

PRESS RELEASE

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ICONIC PAINTINGS LEAVE NORTH AMERICA FOR FIRST TIME FOR ASHMOLEAN EXHIBITION

AMERICA'S COOL MODERNISM: O'KEEFFE TO HOPPER
23 March–22 July 2018



The Ashmolean will present a major exhibition of works by American artists that have never before travelled outside the USA (23 March–22 July 2018). *AMERICA'S COOL MODERNISM: O'KEEFFE TO HOPPER*, will show over eighty paintings, photographs and prints, and the first American avant-garde film, *Manhatta*, from international collections. Eighteen key loans will come from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and a further twenty-seven pieces are being loaned by the Terra Foundation for American Art with whom the exhibition is organised. Thirty-five paintings have never been to the UK and seventeen of these have never left the USA at all.

COOL MODERNISM examines famous painters and photographers of the 1920s and '30s with early works by Georgia O'Keeffe; photographs by Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand and Edward Weston; and cityscapes by Edward Hopper. It also displays the pioneers of modern American art whose work is less well-known in the UK, particularly Charles Demuth (1883–1935) and Charles Sheeler (1883–1965). On show will be major pieces by the so-called precisionist artists. These include Demuth's *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* (1928, from the Met), the painting Robert Hughes described as the 'one picture so famous that practically every American who looks at art knows it.' Made in 1928 and dedicated to the poet William Carlos Williams, *the Figure 5*, was one of a series of symbolist 'poster-portraits' which Demuth made of friends and fellow artists. Consisting of an enormous, stylized '5' that occupies the entire picture plane and painted in bold colours on wallboard, the painting evokes new styles of advertising that were multiplying in American cities in the 1920s – a remarkable anticipation of Pop art later in the century. Another important loan is Sheeler's *Americana* (1931, from the Met) which has never been lent outside the USA. The painting shows a traditional American domestic scene with Shaker furniture and folk objects arranged in a near abstract composition – a blend of modernist forms with a historical subject. Other rare loans include a painting by E.E. Cummings (1894–1962), better known for his poetry; and *Le Tournesol (The Sunflower)* (c. 1920, NGA Washington DC) by Edward Steichen (1879–1973) who destroyed nearly all his paintings before dedicating himself to photography. *The Sunflower* was exhibited in Paris shortly after it was painted in 1922 and has not been seen in Europe since then.

Dr Xa Sturgis, Director of the Ashmolean Museum, says: 'It is an extraordinary privilege to borrow some of the greatest works ever made by American artists for this landmark exhibition. The Ashmolean is indebted to the Terra Foundation, the Met and other lenders for parting with so many of their treasures. We are bringing together an exceptional collection of paintings, photographs and prints - iconic pieces that have never been to the UK before and deserve to be better-known in this country. We will reveal a fascinating aspect of American interwar art that is yet to be explored in a major exhibition.'



The exhibition looks at a current in interwar American art that is relatively unknown. The familiar story of America in the 'Roaring Twenties' is that of *The Great Gatsby*, the Harlem Renaissance and the Machine Age; while the 1930s are known as the Steinbeckian world marked by the Depression and the New Deal. This exhibition focuses on the artists who grappled with the experience of modern America with a cool, controlled detachment, eliminating people from their pictures altogether. For some this treatment reflected an ambivalence and anxiety about the modern world. Factories without workers and streets without people could seem strange and empty places. Two works by Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) from his 'Migration' series, which is otherwise full of characters, are notable for the absence of people. They express the harsh experience of African Americans travelling north in hope of a better life. What they found was often more frightening than promising. Edward Hopper's *Manhattan Bridge Loop* (1928) has a gloomy atmosphere with a tiny, solitary pedestrian whose walking pace is at odds with the bridge's traffic.

For others, this cool treatment of contemporary America was a positive response - an expression of optimism and pride. Skyscrapers and bridges become studies in geometry; and cities are cleansed and ordered with no crowds and no chaos. Louis Lozowick's (1892–1973) prints capture the energy of the city in curving sprawls and buildings soaring into the sky; while Ralston Crawford (1906–78) and Charles Sheeler depict the architecture of industrial America – factories, grain elevators, water plants – as the country's new cathedrals, glorious in their scale and feats of engineering, yet oddly emptied of people.

These artists were also engaged in a conscious effort to develop a distinctly American modernism, not derived from Europe but rooted in American cultural tradition and the landscape. They drew a direct line of descent from the simple utilitarian forms of Shaker furniture and rural barns to the standardized, machine-made world of the 1920s and '30s. In painting and photographing these subjects in a commensurate style – crisp surfaces, flattened perspective, linear purity - artists and critics were revealing an essential attribute of the American character – modernity.

Dr Katherine Bourguignon, Terra Foundation for American Art and exhibition curator, says: 'In addition to the artists who are well-known in the UK, this exhibition is an opportunity to introduce a European audience to important figures like Patrick Henry Bruce, Helen Torr and Charles Sheeler; and photographers of the interwar period including Imogen Cunningham and Berenice Abbott. These artists were actively seeking to create art that could be seen as authentically 'American'. Decades before the Pop artists addressed consumerism and the American character, artists in the 1920s and '30s were dealing with these themes in remarkably modern images marked by emotional restraint and 'cool' control.'

ENDS

▪ FURTHER INFORMATION:

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▪ NOTES TO EDITORS

Exhibition: AMERICA'S COOL MODERNISM
O'KEEFE TO HOPPER
Dates: 23 March–22 July 2018
Venue: Sainsbury Exhibition Galleries
Tickets: £12.25 / £11.25 concessions
www.ashmolean.org/tickets
Catalogue: £25
Press view: 22 March 2018

▪ PRESS IMAGES:

Images for editorial use are available to download at:

<http://bit.ly/2jeEfMy>

▪ CAPTIONS

Charles Demuth (1883–1935)
I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold, 1928
Oil, graphite, ink and gold leaf on paperboard, 90.2 x 76.2 cm
© Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Charles Sheeler (1883–1965)
Americana, 1931
Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 91.4 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
© Estate of Charles Sheeler

Edward Steichen (1879–1973)
Le Tournesol (The Sunflower), c. 1920
Tempera and oil on canvas, 92.1 x 81.9 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC
© 2017 The Estate of Edward Steichen / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Edward Hopper (1882–1967)
Manhattan Bridge Loop, 1928
Oil on canvas, 88.9 x 152.4 cm
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts
© The heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licenced by the Whitney Museum of American Art

▪ CREDITS

The exhibition is organised by the Ashmolean and the Terra Foundation for American Art and is curated by Dr Katherine Bourguignon of the Terra Foundation and Dr Xa Sturgis, Director of the Museum.

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TERRA

FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART

The Terra Foundation for American Art is dedicated to fostering exploration, understanding, and enjoyment of the visual arts of the United States for national and international audiences. Recognizing the importance of experiencing original works of art, the foundation provides opportunities for interaction and study, beginning with the presentation and growth of its own art collection in Chicago. To further cross-cultural dialogue on American art, the foundation supports and collaborates on innovative exhibitions, research, and educational programs. Implicit in such activities is the belief that art has the potential both to distinguish cultures and to unite them.

www.terraamericanart.org

Reciprocal loan to the Met, New York

The loan of eighteen paintings to AMERICA'S COOL MODERNISM from the Met follows a historic loan of the Ashmolean's Michelangelo drawings to New York for the exhibition, *Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman & Designer* (13 November 2018–12 February 2018). The Ashmolean has sent twenty-six Michelangelos from its collection of fifty-seven by the Renaissance master. Key works include designs for the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and the tomb of Pope Julius II; a stunning 'Ideal Head'; and studies of a crucifixion made at the end of Michelangelo's life.

www.metmuseum.org

AMERICAN COOL Arts Festival, May 2018

In May 2018 the Ashmolean and Blackwell's Bookshop have planned a month-long festival celebrating American culture of the 1920s–'40s. The programme includes the AMERICAN LiveFriday on 25 May; an 'American Lates' series where you can enjoy the exhibition, listen to music, and drink 1920s inspired cocktails; a film series with Curzon cinema; talks and performances at the Oxford Playhouse; and an American literature display at Blackwell's where artworks in the exhibition are matched with great American writing of the period.