while at the Whitney Museum, they were seen as contributing to the strain of American realism. Beyond their selection of artists, the museums diverged in the inclusion and exclusion of certain mediums.

Like the Whitney Museum, MoMA held an exhibition of contemporary artists. In a press release about the 1936 summer exhibition, the staff of MoMA said, “It is made up entirely of the work of artists still living, or who have died within the last few years. Secondly, for the most part the collection is the work of American artists and it shows to particular advantage their fine accomplishments in watercolors.”² MoMA showed living American artists, demonstrating that MoMA was similar to the Whitney Museum in believing that the work of contemporary artists was important to represent. The exhibition featured works from artists ranging from Picasso and Mondrian to Sheeler, Demuth, and Davis. MoMA was committed to showing the works of European modernists as well as American modernists, including some who were also represented in the Whitney Museum.

In the 1935-36 season, MoMA put on exhibitions of works by Fernand Léger, bookbindings by Ignatz Wiemeler, and of contemporary architecture in California.³ Other exhibitions included “Posters by Cassandre,” “Architecture of H.H. Richardson,” and “Modern Paintings and

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³ Ibid.
Drawings.” MoMA also put up an exhibition titled, “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism,” as well as an exhibition of photography from 1839 to 1937. It was in these exhibitions that we could see how the goal of MoMA was different from that of the Whitney Museum. MoMA included Dada and surrealism, which were developed abroad, as well as photography and architectural drawings; mediums not included in the Whitney Museum collection. MoMA constructed a different path of art than that of the Whitney Museum, due to the differing visions of their founders. Mrs. Whitney was interested in realism, while Miss Lillie P. Bliss, Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan, and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller were interested in modern art.

Around the same time that the Whitney put on its Abstract Painting in America exhibition, MoMA put up a Cubism and Abstract Art exhibition. In addition, like the Whitney, MoMA acknowledged the federal art projects, by exhibiting “a showing of modern exposition architecture and a display of government housing projects,” as well as an exhibition of work by artists on the Federal Art Project called “New Horizons in American Art,” which went up in the 1936-37 season. The two New York museums, although they had different constructions of the narrative of art history, still saw the value in helping artists in their time of need. The Whitney Museum, in the years between 1934 and 1937, through exhibitions focused on both contemporary and historical art, built a strong narrative based on the importance of American realism. The museum was preoccupied with finding that distinct note of “Americanness.” Although the Whitney Museum’s main goal was to promote realism, it veered from that path and showed an exhibition devoted to modern abstract art. The Whitney also showed art that was

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84 Ibid, 57.
85 Ibid, 62.
86 Ibid, 64.
87 Ibid, 57.
88 Ibid, 59.
89 Ibid, 60.
dedicated to a social cause, and as in the days of the Whitney Studio Club, continued to be seen as a place for artists. With these goals, the Whitney Museum was shaping the very landscape of American art history.
In the Whitney Museum’s formative years, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Juliana Force, and the rest of the museum staff constructed a narrative of American art through its exhibitions, publications, and programs. The museum’s exhibitions focused on realism, highlighting artists such as Winslow Homer and “the Eight.” While the museum did hold an exhibition of abstract painting, it did not, for the most part, show much modernist art, in contrast with MoMA. The exhibitions also publicized the Whitney’s broad definition of “art,” encompassing not only paintings and sculpture, but furniture, handicrafts, scientific drawings, popular prints, and political cartoons. Through the themed exhibitions in particular, the Whitney staff crafted and presented its narrative of American art.

Between 1931 and 1937, the Whitney also offered a full lecture program, in which art historians, critics, and artists spoke on different topics in American art. In this program, a variety of viewpoints were presented, ranging from Royal Cortissoz’s anti-modernist ideas to Frank Jewett Mather, Jr.’s defense of modernism. It seemed that the controversial topic of modernism was more readily discussed in lectures, which expressed only the opinion of the lecturer; while the museum staff’s more conservative stance towards modernism found expression in the exhibition program. However, it is still important to recognize what the Whitney Museum acknowledged in its programs, as these too contributed to the narrative of American Art that they were shaping.

The publications of these early years included a catalogue of the collection, an American Artists series, as well as other books on specific topics. The publications also add to the Whitney’s narrative of American art, because the Whitney staff believed in the topics enough to put the Whitney name on the cover. The American Artists series of monographs was especially
revealing of the variety of artists that the Whitney was aiming to promote. Twenty one monographs were published between 1931 and 1937. The series included volumes on most of the members of “the Eight,” including Arthur B. Davies, Maurice Prendergast, Robert Henri, George Luks, Earnest Lawson, John Sloan, and William Glackens. Additional volumes were written on other realists, including George Bellows, Alexander Brook, Eugene Speicher, Henry Schnakenberg, Kenneth Hayes Miller, Edward Hopper, and Guy Pène du Bois. The Impressionists Mary Cassatt, Bernard Karfiol, Allen Tucker, and John H. Twachtman were also included in the series. Finally, American modernists Henry Lee McFee and Charles Demuth had volumes as well. This variety of artists showed that the Whitney was dedicated to preserving the legacy of many different styles of art, with an emphasis on realism.

American Realism in Lectures and Publications

The publications and some lectures during the Whitney Museum’s early formative years promoted American realism. By focusing on artists who fell in the realist category as well as mentioning the term “realism” consistently in publications, the Whitney Museum was promoting, with a sense of permanence, realism. While exhibitions showed certain artists and types of works for only a month or so at a time, the books, once published, served as a permanent statement of what they saw as important in the narrative of art.

Virgil Barker, art historian and critic, in his 1931 A Critical Introduction to American Painting, walked the reader through its history from 1607 to 1931. One of the main themes in his publication is the development of realism. In his book, Barker argues for a commitment to the “factual” as an American trait, and for realism as the dominant native style. He writes: “Yet the
authentic strain of realism which marks the first manifestation of the American mind in painting persisted in that art, as in life, and recurred in fresh forms.”

Also in this book, Barker introduces the importance of genre painting, defending its realistic subject matter: “Considerably less involved in this national self-consciousness was the novelty of genre painting, the main merit of which was a deep and unforced pleasure in homely incidents and familiar scenes.” Barker uses Homer and Eakins as examples of the leaders in this genre, calling them “true painters:” “True painters like Homer and Eakins could use the story-telling element without compromising the integrity of their vision and could raise genre into permanent aesthetic expressiveness.”

Barker also describes the achievements of the early twentieth-century realists who painted urban life, explaining how they were revolutionary in their embrace of the gritty reality of the American city:

But their courage was to relegate technique to second place and indulge an unashamed relish for subject. The scenes happened to be mostly of New York, but their total effect is that of an important and hitherto unrecognized aspect of life in the American city. It was an art of helter-skelter dramatics, of delighted discovery of the paintableness and the enjoyableness of ugliness; and all this was fittingly expressed in a technique of dash and improvisation.

Barker valued artists and movements that rebelled against the accepted conventions of art particularly “the counterfeit tradition of the academies.” His publication on the history of painting in America up until 1931 established a genealogy of American realism.

Barker was not the only author who promoted important figures in the history of realism. Lloyd Goodrich wrote a lengthy monograph on the life and work of Thomas Eakins, which

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid. 27.
4 Ibid. 38.
5 Ibid, 39.
identified him as one of the nation’s foremost realists. Many of the authors published by the Whitney felt compelled to point out the inferiority of American art in relation to Europe, and yet, at the same time, they defended it. According to Goodrich, “The America in which [Eakins] grew up had little great art in museums and had created comparatively little of its own.” Yet, he continues, “A great wave of ‘Art’ was spreading over the country. The comparatively simple and provincial art world of earlier America was breaking down before the new forces.”

Goodrich promotes Eakins as one of the most influential artists in the United States. “The gist of Eakins’ argument was that the painter must be faithful to nature, but nature seen and understood in the largest way—not slavishly copied but recreated.” Eakins’ philosophy of art was to show life realistically, but in a new light; it was this philosophy that made him stand out among other artists of the time.

Goodrich is not subtle in his categorization of and admiration for Eakins as a realist: “Seldom has there been so consistent a realist as Eakins – one whose art was such a direct outgrowth of reality…His whole philosophy was naturalistic, with little bent towards the romantic, the exotic, or the literary.” This “naturalistic” quality made Eakins a predecessor to other American realist artists. Eakins, when painting his portraits, always chose to represent his subjects as objectively as possible. “None of these sitters, no matter how close to him, were flattered; he painted them as they were, with remarkable truth of character and sense of reality.” All of Eakins’ subjects were closely known to him: “Every picture was part of his daily life, every figure a portrait of someone he knew, every scene a familiar one. It was the

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7 Ibid., 35.

8 Ibid., 17.

9 Ibid., 143.

10 Ibid., 38.
material closest to him, presented with an unconscious simplicity and truth. No trace of imitative style could be found in these works; they were products of an essentially original vision.”

Goodrich saw these qualities of originality and freedom from influence as characterizing Eakins’ work.

Goodrich also gave a lecture as part of the 1932-1933 season called “Thomas Eakins, Realist.” If visitors to the museum did not purchase the monograph on Eakins, they could have attended the lecture and heard about Eakins as a realist. Other speakers at the Whitney Museum gave lectures on topics related to realism. Helen Appleton Read, who was an art critic and supporter of the Realist faction, gave a lecture called “America Interpreted by Her Artists.” The Whitney’s commitment to realism was evident not just in its exhibitions but in every aspect of its educational program, including its various publications and lectures.

**Conversations on Finding “American” Traits and American Art’s Connection to Europe**

As in the exhibitions of the Whitney Museum between 1931 and 1937, the lectures and publications were designed with the preoccupation of finding those pure “American” qualities that made the art truly “American.” The lectures and publications also seemed to be constantly comparing American art to European art. In particular, Goodrich’s *Thomas Eakins* monograph, Virgil Barker’s *A Critical Introduction to American Painting*, and several lectures addressed these issues.

In his publication on American painting, Barker acknowledges American art’s indebtedness to Europe: “The Europeans who colonized North America did more than bring with them some painted pictures; they brought the craft of painting.”

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New World, before they developed their own techniques and styles, they used the same artistic language as their European peers. “The history of painting in America is mainly a record of successive importations of painting techniques from Europe.” However, Barker explained, American painting “can be separated from all other painting for its specific expressiveness.” American art shares themes of American life and an American mentality not found elsewhere. Despite the immense influence from Europe, American painters were still able to develop their own individual style:

In their more ambitious portraits the members of that school continued the habits of design which had been practiced by the foreigners who had immediately preceded them in England…but in the almost equally important technical matters of brushwork, impasto, and colour-schemes they developed a complex set of differences sufficient to give them a specific character in the history of painting.

Most American artists were trained in European art schools, but they applied their foreign techniques to American subjects and gave expression to American concerns:

…The two continents had too much in common for the painting languages of the one to fail the other entirely. Applied to American subject-matter in the fields of history, genre, and portraiture—all of these, be it noted, offering material predominantly factual—the techniques of London, Düsseldorf, Munich, and Paris did manage to record the interests of the age.

Following the establishment of American independence, there was more of a push than ever before to create an individualized art, separate from Europe. “The call for cultural differences produced to order had been intermittently sounded before the revolution; and after that event there was a chorus of voices, both native and foreign, summoning this nation to create a new literature and a new art to match the newly operative political and social ideals.” This led to artists leaving their studios and moving into landscapes and cityscapes, painting scenes of the

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13 Ibid, 39.
14 Ibid, 39.
15 Ibid, 19.
16 Ibid, 24.
varied American experience. The insertion of the American artist into the world he is portraying led to “an increasing participation in the present and among the public an unprecedentedly extensive democratic interest in the whole of art.”

This new “democratic interest” was, according to Barker, one of the essential characteristics of American art. It was also one that the Whitney embraced and promoted not only in its publications, but through all of its programming.

In Goodrich’s monograph on Eakins, he presents Eakins as an artist who created work with a distinct American style. His style was not imitative, like other American artists’ styles. “Few artists have been so little influenced by others, or have shown so few signs of a borrowed style.”

He distinguishes Eakins’ forthright approach to his American subjects from the usual American artist of his time who “was prone to regard this country as an aesthetic wilderness, and either to turn his back on it and become an expatriate, or to draw a veil of pretty sentiment over its crudities.”

Through its lecture program, the Whitney acknowledged differing viewpoints in the American art discourse. The museum’s own search for a distinct “Americanness,” was a theme taken up by Lewis Mumford, Royal Cortissoz, and Daniel Catton Rich. Other lectures investigated American artists’ connections to Europe, such as John Shapley’s “Art through European Eyes” and George W. Eggers’ “Trends and Digressions from Giotto to Matisse.” Whether the speaker argued for an indigenous American style or believed that all American art was derivative of European art, various viewpoints were presented. According to a Brooklyn Daily Eagle article advertising these lectures, “Each of the subjects [of the lectures] was

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18 Ibid, 39.
19 Goodrich, Thomas Eakins, 143.
20 Ibid, 154.
especially chosen for the purpose of bringing to the light of discussion problems of art of vital moment.”21 The lectures provided a platform for discussion of issues in the world of art.

Daniel Catton Rich, associate curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, gave a lecture called “The Great American Loneliness,” while Royal Cortissoz, renowned art critic, spoke on “The Basis of American Taste.” Helen Appleton Read gave a lecture called “Rediscoveries in Edwardian Taste,” connecting British tastes with American art. Lewis Mumford gave lectures at the museum, and he was a champion of finding an indigenous American style, believing in American art’s distinctiveness from European art. In his book, Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization, published in 1924, he argued for this native American architectural style. Not all lecturers viewed American art in the same way; John Shapley, art department chair at the University of Chicago, gave a lecture called “American Art through European Eyes.” He put American art in context of European art, showing the growing differences between artistic language between the United States and Europe. George W. Eggers, an artist, gave a lecture called “Trends and Digressions from Giotto to Matisse,” on the development of art by referencing European artists. These lectures showed that American art historians either continued to think of American art primarily in its relation to European art, or were trying their hardest to find what made American art “American.”

The Exploration of Modernism in the Whitney Museum’s Programs

In contrast to the Whitney’s exhibition program, the lectures and public programs addressed the topic of modernism frequently. Although the museum did not have many publications or exhibitions related to modernism, with the exception of the Abstract Painting exhibition in 1935, it did find the topic to be of enough merit to be discussed in the Whitney Museum’s Sculpture

Hall, which seated two hundred. It brought in speakers who had differing opinions on the subject; it was not solely pro or anti-modernism. This variety encouraged discussion and allowed the public to form its own opinions. Additionally, the Whitney Museum was always a place for artists; the phenomenon of modernism must have been a topic of great interest among them.

Various scholars and critics gave lectures at the museum that considered the merit of modernism. Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., author of *Modern Painting* (1927), an art critic, and modernist, gave a lecture titled “Where is Art?” The inquisitive title of this lecture embodies the spirit of the Whitney Museum’s public programs, as they explored different questions in the field of American art. Francis H. Taylor, director of the Worcester Art Museum and future director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, spoke on “The Dilemma of the Modern Artist.” Lewis Mumford gave a talk called “On Murals and Modern Architecture.” Meyer Schapiro, art historian, gave a lecture on “Mural Painting and Cinema.” Included in the Museum of Modern Art, cinema was a modern art form that had previously not been acknowledged at the Whitney Museum. Also referenced in MoMA exhibitions was the concept of the “machine age.” Although the topic was not addressed in Whitney Museum exhibitions, Philip Newell Youtz, architect, gave a lecture called “Fine Arts in the Machine Age.” Because Youtz was an architect, he must have spoken about architecture; again, another aspect of art covered in MoMA but not previously at the Whitney Museum. Finally, Edward Alden Jewell, the New York Times art critic, gave a lecture called “Churning the Modern Psyche.” Through these programs the Whitney Museum acknowledged that modernism was a topic of interest for their visitors, allowing them to consider and learn about it without committing to putting up many exhibitions.
On April 10, 1933, the Whitney Museum held a symposium titled, “The Problem of Subject Matter and Abstract Esthetics in Painting.” Lloyd Goodrich, along with the artists Morris Davidson (author of Understanding Modern Art, published the following year), Leo Katz (who assisted Orozco in painting his murals at Dartmouth College), and Walter Pach (one of the organizers of the Armory Show) participated in the symposium, offering varying viewpoints on abstraction. The symposium was moderated by Whitney curator C. Adolph Glassgold. Each participant gave speeches on their views of abstraction and the importance of subject matter in painting. While some spoke on the importance of subject, others defended abstraction. Following the individual presentations, a question and answer session ensued, which was surely lively. For example, Mr. Davidson said during his presentation, “Thomas Craven believes gangster-excitement, violence and size to be American ideals and sees them best expressed in violent mural illustrations.” When the panel was open for questions, Mr. Craven himself stood up to defend his work. The discussions seemed to have become heated, as these men had very strong opinions on this trend in art. This discourse on a modernist topic showed the Whitney Museum’s interest in participating in this conversation.

An Air of Inclusion in the Whitney Museum’s Programs and Publications

Finally, the publications and lectures of the Whitney Museum between 1931 and 1937 continued to promote a wide definition of American art, embracing a range of styles, genres, and mediums. They did not limit American art to painting and sculpture; rather, as in the museum’s exhibitions, they included works on paper, murals, and scientific drawings. At the same time, the variety of artists represented in the American Artists publication series emphasized the

22 Whitney Museum, History, Purpose, and Activities, 10.
23 “Whitney Symposium,” Art Digest, May 1, 1933, 6.
24 Ibid, 25.
Whitney’s identity, as begun by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, as a place for artists of all kinds, creating a space of inclusion and acceptance.\textsuperscript{25}

Virgil Barker, in his book on the history of American painting, discusses different kinds of painting, including folk painting, saying that its importance has not yet been fully recognized. He defends folk painting, saying that “What it does imply is the absence of professional sophistication in the craft, a negative trait which can almost be a virtue in itself if it is joined with freshness and directness of vision.”\textsuperscript{26} William Murrell’s book, \textit{History of American Graphic Humor}, published in 1933, describes the genealogy of political cartoons in newspapers. These cartoons combine humor and biting political statements. The Whitney Museum’s publication of the book indicates the breadth of their definition of “art.” Murrell also gave a lecture called “The American Note in Graphic Humor.”

One of the publications of the Whitney Museum during this time was Thomas Hart Benton’s \textit{Arts of Life in America}, which released in conjunction with his murals of the same name in the Whitney Museum’s reading room. Benton creates a wide definition of art, what he calls “the art of life,” which encompasses all actions, no matter how banal and come from the “artist’s direct experience.”\textsuperscript{27} Benton’s definition of American art is very expansive, and supported the Whitney’s ambition of inclusiveness.

The Whitney Museum also hosted lectures that expanded the definition of American art, such as Lewis Mumford’s talk called “Orozco in New England,” about the Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) and the medium of the mural thus seeming to include work by international artists active in the United States within its definition of American art. Meyer

\textsuperscript{25} The creation of a space that was inclusive was the goal of the Whitney Museum; however, sometimes the museum would cater more to realists and artists who were not particularly radical in both style and political commentary. Occasionally, the Whitney’s stated goal and its actions deviated from one another.
\textsuperscript{26} Barker, \textit{A Critical Introduction to American Painting}, 28.
\textsuperscript{27} Benton, \textit{The Arts of Life in America}, 5.
Schapiro’s talk on mural painting and cinema included these two different media in one lecture, showing that the Whitney did not limit itself to painting on canvas and sculpture. Karl Free, curator at the Whitney Museum, gave a talk called “Audubon, Artist and Adventurer,” indicating the Whitney’s inclusion of scientific naturalists in their definition of artists.

The lectures, programs, and publications of the Whitney Museum of American Art between 1931 and 1937 contributed to the narrative of American art in a lively way; the lectures presented differing opinions on various American art topics in the 1930s, encouraging debate and conversation among the members of the public and the artists who attended the lectures. The publications were more permanent in their presentation of information, including monographs on specific artists. These artists were mostly realists, contributing to the realist narrative of American art. However, they did sometimes deviate, showing that the Whitney Museum did aim to show a variety of art.

Conclusion

The Whitney Museum of American Art in its early formative years carved out a place for itself in the American art world, spanning out from beyond New York City boundaries. Beginning with Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and her dedication to creating an institutional space for American artists where they could achieve the recognition they deserve, the Whitney Museum grew to be a place where the perception of American art was transformed forever. Promoting realism, a wide definition of American art, a political and social consciousness in art, and the continuing search for distinctive “Americanness,” the Whitney Museum became an institution of immense importance in the history of American art. In contrast with MoMA, which was dedicated to promoting European modernism, the Whitney Museum stood out in the New
York art scene. As the Great Depression ravaged artists economically throughout the United States, the Whitney Museum continued to promote a healthy environment for artists, supporting the federal art programs and helping artists to make a living. The Whitney Museum held biennials to present new work by artists, encouraging them to continue to create, even in the face of adversity.

These early years of the Whitney Museum set the stage for the continuation of the development of a narrative of American art history. According to a catalogue of the Whitney’s collections written in 1954, the museum’s “purpose is to promote the progress of American art, and to spread the knowledge and enjoyment of it among the people of this country and other countries.”28 The catalogue described the most meaningful goals of the Whitney Museum from its opening in 1931 to the year of publication in 1954:

The museum is based on certain general beliefs: that artistic creation is essential in the life of any nation, and that the contemporary art of a nation has a special importance for its people, regardless of comparisons with the art of the past or of other countries; that a museum’s most valuable function is not merely conserving tradition but playing an active part in the creative processes of its time; that present-day American art is extremely diverse, that creativity exists in many forms, and that this calls for a broad viewpoint recognizing all vital tendencies from traditional to advanced; that a museum should always be open to the new, the young and the experimental, should never forget that the artist is the prime mover in all artistic matters, and should respect his individuality.29

Did the Whitney Museum accomplish its goals and follow these beliefs? The museum did offer a platform for varied viewpoints and continued to foster an accepting environment for all working American artists. It showed a variety of works and encouraged conversation on relevant topics in

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29 Ibid.
art. As the 1954 publication put it, “The museum has always opposed any narrowly nationalistic definition of what American art is.”30

Mrs. Whitney passed away in 1942. Her ambition to aid American artists linked her early Whiney Studio Club to her later Museum, yet there were changes: “The main development has been from the relatively simple functions of the Whitney Studio Club to the much broader functions of a museum, which is an institution devoted not only to exhibiting art, but to collecting, studying, and publicizing it, and which must be guided in all its activities by standards of quality.”31 The Whitney Museum was not just presenting art by any artist working in the United States; the museum staff made an effort to pick out the most important artists and works to include in their collection, works that made a significant contribution to American art. When the Whitney Museum was founded, its goal was to make a place for American art in the art world, at a time when radical art from Europe had the spotlight. The Whitney Museum began as a place for artists, and still today, through its biennials, continues to support American contemporary art.

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Everett Shinn, *Revue*, 1908, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in., Whitney Museum of American Art
Figure 3.

Figure 4.

George Luks, *Woman with Goose*, 1907, oil on wood, 20 x 16 in., Whitney Museum of American Art
Figure 5.
Rendering of the Whitney Museum on Eighth Street, New York City
http://whitney.org/About/History
Figure 6.

Thomas Hart Benton, *Arts of the City*, 1932, mural, New Britain Museum of Art
Figure 7.

Thomas Hart Benton, *Arts of the South*, 1932, mural, New Britain Museum of Art
Figure 8.

Thomas Hart Benton, *Arts of the West*, 1932, mural, New Britain Museum of Art
Figure 9.

Thomas Hart Benton, *Unemployment, Radical Protest, Speed*, 1932, mural, New Britain Museum of Art
Figure 10.

Thomas Hart Benton, *Political Business and Intellectual Ballyhoo*, 1932, mural, New Britain Museum of Art
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