All Aboard: The Railroad in American Art, 1840-1955

Large Format Labels

Main Floor: Murphy Gallery

Pizzagalli Center for Art and Education

Table of Contents

Brief Introduction to this Guide:

Welcome to **All Aboard: The Railroad in American Art, 1840-1955**, which is on special exhibition in the Murphy Gallery on the main floor of the Pizzagalli Center for Art and Education. The exhibition room is a large rectangular space with two freestanding walls spaced out in the middle of the room. Two benches are located on either side of the space. To follow this guide step-by-step, on your right is the exhibition's introductory wall text [full text of this introduction comes next in this binder]. This guide is separated into four labeled themes. Begin with the painting in front of you, and turn right to continue counterclockwise around the main wall unless a deviation from the path is otherwise noted. At the end, you will exit through the same original doors.

All Aboard: The Railroad in American Art, 1840–1955, Exhibition Introductory Wall Text

The railroad transformed modern life in the United States. There was simply nothing else like the power of railroads for transporting people and products within growing metropolitan centers and across the continent. As early as the 1850s, American railways had effectively stitched together the new nation in a manner its citizens could scarcely have imagined thirty years earlier. Just as the digital revolution has in the present day, the railroad reinvented the American experiment.

The history of the railroad in the United States is also the history of many other things. The rise of

this extraordinary technology ushered in a second Industrial Revolution, facilitated unfettered western expansionism, gave rise to the flawed ideology of Manifest Destiny, sparked unprecedented wealth creation and the inequality that accompanied it, and contributed to the destruction of Indigenous ways of life. By the dawn of the Gilded Age, railroads had fundamentally transformed myriad related industries, from coal mining to steel production, and introduced innovations in banking and finance, warfare, farming and ranching, tourism, urban planning, and unmistakably—if inadvertently—the fine art of painting.

All Aboard: The Railroad in American Art, 1840–1955 examines the often-symbiotic relationship

between painters in the United States and the passenger and freight trains that crisscrossed cities, towns, and countrysides throughout the nation. Seen through the eyes of artists, the exhibition traces the evolution of trains from the “devilish iron horse” of the mid-nineteenth century, to an industrial powerhouse at the turn of the century, to, by the mid-twentieth century, a pageant of expressive metaphor and, ultimately, quaint nostalgia.

<u>Theme 1</u>: Smoke in the Wilderness: American Landscape Painting and the Railroad 1840–1900

To an entire generation of American painters, the railroad's encroachment on landscapes they regarded as untouched posed a conundrum. In the Northeast, followers of Thomas Cole—the informal association of artists who would later be called the Hudson River School—perceived the new infrastructure as a challenge to the deeply-held ideal of "the wilderness."

However, some artists had already embraced the "technological sublime," a philosophy that emphasized the machine as an object of awe on a par with nature itself. This new worldview became

increasingly complex in the decades following the Civil War, as railroads emerged as a potent agent of westward expansion. The introduction of trains over the frontier, for example, had devastating effects on Indigenous communities, especially in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain regions. As the nineteenth century drew to a close and the United States entered another phase of its history on the world stage, the burden of the technological sublime continued to impact those excluded from its narrative of plenty and progress.

[Suggested path: After the exhibition introduction, turn left to view the first painting on the small horizontal wall]

George Ault (American, 1891–1948)

From Brooklyn Heights, 1925

Oil on canvas

Collection of The Newark Museum of Art, Purchase, 1928

The painters associated with the Precisionist movement were particularly drawn to themes of transportation. George Ault's **From Brooklyn Heights** captures the New York waterfront and the view across the East River to Manhattan in all of its grit and loneliness. Train tracks curve around isolated buildings in the foreground, a single boxcar sits idle and disconnected, and a tugboat is moored at a storage building on a pier. As a black-and-white

steamship belches dark smoke into the air, Manhattan is shrouded in low-hanging clouds and early morning steam vented from anonymous gray buildings. Ault himself described New York as “the inferno without the fire,” and that is very much what he presents in **From Brooklyn Heights**.

Thomas Cole (American, 1801–48)

River in the Catskills, 1843

Oil on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865, 47.1201

Thomas Cole, an immigrant from the heavily industrialized county of Lancashire in Northwest England, romanticized what he saw as the untouched American landscape. Cole and his followers, an informal group of landscape artists who would later be called the Hudson River School, were known for images of the rural countryside that functioned as metaphors of goodness, independence, republican ideals, and familial

harmony during the antebellum period. His first picture featuring a train, **River in the Catskills**, treats the new infrastructure cautiously. Relegated to the background, the steam-powered engine is still overwhelmed by the surrounding natural beauty of the Catskill Mountains of New York. The composition questions the place of the railroad within the grand scheme of nature, offering a new vision of the landscape in conflict with established visual conventions.

Albert Bierstadt (American, 1830–1902)

View of Donner Lake, California, 1871–72

Oil on paper mounted on canvas

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Anna Bennett and Jessie Jonas in memory of August F. Jonas, Jr., 1984.54

Donner Lake is a freshwater lake on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, not far from the larger Lake Tahoe. The lake is named for the ill-fated Donner Party that had traveled west on the Oregon Trail in spring 1846 and were trapped in heavy snow near the lake, infamously resorting to cannibalism.

View of Donner Lake, California was commissioned by the railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington. The scene ignores both the tragic history of the Donner Party and the labor required to dig through the towering mountain ranges. The painting's sublime aesthetic conceals a dark history in favor of provoking sheer awe.

Charles Louis Heyde (American, 1822–92)

Steam Train in North Williston, Vermont, ca. 1856

Oil on canvas

Collection of Shelburne Museum, gift of Edith Hopkins Walker, 1959 49.1

Vermont painter Charles Louis Heyde was one of a number of artists who embraced the new idea of a "technological sublime." **Steam Train in North Williston, Vermont** demonstrates the shift in the message of American landscape painting, from a commemoration of the wilderness to a celebration of conquered nature, revealed by the field of tree stumps bounded by a perfectly straight railroad track and steaming engine cutting through the land. Within years of the arrival of the Vermont Central

Railroad in 1850, North Willison boasted gristmills, a poultry warehouse, cheese factory, creameries, and New England's first cold storage plant, enabling the exportation of meat and other perishables throughout the Northeast. In this way, one small corner of Vermont heralded the modern era to come.

Theodore Kaufmann (American, 1814–96)

Westward the Star of Empire, 1867

Oil on canvas

Collection of the St. Louis Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, Gift of James E. Yeatman

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Theodore Kaufmann had worked as an illustrator in New York City before serving as correspondent for the Union Army during the Civil War. **Westward the Star of Empire**, completed at the start of the Reconstruction Era, was a hit on both sides of the Atlantic and the artist's most famous work. The painting presents a group of Indigenous men involved in an act of sabotage. Emerging from the prairie grasses under the cover of night, the group

cut and removed two sections of railroad tracks to cause an approaching train to derail.

Kaufmann's Indigenous characters are purposefully vague. Their painted faces, hair adorned with feathers, and attire all reflect generic accoutrements that most Europeans and Euro-Americans associated with Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains. Furthermore, Kaufmann relegated Native Americans to a marginal place in the shadows. The depiction implies the futility of Native American resistance as modernity advances into the vastness of the continent.

Henry Farny (American, 1847–1916)

Morning of a New Day, 1907

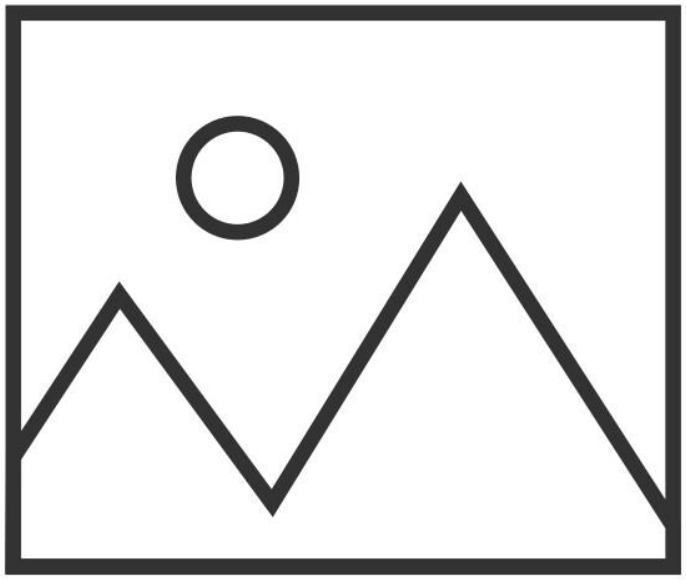
Oil on canvas

National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Museum Purchase, 1998.72.07

The Alsace-born Henry Farny, influenced by both German and French visual art traditions, envisioned the railroad as an incarnation of a new day, a triumph of the machine over the once-impenetrable landscapes of the Rocky Mountains. Mounted on horses near a ledge, a column of Indigenous figures looks on as a train easily races through a picturesque valley blanketed with snow. The picture, one of Farny's best known, symbolically stages the winter of Native civilizations, outpaced

by the “iron horse” and spectators of their own impending demise.

Absent from the scene, however, is the workforce necessary to carve the landscape into the shape of a Euro-American settlement. As early as the 1860s, immigrant Chinese laborers, with the addition of a small number of Indigenous and recently emancipated Black workers, toiled away to fulfill the railroad’s promise of Manifest Destiny. The beauty of the triumphant machine belies a complex reality of labor, displacement, and resistance.



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Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889–1975)

New Mexico (Landscape), 1926

Oil and tempera on Masonite

Denver Art Museum, Funds from Hellen Dill bequest, 1937.2

In **New Mexico (Landscape)**, a lonely locomotive in a remote landscape coughs black smoke into a hazy western sky. Passing through largely empty terrain, the short train is witnessed only by a single lean cow standing among soaptree yuccas and sagebrush. The desolate character of **New Mexico (Landscape)** was almost certainly informed by a long one-person ramble through Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Texas, and presumably New Mexico that Benton took in spring 1926. He was

seeking inspiration and subject matter that were both authentic to the character of the country and true to himself. Benton was alive to the changes gripping the country, fully aware of its restlessness as well as his own, and in **New Mexico (Landscape)**, he expressed it through the vehicle of a solitary rail.

Carl Frederick Gaertner (American, 1898–1952)

Swamp Spur, 1944

Oil on canvas

The John and Susan Horseman Collection, Courtesy of the Horseman Foundation

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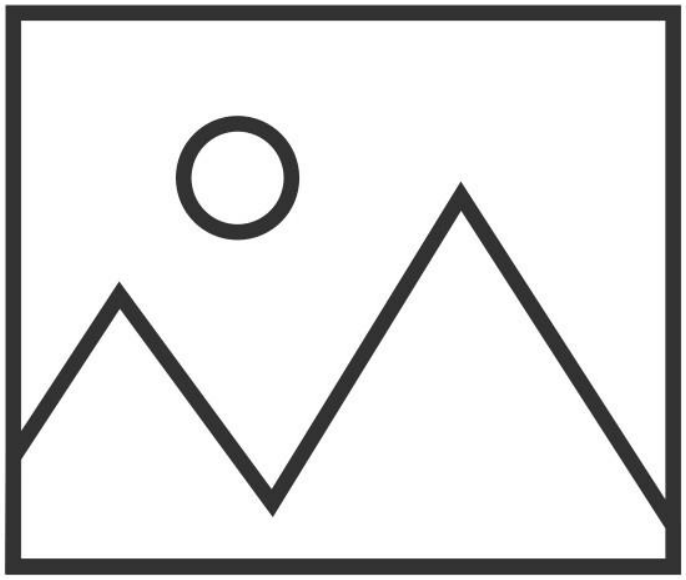
By the late 1930s, railroads were still important in daily life, but the industry was declining. A good many of the country's smaller rail lines failed in the Great Depression, facing competition from automobiles, trucks, and airplanes. The United States' involvement in World War II brought the railroad back into service of the war effort, transporting military personnel and freight at twice the rate that it had during World War I.

Cleveland painter Carl Gaertner's 1944 **Swamp Spur**, like Bohrod's **Slag Heaps** (on view nearby), is a damp winter landscape so cold and desolate that it borders on the surreal. But the small train cutting through the center of the composition, tailed by a red caboose with one passenger, sets the otherwise still scene into motion. The "spur" in Gaertner's title is a secondary train line providing access to industrial areas, in this painting the cluster of buildings and smokestacks visible along the painting's horizon. In spite of its bleak, marshy setting, **Swamp Spur** walks a poetic line between nostalgia for the past, anxiety about the present, and hope for—or at least movement toward—the future.



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Otto Kuhler (American, 1894–1977)

Work Train at Wagonmound, date unknown

Oil on canvas

Collection of The New Mexico Museum of Art, Gift of Otto August Kuhler, 1976, 3648.23P

German-American artist Otto Kuhler was hired in 1931 by the American Locomotive Company, first in their advertising department and eventually as a designer of passenger trains. He is best known as the designer of the 1935 Hiawatha steam train, which in addition to its speed was known for its richly toned interiors and well-designed, modern, accommodations.

Kuhler eventually moved to the American West, where he continued making paintings that explore the railroad and its encroachment into such unique and majestic landscapes as New Mexico's Wagon Mound butte.

Hiawatha train designed by Otto Kuhler for the American Locomotive company, 1935.

<u>Theme 2</u>: Industry and Urbanization: The Railroad and American Art in the Progressive Era and Beyond

The dawn of the twentieth century ushered in a new period in American history, focused on social reform, government regulation, and economic expansion. The so-called Progressive Era spanned the mid-1890s into 1917, when the United States entered World War I. This moment witnessed the extraordinary rise of cities such as New York and Pittsburgh in terms of their physical sizes, populations, industries, amenities, institutions, and amusements. The railroad was central to this growth, providing the transportation necessary to move raw materials, goods, and people efficiently

across the country and among urban areas. By 1902, railroad tracks in the United States measured 200,000 miles, double what they had been just two decades earlier, and technology was advancing as well, allowing trains to move more passengers and materials to a growing number of destinations across the country and at a greater speed.

Unparalleled growth, however, brought unavoidable conflict, including increasingly volatile relations between management and labor, devastating strikes, and broad public suspicion of railroad industry leaders. The pervasiveness of railway lines themselves, and the almost daily discussion in the popular press of the business affairs of the largest companies, is reflected in the

frequency with which American artists painted railroad subjects. Just as they were chronicling the railroad boom, artists also turned a critical eye to the toll trains were taking on life in the United States.

[Suggested path: Turn to your left and proceed diagonally to the small horizontal wall facing you]

William Robinson Leigh (American, 1866–1955)

The Attempt to Fire the Pennsylvania Railroad Roundhouse in Pittsburgh, at Daybreak on Sunday, July 22, 1877, 1895

Oil on canvas on board

Carnegie Museum of Art, Gift of Thomas Mellon Evans, 76.60

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877, the first nationwide workers' upheaval in American history, began in Martinsburg, West Virginia, after a series of job and wage cuts. Within five days, the protests had spread into Pittsburgh, erupting into an antimonopoly uprising that The New York Times would describe as the "reign of terror in Pittsburgh." When the Pittsburgh police failed to

control the crowds, Pennsylvania Governor John Hartranft deployed the National Guard. On the morning of July 22, 1877, the angry mob trapped some of the militia in the Pennsylvania Railroad's roundhouse and then set it on fire. The soldiers managed to escape, shooting their way out killing twenty people in the process.

Nearly twenty years later, artist William Robinson Leigh captured the tense moment when flames were blazing around the roundhouse for an article in the July–December 1895 issue of Scribner's magazine, entitled "A History of the Last Quarter Century in the United States." The mob of protestors in the foreground is only barely illuminated—the flames instead pour light onto the

National Guard in the background, carrying rifles and ready to fight.

[Suggested path: Continue to your right around the L-shaped wall to view two more paintings]

Harry Gottlieb (American, 1895–1992)

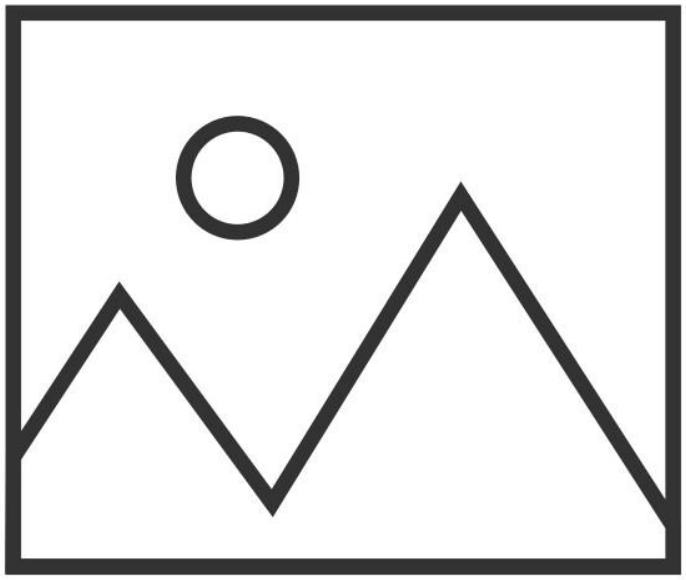
Dixie Cups, 1936–37

Oil on canvas

Wichita Art Museum, Museum purchase, Friends of the Wichita Art Museum, Director's Discretionary Fund, 1982.42

Harry Gottlieb's **Dixie Cups**, painted in the darkest days of the Great Depression, is a stark representation of the monumental glowing red railcars used in the production of steel, steaming in the cold air. Belying their innocent sounding nickname, these "Dixie Cups" contained slag, a byproduct of the steel industry, and transported the red-hot waste from blast furnaces in cities like Cleveland, Detroit, and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to

immense dumps. Massive conical vessels designed to withstand the harshest of conditions, these specialized railcars shared little in common with the ephemeral paper cups that sprang up in public washrooms as part of a public health effort aimed at curbing the 1918 influenza epidemic.



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Aaron Bohrod (American, 1907–92)

Slag Heaps, 1938

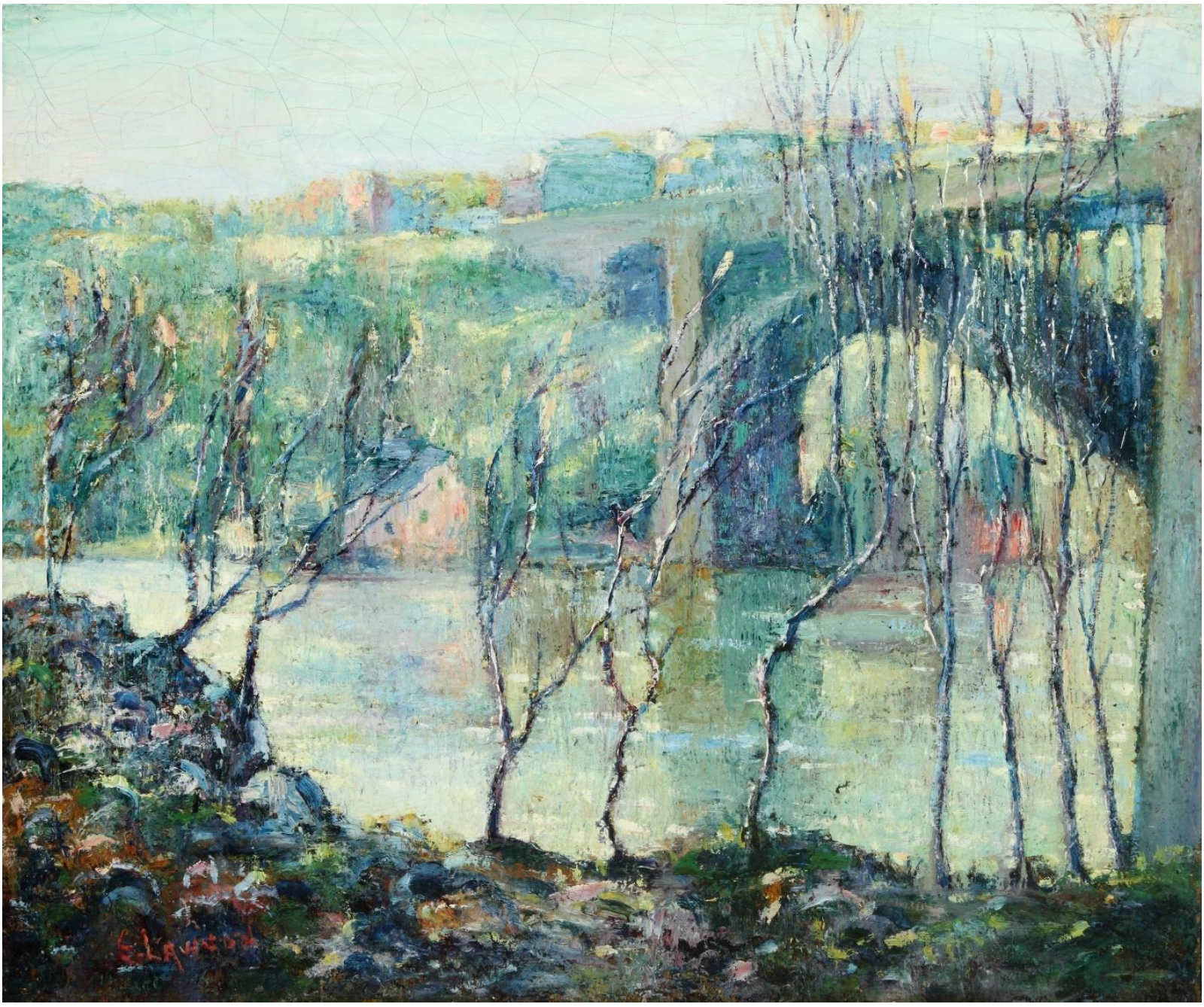
Oil on canvas

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Allocation of the U.S. Government, Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, WPA 106.1943

Aaron Bohrod's **Slag Heaps** presents a lone miner, slightly hunched over as he trudges to work along quiet rail tracks amid a bleak and apocalyptic landscape. Behind the worker are the titular "slag heaps," a slang term for the mounds of rocks and refuse that surround a depleted mine. Bohrod's desolate landscape mirrors the desperate situation in which many Americans found themselves during

the recession of 1937 and 1938, when unemployment climbed to nearly 20 percent and industrial production fell sharply. **Slag Heaps** was a commission from the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, which provided artists such as Bohrod with employment during the Depression by commissioning works of art that both celebrated and scrutinized American labor. The quiet railroad, lonely worker, and lifeless mounds present this section of middle America as a surreal wasteland depleted by exploitation, conveying the ominous national climate and the lost promise of the golden age of railroads.

[Suggested path: Return to your place on the corner of the right-hand wall and continue around]



Ernest Lawson (American, 1873–1939)

Washington Bridge, Harlem River, ca. 1915

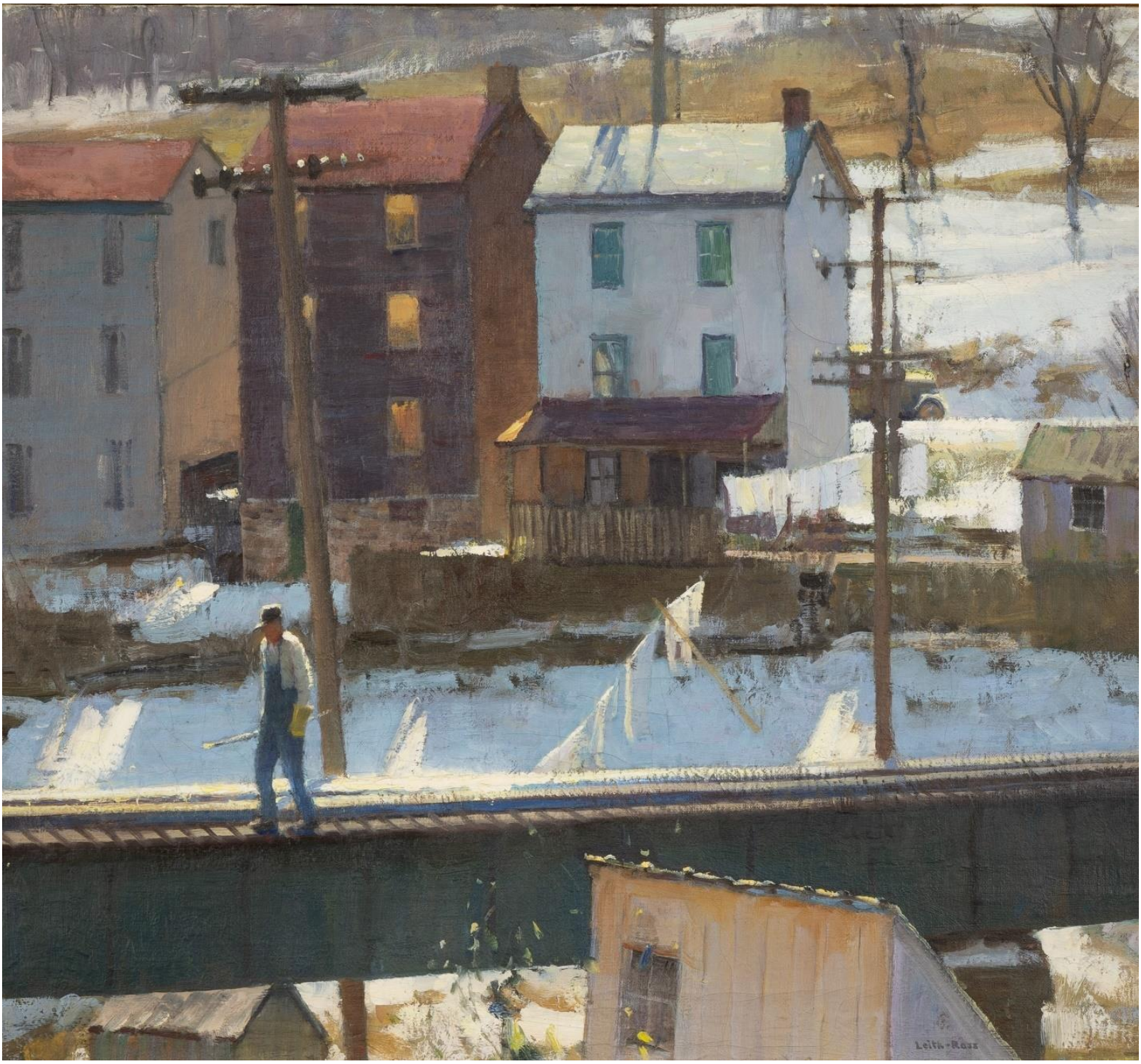
Oil on canvas

High Museum of Art, J. J. Haverty Collection, 49.38

The railroad made the growth of industrial towns possible, and the presence of the many trains that traveled across the country was felt even when they were not actively passing through. Ernest Lawson continued to incorporate the railroad, or at least implicate its presence, in his Impressionistic canvases for years. In the mid-1910s, he completed a series of paintings of New York's Washington Bridge that reveal the influence of French Impressionists such as Camille Pissarro and Alfred Sisley, who both frequently painted rail bridges. By

that point, Lawson was at the height of his career, and the railroad was perhaps at the pinnacle of its importance to American life.

Washington Bridge, Harlem River incorporates the marvel of engineering into Lawson's scene, yet it avoids becoming an "industrial landscape." The railcars and automobiles that would normally move across the scene are either absent or have been abstracted; the workers that would usually bustle about the riverbanks are not present; and even the small structures along the water appear quaint. In this way, Lawson successfully integrated modern themes into his landscape while maintaining a sense of romance.


Leith-Ross

Harry Leith-Ross (American, 1886–1973)

Tenant's House and Tracks, ca. late 1930s

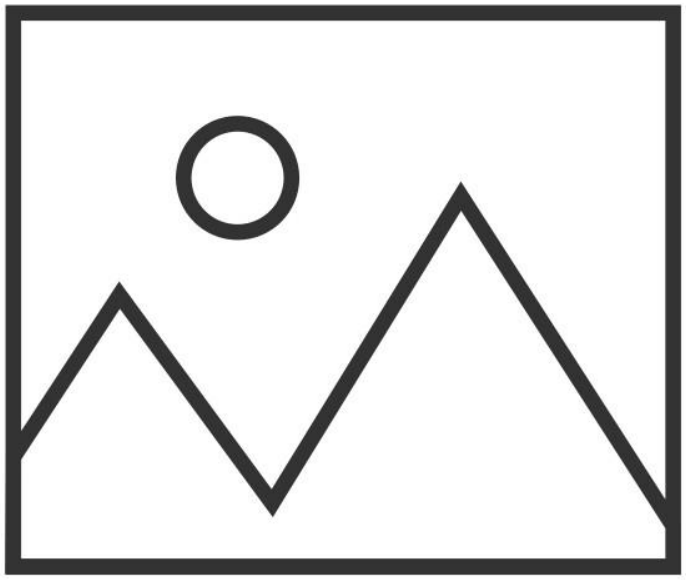
Oil on canvas

Private collection

The notion of powerlessness in the modern landscape offered a striking counterpoint to the bustling industrial landscapes popular in the early twentieth century. Harry Leith-Ross, a British citizen born on the island of Mauritius, served in the US Infantry during World War I. After being discharged, he spent the remainder of the war years teaching in Woodstock, New York, before ultimately settling in New Hope, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in 1935. There, around the late 1930s, he produced **Tenant's**

House and Tracks, a lonely view of life along the railroads.

In the midst of the Great Depression, Leith-Ross found something poignant in a solitary worker going about his daily routine, walking along railroad tracks on a bright winter day. Although likely painted around New Hope, **Tenant's House and Tracks** displays a certain universality—this scene could have played out in any number of American towns—that made his work popular with collectors and respected by colleagues and critics.



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John Sloan (American, 1871–1951)

The City from Greenwich Village, 1922

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1970.1.1

As the twentieth century progressed, elevated trains had become less of a curiosity to John Sloan and more of a ubiquitous presence in his New York. By 1922, when he completed **The City from Greenwich Village**, his work had evolved from his more narrative paintings of the 1900s and 1910s, but he retained an observational perspective, looking out at Greenwich Village from the roof of his studio—a common vantage point. Sloan had, just a few years earlier, moved his studio from the

Varitype Building that appears at the right of the composition to another studio close by, and he contrasted the relatively quaint charm of Greenwich Village with upper Manhattan's cluster of skyscrapers in the distance. Tellingly, he also captured a city humming with life and (artificial) light as evening settles in, with the elevated train noisy conduit clanging through it all.

Ernest Lawson (American, 1873–1939)

Excavation—Penn Station, ca. 1906

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Bequest of Hudson D. Walker from the Ione and Hudson D. Walker Collection, 1978.21.845

New York City's role as the most important commercial center of the United States led Pennsylvania Railroad CEO Alexander Cassatt to initiate the construction of a large, centralized station that would allow his trains direct access to Manhattan (hitherto cargo had to be shipped by ferry from New Jersey). The construction of Penn Station was chronicled for millions of readers in the

New York press. Artists such as Ernest Lawson who were attuned to modern life could not ignore the effects of construction.

Merging observational realism with Impressionist techniques, Lawson's **Excavation—Penn Station** captures one of the many excavation sites required for the tunnels that would service the station. A small engine chugs across the foreground, aiding in the excavation and also serving as a visual reminder of the reason for the labor. Lawson's point of view is remote, with the workers seen at such a distance that they lose their individual characteristics and take on an ant-like collective energy. His light palette and heavy impasto render the scene almost

abstract in some areas and counterbalance its gritty realism.

Leon Kroll (American, 1884–1974)

Terminal Yards, 1912–13

Oil on canvas

Flint Institute of Arts, Gift of Mrs. Arthur Jerome Eddy, 1931.4

New York City's vast train network spread into surrounding regions such as Weehawken, New Jersey, which Leon Kroll depicts in **Terminal Yards**. Revealing Kroll's sharp eye and great technical skill, **Terminal Yards** depicts a bright and busy winter day at the Weehawken Terminal, the vast transportation hub across the Hudson River from Manhattan, which included an extensive network of both train and ferry connections.

Kroll's view of Weehawken is accurate, marked by puffs of smoke, crisscrossing lines, station buildings, and the perpendicular forms of electric poles all sandwiched between the Hudson and the rocky bluff. But it bears little of the grittiness and grime that define Ernest Lawson's and George Bellows's explorations of the railroad in the urban landscape. Rather, **Terminal Yards** is in many ways a gleaming celebration of American industry. Kroll's view is taken from the top of Weehawken's palisade, overlooking the rail lines, and along the horizon the viewer can recognize the expansive Manhattan skyline, itself a sign of American ingenuity and prowess. Kroll, interested in this new form of landscape, recognized the railroad's ubiquity and focused on capturing it not only as a sign of

progress but also as an ever-present factor in the landscape.

Colin Campbell Cooper (American, 1856–1937)

Pittsburgh, PA, ca. 1905

Oil on canvas

The Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Gift in memory of Alex G. McKenna, 1996.19

Pittsburgh remained an important industrial center in the early twentieth century. When Pennsylvania native Colin Campbell Cooper returned to his home state to paint Pittsburgh around 1905, the effects of more than a century of factories, foundries, and trains polluting the landscape were evident. **Pittsburgh, PA** is characterized by grime: on a dreary winter day, clouds of black and white smoke puff out of trains crossing the murky waters of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers only to dissipate

into equally dark clouds in the sky. Another train chugs toward the viewer in the foreground, surrounded by the muck that has accumulated along the riverbanks.

Cooper's view of Pittsburgh is honest and bleak, but not without its moments of beauty. By 1905, he had become one of the leading American Impressionists, particularly known for his ability to render modern architecture with a soft sensitivity. **Pittsburgh, PA** draws on French industrial landscapes by Impressionist painters like Claude Monet and Alfred Sisley; the heavy, polluted clouds break way in some areas for clear light, and the waters of the river offer a sense of visual tranquility in an otherwise humming scene.

Otto Kuhler (American, 1894–1977)

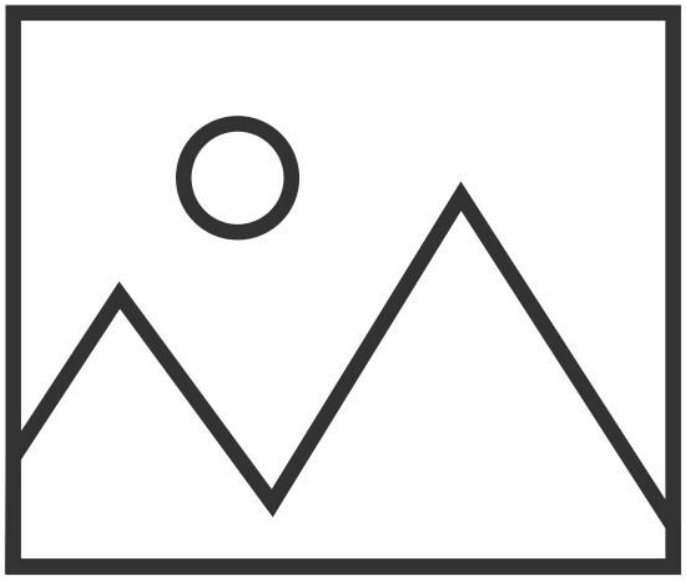
Steel Valley, Pittsburgh, ca. 1925

Oil on canvas

The Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Gift of Mr. Richard M. Scaife, 2004.2

German-born designer and painter Otto Kuhler painted a view of Pittsburgh that consciously expands on Colin Campbell Cooper's efforts (see his painting of Pittsburgh nearby) to find beauty amid the consequences of industrialization. Kuhler immigrated to the United States in 1923 and found work in Pittsburgh as a commercial artist focusing on industrial landscapes such as **Steel Valley, Pittsburgh**. The railroad was a constant presence in Kuhler's art from his earliest years in Germany, and

therefore his view of Pittsburgh was more optimistic—or at least less apocalyptic—than Cooper's. In this large but somehow still quiet painting, a train makes its way over the Monongahela River, framed on either side by the smokestacks of factories billowing clouds of brown and gray smoke into the air.



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John Sloan (American, 1871–1951)

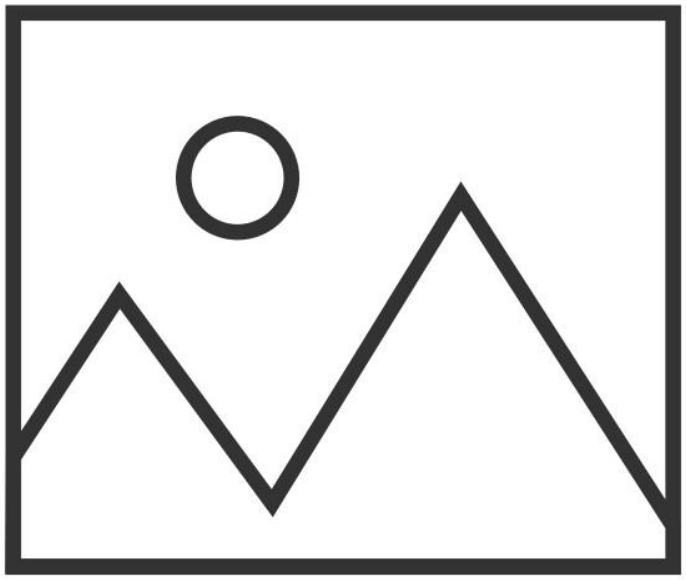
Six O'Clock, Winter, 1912

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection; Acquired 1922

Elevated trains had provided a backdrop for some of John Sloan's quintessential New York Ashcan paintings of the first years of the 1900s. By 1912, when the artist completed **Six O'Clock, Winter**, he was still standing among the masses of New Yorkers, but he had shifted his focus upward to the Third Avenue elevated train, or "El." Sloan structured his composition into three horizontal zones: the fading blue winter sky, the massive El and its track, and the workaday people and storefronts of the ground level. Elevated trains had

been in common operation in New York since the 1870s, providing relief from the traffic that plagued the city's streets. Even with the opening of subterranean rail lines in 1904, elevated trains remained an important artery for intercity transport. Although stopped and shrouded in darkness, the El is the powerful force and focal point of this painting.



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Edward Hopper (American, 1882–1967)

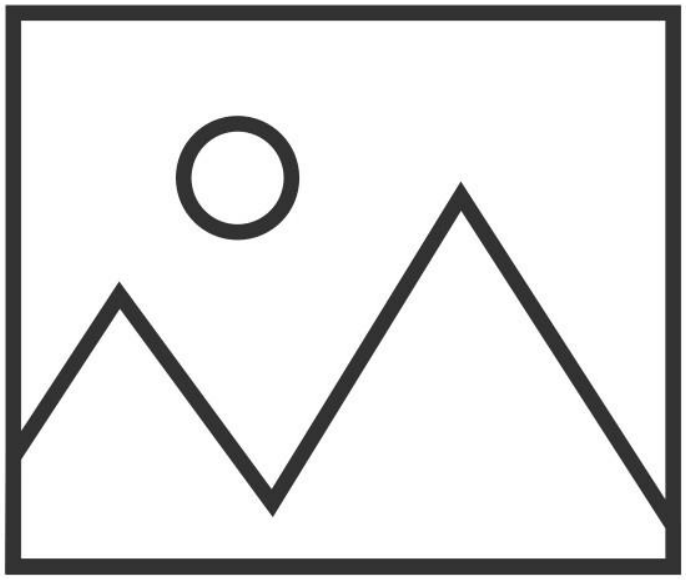
Approaching a City, 1946

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection, Acquired 1947

Edward Hopper was capable of finding loneliness in almost any subject he painted. His depictions of the railroad, however, are master classes in depicting isolation. Hopper painted **Approaching a City** in the winter of 1946, not long after the end of World War II. The artist had traveled uptown from his Washington Square apartment to Carnegie Hill in Manhattan's Upper West Side. There, he positioned himself on the east side of Park Avenue between 97th and 98th Streets, where commuter train tracks enter a tunnel and continue underground to Grand

Central Station. Lonely to the point of bleakness, Hopper's view of railroad tracks disappearing into darkness is a metaphor for the coming era of alienation brought about by the Cold War.



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Georgia O’Keeffe (American, 1887–1986)

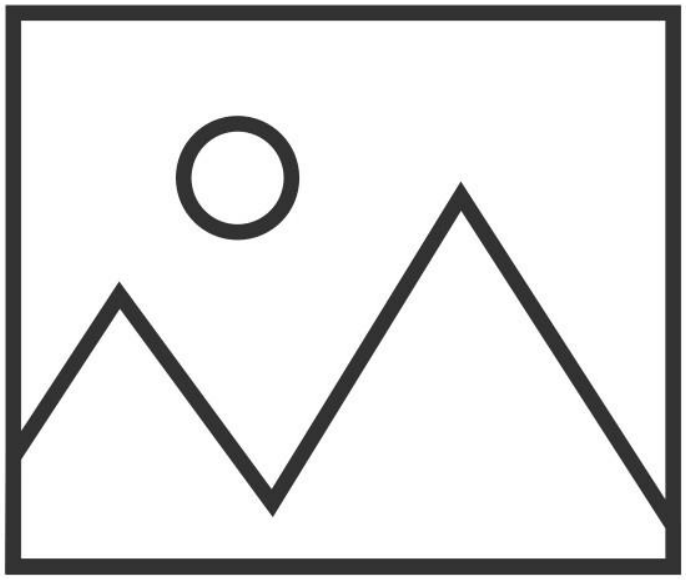
Train Coming in—Canyon, Texas, 1916

Watercolor on paper

Amarillo Museum of Art, Purchased with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, Amarillo Area Foundation, Amarillo Art Alliance, Fannie Weymouth, Santa Fe Industries Foundation and Mary Fain (AM.1982.1.4)

Train Coming In—Canyon, Texas is an essay in simplicity. The railroad tracks are merely three arcing lines that move quickly out of the composition while a locomotive, little more than a circle, releases massive swirls of colorful smoke into the Texas sky. The work speaks both to O’Keeffe’s powerful affinity for the Southwest and the sense of

isolation it could offer. She wrote to Alfred Stieglitz, eventually her husband, not long after arriving in Canyon, Texas: “The Plains—the wonderful great big sky—makes me want to breathe so deep that I’ll break—There is so much of it.”



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John Marin (American, 1872–1953)

Grain Elevator (Weehawken Sequence),

ca. 1910–15

Oil on canvas

Promised Gift to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas

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In 1910, the painter, watercolorist, and printmaker John Marin established the first of a series of studios in New Jersey and made frequent painting excursions to the Palisades, high bluffs above the Hudson River on the Jersey side that he had known since childhood. In **Grain Elevator (Weehawken Sequence)**, he captured the vast West Shore Elevator on Pier 7 looming over the Hudson River. The construction of the great grain elevator had

been announced in The New York Times on September 11, 1901, and it was trumpeted as the largest of its kind in the country. Marin rendered the great storage facility in streaks of red paint, pushed into the upper left of the composition and surrounded by a shrouded hush of winter snow.

Joe Jones (American, 1909–63)

All the Live Long Day, 1939

Oil on paper mounted on board

Art Gallery of Hamilton, Gift of Mr. Herman H. Levy, O.B.E., 1961

The title of Joe Jones's **All the Live Long Day** quotes the well-known work song "I've Been Working on the Railroad." While framing his painting with the complex geometry of a large switchyard, populated by boxcars on the horizon, Jones leaves no doubt that the focus of the work is the thirteen men toiling to lay the heavy and awkward steel rails. The rhythm of the scene is amplified by the popular song, a traditional tune from the mid-nineteenth century originally published in a collegiate songbook

by Princeton University in 1894. Popular in minstrel shows and later abridged as nursery rhymes, such music found new relevance during the Depression, when various federal agencies such as the WPA sought to catalogue and record examples of American folk songs.

Theme 3: The Lonely Rail

In the nineteenth century the American railroad was largely perceived as a builder of connections. Beginning in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, however, trains became viewed as vehicles of separation, migration, and loss as life became seemingly fractured and ever more complex. While for many people the 1920s were the machine age, the Jazz Age, and the Harlem Renaissance—unmistakably dynamic and optimistic forces—they were also a period in which American mobility led to separation and a pervasive sense of loneliness. That displacement and isolation was expressed repeatedly in the ways painters portrayed the railway.

For artists, the rails began to embody and deliver a different iconography, one that spoke more to nostalgia and detachment than to speed and strength. That change in perception—and the outpouring of paintings, songs, poems, and films about the rails that followed—recast the railroad in a more sympathetic light than the industry had ever known. The lonely rail became a persistent and pervasive organizing myth in American culture.

[Suggested path: Turn left and proceed toward the L-shaped wall with two paintings on the left side and one painting directly facing you]

William Charles Libby (American, 1919–82)

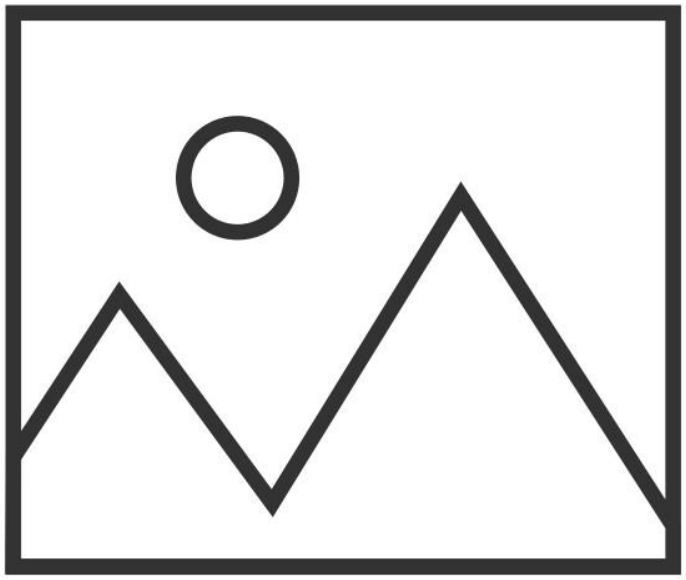
Lanterns, 1945

Tempera on board

Carnegie Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Beal, 63.1.5

William Charles Libby executed a precise lithograph of railroad lanterns, tracks, and telegraph poles in 1940. The medium allowed him to sell multiple copies of the composition, an advantage during the later years of the Great Depression. Five years later, however, he interpreted the same scene in tempera paint, but this time rendering the work as an abstract representation of objects, rather a realist print. Five years of unprecedented world war and the coming of the atomic age had destabilized

perception to such a point that Libby employed quotidian objects to show how the ordinary melts into the ether in the modern era.



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Kay Sage (American, 1898–1963)

Unusual Thursday, 1951

Oil on canvas

New Britain Museum of American Art, Gift of Mrs. Naum Gabo, 1978.90

The surprising adaptability of the American rails and their ability to conjure or manifest meaning was put to use even by postwar painters working in the Surrealist style. Kay Sage came by her Surrealism in Europe before World War II and through her marriage to the French artist Yves Tanguy. Her **Unusual Thursday** includes a railroad bridge across one of her typical dreamscapes, leading either to nowhere or to infinity—or perhaps both.


GOELLER

Charles Goeller (American, 1901–55)

Factory Yard, ca. 1938

Oil on canvas

Collection of The Newark Museum of Art, Bequest of the artist, 1955, 55.104

Charles Goeller had difficulty finding his footing as an artist. A native of Newark, he made attempts to penetrate the New York art world, but he ultimately left the city and returned to New Jersey, where he worked in his family's iron business. Goeller's **Factory Yard** may have represented the family business, but in any event, it captures a plant that may have fallen victim to the economic struggles still playing out during the later years of the Great Depression. A large pile of sand has begun to spread

from disuse and now covers much of the railroad tracks that once carried raw materials in and finished products out of the yard.

[Suggested path: Return to your place on the outer main wall next to “The Lonely Rail” wall text]

Charles T. Bowling (American, 1891–1985)

Church at the Crossroads, 1936

Oil on board

Private collection, courtesy of the Dallas Museum of Art

Charles T. Bowling was born in Quitman, Texas, a town east of Dallas, and became a late addition to the group of artists known as the Dallas Nine. In 1936, Bowling painted **Church at the Crossroads**, showing a white, rural, one-room chapel that not only sits at the dusty corner of two lonely intersecting roads, as the title of the work implies, but backs up to a set of railroad tracks as well. The setting of Bowling's painting is desolate, but even in the lonely Texas landscape the church is still a

meeting house. The spirit of community is further reinforced by the electric lines (and perhaps telephone service) that connect the church to the outside world, as well as a house across the road and another on the horizon, where members of the congregation may live. Even the tracks in the road running alongside the church suggest that someone has traveled by recently. The same year Bowling completed **Church at the Crossroads**, he sent it to the vast Texas Centennial Exposition, where it hung in the first room of the Texas Painting section.


U.S.
MAIL.
MARSH

Reginald Marsh (American, 1898–1954)

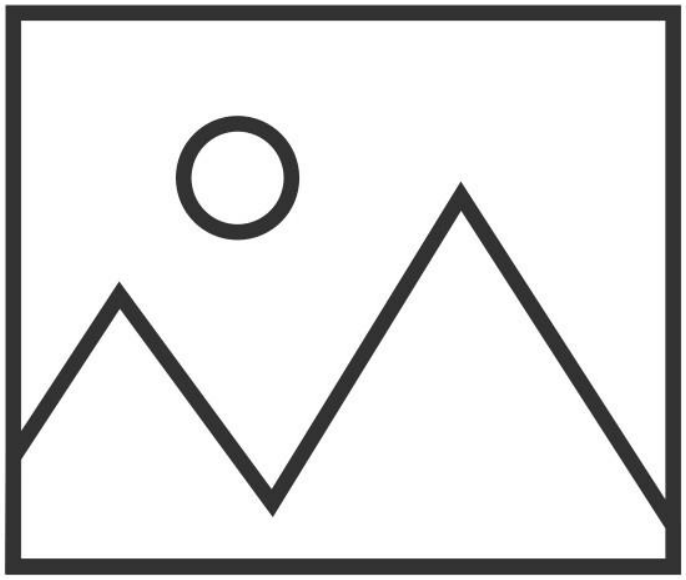
Gathering the Mail, 1934

Fresco on cement

Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State, Purchased with funds provided by the Friends of the Palmer Museum of Art, 85.3

The United States Postal Service employed Railroad Post Offices (or RPOs) throughout the continental United States in the early twentieth century as a systemized and integrated method of moving letters, eventually developing a standardized layout for these special railcars. The RPO engendered communication and commerce in far-flung corners of the country. In **Gathering the Mail**, Reginald Marsh depicts a railroad postal worker posed in

heroic fashion, employing a mail hook and catcher pouch to gather mail on the fly.



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Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917–2000)

Subway—Home from Work (In the Evening the Mother and Father Come Home from Work), 1943

Gouache on paper

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of the Alexander Shilling Fund, 44.18.1

Subway—Home from Work (In the Evening the Mother and Father Come Home from Work), painted during World War II, demonstrates Lawrence's deep immersion in modernist circles, particularly in its formal, Cubist composition and pervasive atmosphere of cool detachment. A study in shapes, two subway entrances separated by a broad, empty avenue become classical temples through which purposeful figures silently go about

their business. The absence of automobiles reminds us that gas rationing is in effect, while the somber palette makes the evening scene mellow despite the sharp geometry of figures emerging from underground. The title also hints at conditions during the war, as both mother and father are working out of the home, replacing those at the front and providing labor for factories running around the clock in service of the war effort. The circumstances would have been no surprise to those African Americans who came from the South to northern cities, as the privations of a segregated society had long required women to labor alongside men.

Palmer C. Hayden (American, 1890–1973)

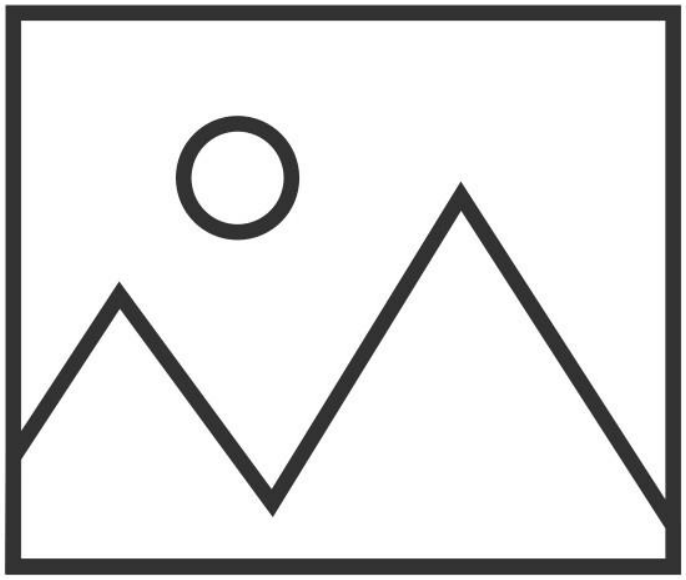
His Hammer in His Hand, from the **Ballad of John Henry** series, 1944–47

Oil on canvas

Museum of African American Art, Los Angeles

His Hammer in His Hand by Palmer Hayden is one of twelve canvases in the **Ballad of John Henry** series. Hayden, born in Virginia of African descent, studied at Cooper Union and Columbia University before living in Paris for five years, returning to the United States during the depths of the Depression. Hayden secured employment with the WPA and frequently explored the African American experience in his paintings.

His Hammer in His Hand celebrates the folk hero John Henry, the well-known “steel-driving man” who bested a pneumatic drill before laying down his life, a parable of man versus machine and the dignity of labor in the face of modernity. “A man ain’t nothing but a man,” declares one verse of the blues folk song, “but before I let your steam drill beat me down, I’d die with a hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord, I’d die with a hammer in my hand.” In Hayden’s painting, John Henry is depicted as handsome, triumphant, and smiling while walking from the tunnel he personally carved.



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Philip Evergood (American, 1901–73)

Wheels of Victory, ca. 1944

Oil on panel

Collection of the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Bequest of Hudson D. Walker from the Ione and Hudson D. Walker Collection, 1978.21.830

Wheels of Victory reminds viewers that the United States remained deeply conflicted when it came to questions of race during World War II. The painting offers a seemingly simple narrative. Two trains cross on a steel bridge, with the locomotive facing the viewer crossing paths with a light tank on a flat car, perhaps leaving a factory on its way to the theater of war. Five men, all White, confer in the

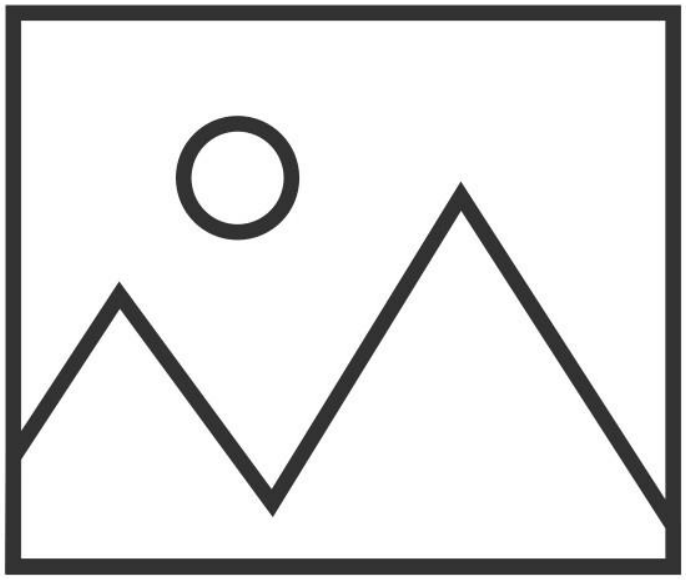
foreground, checking their pocket watches and regarding important papers, possibly the manifest for their shipment. The figure on the right, however, provides the moral center of the composition. Evergood has included an African American sentry, silently witnessing the fraternity of railway workers as he guards the bridge and secures the future of a country that will exclude him from economic opportunity in the postwar era.

Theme 4: Passengers All: People on the Train in American Art, 1900–1950

The United States, once a social economy of rural communities, had grown into an urban, industrial nation by the turn of the twentieth century. Modernity transformed the country into a diverse culture of consumption marked by large cities peopled by immigrants from around the world. For many, the geographic mobility and social fluidity provided by the railroad heralded life in the modern era.

The stock market crash in the fall of 1929 triggered unprecedented economic suffering and social unrest in the United States. In the depths of this

crisis, various branches of the federal government, especially the Works Progress Administration (WPA), commissioned artists to create work that valorized the workforce, including railroad labor, to influence public policy through soft power while providing economic support for creatives. Paintings from this moment capture the shift in perspective. In the nineteenth century, representations of people associated with the railroad were most often limited to executives and owners, but after the Depression the laborer and everyday rider garnered artists' attention. "Passengers all" these subjects increasingly dominated images of the railroad as they appeared throughout the American imagination.



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Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889–1975)

Engineer's Dream, 1931

Oil on panel

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Eugenia Buxton Whitnel Funds, 75.1

Painters such as Thomas Hart Benton, who were trained in New York and Paris, used a sinuous, exaggerated realism to render the American scene as if in a dream state. Benton's **Engineer's Dream**, despite the bright, illustrative palette and comic pose of the railway worker at right, is clearly the stuff of nightmares. An engineer, asleep in his bed, conjures a steam locomotive speeding to the precipice of a washed-out bridge while a forlorn figure is caught in the blinding sweep of the

headlamp, frantically waving a red signal flag. The diminutive engineer—presumably the sleeping protagonist—has leapt from the controls to an uncertain fate. The painting is fittingly symbolic of economic conditions in the United States two years into the Great Depression.


ESSEX
LANCIA GRANDEE

Allan Rohan Crite (American, 1910–2007)

The Carstop, 1940

Oil on canvas

Boston Athenaeum, UR75

Allan Rohan Crite studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and later earned his degree through Harvard University Extension School. He worked as a draftsman and technical illustrator for the Boston Naval Shipyard while executing a series of “neighborhood paintings” on his own time. Later in life, Crite explained his intention as a black artist to depict a “real Negro” rather than a “Harlem” or “jazz Negro,” figures that he saw as white representations of the African American community. **The Car Stop** reflects that

goal, depicting an intersection in the South End of Boston where the bus line, streetcars, and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, known as the “T”—then Boston’s elevated railroad—come together to form a vibrant crossroads at the Northampton Street Station. Crite’s work is now celebrated as a rare lens through which to view Boston’s neighborhoods before urban renewal changed the social topography of the city in the 1960s and 1970s.

Edmund Charles Tarbell (American, 1862–1934)

In the Station Waiting Room, Boston, ca. 1915

Oil on canvas

Crocker Art Museum, Gift of Dr. Joseph R. Fazzano, 1956.7

Influenced as much by seventeenth-century Dutch interiors as by the radical themes and techniques of French Impressionism, Edmund Tarbell and his followers developed a signature style that coalesced into the so-called Boston School. Dubbed "Tarbellites" in 1897 by the critic Sadakichi Hartmann, the Boston School endorsed a vision of an idealized "old" New England. Tarbell earned acclaim by composing domestic interiors featuring the well-to-do performing their identities among

ancestral silver, porcelain, and seventeenth-century furniture.

As a picture of a public space, **In the Station Waiting Room, Boston** is an unusual departure for Tarbell. Shafts of heavenly illumination pick out a family in the middle distance, calling our attention to a mother and child waiting patiently while a couple of swells sporting boater hats jog by, late for their train. In foregrounding three female sitters in white summer dresses, Tarbell tries to assure the viewer that technology marches forward and cities grow, but traditional female virtues are a constant in Boston.

Samuel Woolf (American, 1880–1948)

The Under World, ca. 1909–10

Oil on canvas

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Purchase, funds provided by a private Richmond foundation, 95.101

The subway provided a setting for painters to explore the drama of the modern city. Subterranean mass transportation entered the popular imagination in 1863 with the advent of the London Underground, followed by advancements around the globe, including in New York, which was a city of almost 3.5 million in 1900. Opened in 1904, New York's underground Interborough Rapid Transit Company, or IRT, offered an alternative to

earlier elevated rail systems and accommodated all members of New York society.

Samuel J. Woolf captured the thrill of riding the city's new subway system in **The Under World**. The painting's theatrical focus is at stage right, where a man in evening dress leans over to whisper confidences to a woman dressed as a fashion plate, complete with a fur collar and plumed hat. Woolf envisions the subway as a place where class, ethnicity, and gender roles slipped earlier bounds of gentility and were redefined in the new public space of the passenger car.

[Suggested path: At the main doors, turn to your left and proceed to the other side of the small horizontal wall to view the last two paintings]

Louise Emerson Rönnebeck (American, 1901–80)

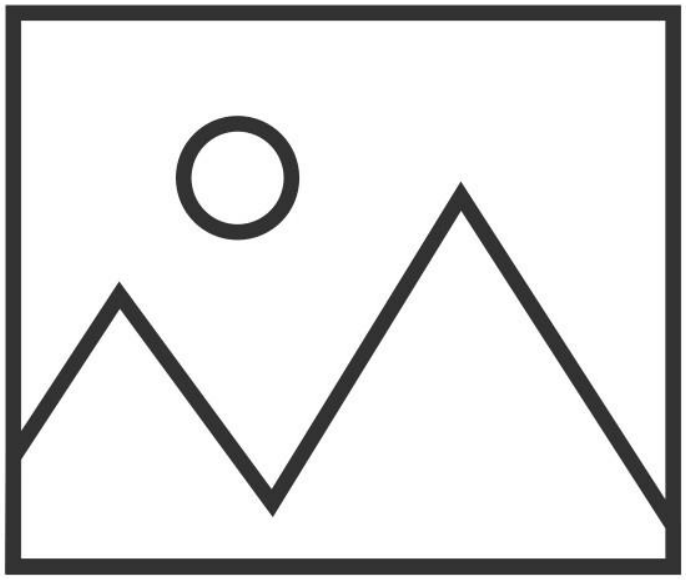
End of Summer, 1945

Oil/tempera on artist's board

Private collection

The end of World War II brought about a massive, dramatic shift in American culture. Soldiers returned home, prosperity beckoned, and the United States briefly stood uncontested on the world stage. Louise Rönnebeck's painting **End of Summer** captures the moment as two young women—mother and daughter, perhaps—curl up and sleep, the leather valise at their feet hinting at the end of a vacation. Rönnebeck creates an elliptical work by rendering her subjects unconscious and intertwined in a composition of

red, white, and blue. At the end of summer, 1945, the war is over, but the world will never be the same for innocents sleeping on a train.



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Henry Sugimoto (American, 1900-90)

When can we go home?, 1943

Oil on canvas

Japanese American National Museum, Gift of Madeleine Sugimoto and Naomi Tagawa, 92.97.3

During World War II, trains moved Japanese Americans from their homes, mostly on the West Coast, to internment camps as far east as Arkansas. Among those held at the Jerome War Relocation Center in Arkansas were the painter Henry Sugimoto and his wife and young daughter, starting in October 1942. In his painting of the following year, **When can we go home?,** Sugimoto portrays his family in a compressed landscape of two distinct worlds. One captures the civilization the Sugimoto

family wished to return to, and the other describes the grim internment camp itself.

At the upper right, barracks and a watch tower loom against a dark sky and are separated by a bolt of lightning; on the left, an Art Deco suspension bridge and skyscraper seem to speak to future possibilities. The little girl points to a locomotive with smoke billowing from its stack and presumably poses the title question to her mother. At war's end, the train would indeed carry the Sugimotos home to California.

[End of Exhibition]