

Portrait of the USA

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Chapter Ten

DISTINCTIVELY AMERICAN ARTS

Music, dance, architecture, visual arts, and literature

The development of the arts in America -- music, dance, architecture, the visual arts, and literature -- has been marked by a tension between two strong sources of inspiration: European sophistication and domestic originality. Frequently, the best American artists have managed to harness both sources. This chapter touches upon a number of major American figures in the arts, some of whom have grappled with the Old World-New World conflict in their work.

MUSIC

Until the 20th century, "serious" music in America was shaped by European standards and idioms. A notable exception was the music of composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869), son of a British father and a Creole mother. Gottschalk enlivened his music with plantation melodies and Caribbean rhythms that he had heard in his native New Orleans. He was the first American pianist to achieve international recognition, but his early death contributed to his relative obscurity.

More representative of early American music were the compositions of Edward MacDowell (1860-1908), who not only patterned his works after European models but stoutly resisted the label of "American composer." He was unable to see beyond the same notion that hampered many early American writers: To be wholly American, he thought, was to be provincial.

A distinctively American classical music came to fruition when such composers as George Gershwin (1898-1937) and Aaron Copland (1900-1990) incorporated homegrown melodies and rhythms into forms borrowed from Europe. Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" and his opera *Porgy and Bess* were influenced by jazz and African-American folk songs. Some of his music is also self-consciously urban: The opening of his "An American in Paris," for example, mimics taxi horns.

As Harold C. Schonberg writes in *The Lives of the Great Composers*, Copland "helped break the stranglehold of the German domination on American music." He studied in Paris, where he was encouraged to depart from tradition and indulge his interest in jazz (for more on jazz, see chapter 11). Besides writing symphonies, concertos, and an opera, he composed the scores for several films. He is best known, however, for his ballet scores, which draw on American folk songs; among them are "Billy the Kid," "Rodeo," and "Appalachian Spring."

Another American original was Charles Ives (1874-1954), who combined elements of popular classical music with harsh dissonance. "I found I *could not* go on using the familiar chords early," he explained. "I *heard* something else." His idiosyncratic music was seldom performed while he was alive, but Ives is now recognized as an innovator who anticipated later musical developments of the 20th century. Composers who followed Ives experimented with 12-tone scales, minimalism, and other innovations that some concertgoers found alienating.

In the last decades of the 20th century, there was a trend back toward music that pleases both composer and listener, a development that may be related to the uneasy status of the symphony orchestra in America. Unlike Europe, where it is common for governments to underwrite their orchestras and opera companies, the arts in America get relatively little public support. To survive, symphony orchestras depend largely on philanthropy and paid admissions.

Some orchestra directors have found a way to keep mainstream audiences happy while introducing new music to the public: Rather than segregate the new pieces, these directors program them side-by-side with traditional fare. Meanwhile, opera, old and new, has been flourishing. Because it is so expensive to stage, however, opera depends heavily on the generosity of corporate and private donors.

DANCE

Closely related to the development of American music in the early 20th century was the emergence of a new, and distinctively American, art form -- modern dance. Among the early innovators was Isadora Duncan (1878-1927), who stressed pure, unstructured movement in lieu of the positions of classical ballet.

The main line of development, however, runs from the dance company of Ruth St. Denis (1878-1968) and her husband-partner, Ted Shawn (1891-1972). Her pupil Doris Humphrey (1895-1958) looked outward for inspiration, to society and human conflict. Another pupil of St. Denis, Martha Graham (1893-1991), whose New York-based company became perhaps the best known in modern dance, sought to express an inward-based passion. Many of Graham's most popular works were produced in collaboration with leading American composers -- "Appalachian Spring" with Aaron Copland, for example.

Later choreographers searched for new methods of expression. Merce Cunningham (1919-) introduced improvisation and random movement into performances. Alvin Ailey (1931-1989) incorporated African dance elements and black music into his works. Recently such choreographers as Mark Morris (1956-) and Liz Lerman (1947-) have defied the convention that dancers must be thin and young. Their belief, put into action in their hiring practices and performances, is that graceful, exciting movement is not restricted by age or body type.

In the early 20th century U.S. audiences also were introduced to classical ballet by touring companies of European dancers. The first American ballet troupes were founded in the 1930s, when dancers and choreographers teamed up with visionary lovers of ballet such as Lincoln Kirstein (1907-1996). Kirstein invited Russian choreographer George Balanchine (1904-1983) to the United States in 1933, and the two established the School of American Ballet, which became the New York City Ballet in 1948. Ballet manager and publicity agent Richard Pleasant (1909-1961) founded America's second leading ballet organization, American Ballet Theatre, with dancer and patron Lucia Chase (1907-1986) in 1940.

Paradoxically, native-born directors like Pleasant included Russian classics in their repertoires, while Balanchine announced that his new American company was predicated on distinguished music and new works in the classical idiom, not the standard repertory of the past. Since then, the American ballet scene has been a mix of classic revivals and original works, choreographed by such talented former dancers as Jerome Robbins (1918-1998), Robert Joffrey (1930-1988), Eliot Feld (1942-), Arthur Mitchell (1934-), and Mikhail Baryshnikov (1948-).

ARCHITECTURE

America's unmistakable contribution to architecture has been the skyscraper, whose bold, thrusting lines have made it the symbol of capitalist energy. Made possible by new construction techniques and the invention of the elevator, the first skyscraper went up in Chicago in 1884.

Many of the most graceful early towers were designed by Louis Sullivan (1856-1924), America's first great modern architect. His most talented student was Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959), who spent much of his career designing private residences with matching furniture and generous use

of open space. One of his best-known buildings, however, is a public one: the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

European architects who emigrated to the United States before World War II launched what became a dominant movement in architecture, the International Style. Perhaps the most influential of these immigrants were Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) and Walter Gropius (1883-1969), both former directors of Germany's famous design school, the Bauhaus. Based on geometric form, buildings in their style have been both praised as monuments to American corporate life and dismissed as "glass boxes." In reaction, younger American architects such as Michael Graves (1945-) have rejected the austere, boxy look in favor of "postmodern" buildings with striking contours and bold decoration that alludes to historical styles of architecture.

THE VISUAL ARTS

America's first well-known school of painting -- the Hudson River school -- appeared in 1820. As with music and literature, this development was delayed until artists perceived that the New World offered subjects unique to itself; in this case the westward expansion of settlement brought the transcendent beauty of frontier landscapes to painters' attention.

The Hudson River painters' directness and simplicity of vision influenced such later artists as Winslow Homer (1836-1910), who depicted rural America -- the sea, the mountains, and the people who lived near them. Middle-class city life found its painter in Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), an uncompromising realist whose unflinching honesty undercut the genteel preference for romantic sentimentalism.

Controversy soon became a way of life for American artists. In fact, much of American painting and sculpture since 1900 has been a series of revolts against tradition. "To hell with the artistic values," announced Robert Henri (1865-1929). He was the leader of what critics called the "ash-can" school of painting, after the group's portrayals of the squalid aspects of city life. Soon the ash-can artists gave way to modernists arriving from Europe -- the cubists and abstract painters promoted by the photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) at his Gallery 291 in New York City.

In the years after World War II, a group of young New York artists formed the first native American movement to exert major influence on foreign artists: abstract expressionism. Among the movement's leaders were Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), and Mark Rothko (1903-1970). The abstract expressionists abandoned formal composition and representation of real objects to concentrate on instinctual arrangements of space and color and to demonstrate the effects of the physical action of painting on the canvas.

Members of the next artistic generation favored a different form of abstraction: works of mixed media. Among them were Robert Rauschenberg (1925-) and Jasper Johns (1930-), who used photos, newsprint, and discarded objects in their compositions. Pop artists, such as Andy Warhol (1930-1987), Larry Rivers (1923-2002), and Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997), reproduced, with satiric care, everyday objects and images of American popular culture -- Coca-Cola bottles, soup cans, comic strips.

Today artists in America tend not to restrict themselves to schools, styles, or a single medium. A work of art might be a performance on stage or a hand-written manifesto; it might be a massive design cut into a Western desert or a severe arrangement of marble panels inscribed with the names of American soldiers who died in Vietnam. Perhaps the most influential 20th-century American contribution to world art has been a mocking playfulness, a sense that a central purpose of a new work is to join the ongoing debate over the definition of art itself.

LITERATURE

Much early American writing is derivative: European forms and styles transferred to new locales. For example, *Wieland* and other novels by Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810) are energetic imitations of the Gothic novels then being written in England. Even the well-wrought tales of Washington Irving (1783-1859), notably "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," seem comfortably European despite their New World settings.

Perhaps the first American writer to produce boldly new fiction and poetry was Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). In 1835, Poe began writing short stories -- including "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" -- that explore previously hidden levels of human psychology and push the boundaries of fiction toward mystery and fantasy.

Meanwhile, in 1837, the young Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) collected some of his stories as *Twice-Told Tales*, a volume rich in symbolism and occult incidents. Hawthorne went on to write full-length "romances," quasi-allegorical novels that explore such themes as guilt, pride, and emotional repression in his native New England. His masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*, is the stark drama of a woman cast out of her community for committing adultery.

Hawthorne's fiction had a profound impact on his friend Herman Melville (1819-1891), who first made a name for himself by turning material from his seafaring days into exotic novels. Inspired by Hawthorne's example, Melville went on to write novels rich in philosophical speculation. In *Moby-Dick*, an adventurous whaling voyage becomes the vehicle for examining such themes as obsession, the nature of evil, and human struggle against the elements. In another fine work, the short novel *Billy Budd*, Melville dramatizes the conflicting claims of duty and compassion on board a ship in time of war. His more profound books sold poorly, and he had been long forgotten by the time of his death. He was rediscovered in the early decades of the 20th century.

In 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), an ex-minister, published a startling nonfiction work called *Nature*, in which he claimed it was possible to dispense with organized religion and reach a lofty spiritual state by studying and responding to the natural world. His work influenced not only the writers who gathered around him, forming a movement known as Transcendentalism, but also the public, who heard him lecture.

Emerson's most gifted fellow-thinker was Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), a resolute nonconformist. After living mostly by himself for two years in a cabin by a wooded pond, Thoreau wrote *Walden*, a book-length memoir that urges resistance to the meddlesome dictates of organized society. His radical writings express a deep-rooted tendency toward individualism in the American character.

Mark Twain (the pen name of Samuel Clemens, 1835-1910) was the first major American writer to be born away from the East Coast -- in the border state of Missouri. His regional masterpieces, the memoir *Life on the Mississippi* and the novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, were noted in chapter 2. Twain's style -- influenced by journalism, wedded to the vernacular, direct and unadorned but also highly evocative and irreverently funny -- changed the way Americans write their language. His characters speak like real people and sound distinctively American, using local dialects, newly invented words, and regional accents.

Henry James (1843-1916) confronted the Old World-New World dilemma by writing directly about it. Although born in New York City, he spent most of his adult years in England. Many of his novels center on Americans who live in or travel to Europe. With its intricate, highly qualified sentences and dissection of emotional nuance, James's fiction can be daunting. Among his more accessible works are the novellas "Daisy Miller," about an enchanting American girl in Europe, and "The Turn of the Screw," an enigmatic ghost story.

America's two greatest 19th-century poets could hardly have been more different in temperament and style. Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was a working man, a traveler, a self-appointed nurse during the American Civil War (1861-1865), and a poetic innovator. His magnum opus was *Leaves of Grass*, in which he uses a free-flowing verse and lines of irregular length to depict the all-inclusiveness of American democracy. Taking that motif one step further, the poet equates the vast range of American experience with himself -- and manages not to sound like a crass egotist. For example, in "Song of Myself," the long, central poem in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes: "These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me...."

Whitman was also a poet of the body -- "the body electric," as he called it. In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, the English novelist D.H. Lawrence wrote that Whitman "was the first to smash the old moral conception that the soul of man is something 'superior' and 'above' the flesh."

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), on the other hand, lived the sheltered life of a genteel unmarried woman in small-town Massachusetts. Within its formal structure, her poetry is ingenious, witty, exquisitely wrought, and psychologically penetrating. Her work was unconventional for its day, and little of it was published during her lifetime.

Many of her poems dwell on death, often with a mischievous twist. "Because I could not stop for Death," one begins, "He kindly stopped for me." The opening of another Dickinson poem toys with her position as a woman in a male-dominated society and an unrecognized poet: "I'm nobody! Who are you? / Are you nobody too?"

At the beginning of the 20th century, American novelists were expanding fiction's social spectrum to encompass both high and low life. In her stories and novels, Edith Wharton (1862-1937) scrutinized the upper-class, Eastern-seaboard society in which she had grown up. One of her finest books, *The Age of Innocence*, centers on a man who chooses to marry a conventional, socially acceptable woman rather than a fascinating outsider. At about the same time, Stephen Crane (1871-1900), best known for his Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, depicted the life of New York City prostitutes in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. And in *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) portrayed a country girl who moves to Chicago and becomes a kept woman.

Experimentation in style and form soon joined the new freedom in subject matter. In 1909, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), by then an expatriate in Paris, published *Three Lives*, an innovative work of fiction influenced by her familiarity with cubism, jazz, and other movements in contemporary art and music.

The poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was born in Idaho but spent much of his adult life in Europe. His work is complex, sometimes obscure, with multiple references to other art forms and to a vast range of literature, both Western and Eastern. He influenced many other poets, notably T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), another expatriate. Eliot wrote spare, cerebral poetry, carried by a dense structure of symbols. In "The Waste Land" he embodied a jaundiced vision of post-World War I society in fragmented, haunted images. Like Pound's, Eliot's poetry could be highly allusive, and some editions of "The Waste Land" come with footnotes supplied by the poet. Eliot won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948.

American writers also expressed the disillusionment following upon the war. The stories and novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) capture the restless, pleasure-hungry, defiant mood of the 1920s. Fitzgerald's characteristic theme, expressed poignantly in *The Great Gatsby*, is the tendency of youth's golden dreams to dissolve in failure and disappointment.

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) saw violence and death first-hand as an ambulance driver in World War I, and the senseless carnage persuaded him that abstract language was mostly empty and misleading. He cut out unnecessary words from his writing, simplified the sentence structure, and concentrated on concrete objects and actions. He adhered to a moral code that emphasized courage under pressure, and his protagonists were strong, silent men who often dealt awkwardly with women. *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* are generally considered his best novels; he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954.

In addition to fiction, the 1920s were a rich period for drama. There had not been an important American dramatist until Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) began to write his plays. Winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936, O'Neill drew upon classical mythology, the Bible, and the new science of psychology to explore inner life. He wrote frankly about sex and family quarrels, but his preoccupation was with the individual's search for identity. One of his greatest works is *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, a harrowing drama, small in scale but large in theme, based largely on his own family.

Another strikingly original American playwright was Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), who expressed his southern heritage in poetic yet sensational plays, usually about a sensitive woman trapped in a brutish environment. Several of his plays have been made into films, including *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Five years before Hemingway, another American novelist had won the Nobel Prize: William

Faulkner (1897-1962). Faulkner managed to encompass an enormous range of humanity in Yoknapatawpha, a Mississippi county of his own invention. He recorded his characters' seemingly unedited ramblings in order to represent their inner states -- a technique called "stream of consciousness." (In fact, these passages are carefully crafted, and their seeming randomness is an illusion.) He also jumbled time sequences to show how the past -- especially the slave-holding era of the South -- endures in the present. Among his great works are *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Go Down, Moses*, and *The Unvanquished*.

Faulkner was part of a southern literary renaissance that also included such figures as Truman Capote (1924-1984) and Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964). Although Capote wrote short stories and novels, fiction and nonfiction, his masterpiece was *In Cold Blood*, a factual account of a multiple murder and its aftermath, which fused dogged reporting with a novelist's penetrating psychology and crystalline prose. Other practitioners of the "nonfiction novel" have included Norman Mailer (1923-), who wrote about an antiwar march on the Pentagon in *Armies of the Night*, and Tom Wolfe (1931-), who wrote about American astronauts in *The Right Stuff*.

Flannery O'Connor was a Catholic -- and thus an outsider in the heavily Protestant South in which she grew up. Her characters are Protestant fundamentalists obsessed with both God and Satan. She is best known for her tragicomic short stories.

The 1920s had seen the rise of an artistic black community in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem. The period called the Harlem Renaissance produced such gifted poets as Langston Hughes (1902-1967), Countee Cullen (1903-1946), and Claude McKay (1889-1948). The novelist Zora Neale Hurston (1903-1960) combined a gift for storytelling with the study of anthropology to write vivid stories from the African-American oral tradition. Through such books as the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* -- about the life and marriages of a light-skinned African-American woman -- Hurston influenced a later generation of black women novelists.

After World War II, a new receptivity to diverse voices brought black writers into the mainstream of American literature. James Baldwin (1924-1987) expressed his disdain for racism and his celebration of sexuality in *Giovanni's Room*. In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) linked the plight of African Americans, whose race can render them all but invisible to the majority white culture, with the larger theme of the human search for identity in the modern world.

In the 1950s the West Coast spawned a literary movement, the poetry and fiction of the "Beat Generation," a name that referred simultaneously to the rhythm of jazz music, to a sense that post-war society was worn out, and to an interest in new forms of experience through drugs, alcohol, and Eastern mysticism. Poet Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) set the tone of social protest and visionary ecstasy in "Howl," a Whitmanesque work that begins with this powerful line: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness...." Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) celebrated the Beats' carefree, hedonistic life-style in his episodic novel *On the Road*.

From Irving and Hawthorne to the present day, the short story has been a favorite American form. One of its 20th-century masters was John Cheever (1912-1982), who brought yet another facet of American life into the realm of literature: the affluent suburbs that have grown up around most major cities. Cheever was long associated with *The New Yorker*, a magazine noted for its wit and sophistication.

Although trend-spotting in literature that is still being written can be dangerous, the recent emergence of fiction by members of minority groups has been striking. Here are only a few examples. Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko (1948-) uses colloquial language and traditional stories to fashion haunting, lyrical poems such as "In Cold Storm Light." Amy Tan (1952-), of Chinese descent, has described her parents' early struggles in California in *The Joy Luck Club*. Oscar Hijuelos (1951-), a writer with roots in Cuba, won the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. In a series of novels beginning with *A Boy's Own Story*, Edmund White (1940-) has captured the anguish and comedy of growing up homosexual in America. Finally, African-American women have produced some of the most powerful fiction of recent decades. One of them, Toni Morrison (1931-), author of *Beloved* and other works, won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, only the second American woman to be so honored.



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