

Florine Stettheimer's *New York/Liberty* (1918–19) is the earliest work in this gallery. Made to celebrate the end of World War I, the painting's striving verticality—evident in the soaring warplane, Lady Liberty's pose, and a skyscraper under construction—gestures optimistically toward the future. But only a decade later the picture of the United States would change drastically with the stock market crash of 1929, which signaled the most precipitous economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world. Artists responded to the dramatic changes wrought by the Great Depression with works depicting sites of production, scenes representing modernity, and portraits of the people reshaping the workforce. Alice Neel, who relentlessly studied the role of the individual in the larger culture, here portrays the labor leader Pat Whalen in 1935 as both a heroic everyman and a committed idealist. At the same time, Charles Sheeler, whose *River Rouge Plant* (1932) is on view, described American factories as the modern equivalent of the cathedral—"our substitute," he said, "for religious expression."

Sheeler's work is representative of Precisionism, a movement in which geometric rationalism and immaculately rendered surfaces signify the beauty and efficiency artists saw in the new industrial order. He painted *River Rouge Plant*, then the Ford Motor Company's most advanced factory with 75,000 employees, from photographs he took in 1927. By 1932, three years into the Depression, the absence of any workers would seem prophetic.

Alexander Calder moved to Paris in 1926 and began to fabricate dozens of tiny figures and props for an exuberant sculptural experiment with a circus as its subject. Making use of simple, readily available materials such as wire, wood, metal, cork, fabric, and string, he constructed ingeniously articulated animals, clowns, and acrobats. In total the elaborate *Cirque Calder*, or *Calder's Circus*, comprises more than seventy miniature figures and animals; nearly one hundred accessories such as nets, flags, carpets, and lamps; and over thirty musical instruments, phonographic records, and noisemakers. A low bed or crates would serve as the bleachers for Calder's audience, who ate peanuts and used noisemakers while the artist choreographed, directed, and performed the work, narrating the actions in English or French. Accompanied by music and lighting, performances sometimes lasted as long as two hours. *Calder's Circus* brought him renown in Paris as he staged it for artist colleagues and friends, including Piet Mondrian, Joan Miró, and Marcel Duchamp. The performances also introduced the kineticism (or movement) that would become the defining characteristic of Calder's art from the 1930s onward.

In 1961 Calder collaborated with the filmmaker Carlos Vilardebó to document what would be his last full performance of the work in *Le Cirque de Calder* (also on view). The groupings on display here have been selected from the complete ensemble and reflect specific circus acts and the approximate order in which they are presented in the film.

In 1942 Andrew Wyeth found a dead crow near his home in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and brought it to his studio to sketch. He later painted the bird as if it were still lying in a winter field, an evocative choice given the mounting casualties in the war then convulsing Europe. Landscapes have always expressed an artist's association with a particular place, but they can also signal personal and national narratives. This gallery presents works that complicate our understanding of the natural world and of how artists employ nature to explore human emotions, myths, fantasies, and politics. While some artists represented here paid homage to beloved sites with both invention and fidelity—as Marsden Hartley did with Maine—others, like Horace Pippin in *The Buffalo Hunt* (1933), crafted depictions of the natural world that fuse memories with images from popular culture, in his work a mythic American West. Other artists found something both visceral and abstract in nature, opening a space for a viewer's own experience. Georgia O'Keeffe, whose work is the focus of this gallery, looked to nature and its infinite details to enumerate the complexities of the self and the precariousness of both bodies and landscapes.

One of the most celebrated artists of the twentieth century, Edward Hopper was born in Nyack, New York, in 1882. He studied at the New York School of Art and then worked as a commercial illustrator before fully embarking on his painting practice in the early 1920s. Hopper is known as a quintessential American realist, but his paintings of street scenes, buildings, and interiors are enigmatic. His unconventional views and compositions frequently suggest an open-ended narrative, less descriptive of a place than suggestive of a mood or sensibility. The almost cinematic quality of his work is emphasized by simplified forms, deceptively placid painterly surfaces, dramatic light, and studiously constructed settings. Hopper's images often combined memories of a site with imaginary details. He once said of his work: "If you could say it in words there would be no reason to paint."

Hopper's long relationship with the Whitney began in 1920, when the then unknown artist received his first-ever solo exhibition at the Whitney Studio Club, the precursor to what would become the Museum. *Early Sunday Morning*, which Juliana Force and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney purchased in 1930, was a centerpiece of the Whitney Museum's inaugural exhibition and immediately became an icon of the collection.

This gallery explores the tension between realistic renderings and dreamlike subject matter in American artistic practices of the mid-twentieth century, a development often attributed to the influence of Surrealism—a European-born movement that emphasized the power of the unconscious—in New York during World War II. For Kay Sage, who was active in Surrealist circles in Paris before returning to the United States in 1940, this is undeniably true. But for other artists the role of the fantastic, ecstatic, or nonrational in their practices can be ascribed to living in a world altered by war, in cities experiencing an influx of new populations, and in a new commercial order where advertising deliberately targeted subliminal fears and desires. For artists reckoning with identity and displacement in this alienating period, sometimes the best recourse was to stop making sense. George Tooker, whose painting entitled *The Subway* (1950) is on view here, once said, “I am after painting reality impressed on the mind so hard that it returns as a dream.”

Jacob Lawrence's War Series evokes the regimentation, community, and displacement that the artist experienced firsthand while serving in the United States Coast Guard during World War II. Lawrence spent his first year of duty in St. Augustine, Florida, in a racially segregated unit where he was given the rank of steward's mate, the only one then available to Black Americans. He befriended a commander who shared his interest in art and went on to serve in an integrated regiment as an artist, documenting the war in Italy, England, Egypt, and India. Although almost all of the works from that time were lost, in 1946 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship to paint the War Series. The fourteen panels present a narrative that progresses from *Shipping Out* to *Victory* and testify to Lawrence's belief that one cannot "tell a story in a single painting."

In April 1950 a group of artists gathered at Studio 35, an artist-run space at 35 East Eighth Street in New York, for what would later be recognized as a defining moment in American art history. Artists including Willem de Kooning and Norman Lewis—represented in this gallery—debated the role of art in culture over the course of a series of closed-door discussions and adopted Abstract Expressionism as the umbrella term for their respective approaches. Others working outside of New York, such as Jay DeFeo, who was immersed in San Francisco’s Beat culture, similarly rejected conventional pictorial practices. Distrustful of artistic traditions, these artists nevertheless were indebted to aspects of, among other historical movements, Mexican muralism and European Surrealism as they sought to create a new painterly language. Rather than rely on representations that were legible to others, they deployed gesture and color to map an individual’s emotional territory and make inner visions outwardly visible. Yet history and culture can still intrude, sometimes violently. Lewis, one of the few Black artists associated with Abstract Expressionism, painted *American Totem* (1960) during the civil rights movement, a period of great hope but also a time of racial terror in the United States. The ghostly evocation of a Klansman stands as a reminder that some visions—and bodies—are more vulnerable than others.

In an interview with the critic Gene Swenson in 1963, Andy Warhol gave a typical deadpan response when asked what Pop art was: “It’s liking things.” By this formulation, Pop is an attitude. It is not fully defined by its adoption of commodities and celebrities as subject matter or by its embrace of commercial art techniques. More than half a century later, this understanding of Pop resounds with today’s contemporary culture, as social media has foregrounded “liking” as a tool for navigating the world. Yet while artists such as Warhol saw Pop as a way to hold up symbols of American culture like a mirror incapable of judgment, others, like Allan D’Arcangelo, whose work is on view here, addressed popular subjects with suspicion. His depiction of Jacqueline and Caroline Kennedy co-opts known source material, but he has altered the image in order to expose its complicated underpinnings and emotional resonances. These divergent approaches to Pop suggest the subtle but powerful distinctions between observing, celebrating, critiquing—and even liking.