At the Dawn of a New Age: Early Twentieth-Century American Modernism
Audio guide

800 Introduction
801 Aaron Douglas, Emperor Jones
803 Agnes Pelton, Sea Change
804 Elie Nadelman, Standing Female Figure
805 Arthur Dove, Plant Forms
806 Pamela Colman Smith, tarot cards and The Wave
807 Chiura Obata, Silence, Last Twilight [first rotation] and Untitled (Lakeshore) [second rotation]
808 Richmond Barthé, African Dancer
809 Florine Stettheimer, Sun
810 Georgia O'Keeffe, Music Pink and Blue
811 Marsden Hartley, Painting, Number 5
812 Stuart Davis, Egg Beater No. 1
813 Agnes Pelton, Ahmi in Egypt

800 Intro

Barbara Haskell: I'm Barbara Haskell. I'm a curator at the Whitney Museum and the curator of the exhibition *At the Dawn of a New Age: Early Twentieth-Century American Modernism*.

One of the ideas of the exhibition was to take a look at this explosion of energy that happened at the turn of the century, this idea that people were really at the dawn of something new, something that hadn't happened before. They're rejecting the past, and there was a sense of unlimited opportunity, unlimited possibilities. And the work reflects that through these bright colors and sensual shapes and exploding forms.

The show is also one that allows the Whitney to reassess its collection and to reassess the period the show will include famous artists like Georgia O'Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, artists that are fairly known to the public. But it will also include artists who were equally groundbreaking at that moment, but have been largely forgotten, and in some cases have been in storage for decades. There's some work in the exhibition that has only been shown once the entire time we've had it at the Museum. And we've also been able to use the exhibition as an occasion to acquire new work, to fill in the gaps that still exist. When the Whitney started to collect modernism they embraced essentially male artists, so that a lot of female artists, artists of color were not part of that collection even our collection now. This exhibition has given us a chance to look at those gaps and to begin to re-address them.

801 Aaron Douglas, Emperor Jones

Narrator: These woodblock prints were inspired by a commission Aaron Douglas received from *Theater Arts Monthly* to design a series of woodblock illustrations for the Eugene O'Neill play *Emperor Jones* in 1926. The play helped launch the career of actor, singer, and civil rights activist Paul Robeson, whose abstracted, powerful form appears in each of these images. The play tells the tale of Brutus Jones, an African American man and former Pullman porter. In the story, Jones is jailed for murder, but escapes to a small Caribbean island, where he becomes the emperor.

LeRonn Brooks: Here, Douglas captures the silhouette or the two-dimensional style of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic forms. And he also captures the physiognomy of Sub-Saharan African sculpture. He's capturing Robeson as the Emperor Jones in the Caribbean, but also Robeson as an African American.

Narrator: Writer and art historian LeRonn Brooks.

LeRonn Brooks: This aspect of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics is something that here we see Douglas use as a storytelling element. That this character is not just a character bound to this moment, but this character has a history that brings the weight of this particular situation. And so this is a colonial moment in which the Emperor Jones is the Emperor of an island that frees itself of the colonial powers. It also connects to the sort of power of the ancestral world.

In many ways, Aaron Douglas was before his time in the telling of African Americans having a deeper history than one of enslavement in the United States.

802 [Nancy Elizabeth Prophet – TK later in the exhibition when we can interview Jennie]

Narrator: Assistant curator Jennie Goldstein.

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803 Agnes Pelton, Sea Change

Carrie Moyer: I have been interested in Agnes Pelton for a really long time. I guess we would consider her a kind of transcendentalist painter from the mid-twentieth century. So it's this woman who's self-inventing the kind of spirituality that she wants to practice, and that becomes part of these paintings.

Narrator: The painter Carrie Moyer spoke to us about Agnes Pelton's *Sea Change.*

Carrie Moyer: Pelton's palette is really phenomenal in terms of it has a kind of like sweetness to it that feels so away or separated from things we think of as being from nature. Right? So everything is this very heightened, saturated color.

We don't know exactly where this is. We know that it's a sort of mental space, and the color tells us that because it doesn't seem to have a direct relationship to observation. It's this heightened sense of. It's almost like we're looking out from a cave or something into this really deep light, maybe dusk or something.

And then there's, one could call it a kind of art deco locomotive, but it's also like a cloud that has this crazy glowing head on it. So it feels like the term "sea change" is much more than talking about nature. Right? It's about a sort of change of morphing or something. I just think it's the most intriguing painting, because it's really hard to figure out where this form is in terms of the landscape. Is it like sitting on the horizon? Is it erupting? Is it gliding? It's doing all of those things.

804 Elie Nadelman, *Standing Female Figure* (2 sculptures by same name – label can go with either)

Narrator: These two sculptures by Elie Nadelman depict circus performers that appear in moments of introspection, not putting on a show. Earlier in his career, Nadelman had made sculpture out of wood. He began making sculptures like these out of a democratic desire to make his work affordable so it could reach a wider audience. Curator Barbara Haskell.

Barbara Haskell: He began to develop something called galvano-plastique, which is a technique where he made these hollow form plaster figures that were extensions of the wooden sculptures that he had made earlier in the in the decade and he coated them in a metal veneer, which gave them the look of metal, gave them the look of bronze, but were affordable.

Narrator: Nadelman's efforts to reach a broader audience failed spectacularly.

Barbara Haskell: I think the American public was uncomfortable with images that looked like them at that point; they weren't sure whether these were satiric or celebratory. And in reality they fell somewhere in between. This was, you know, an immigrant looking at a new culture and embracing it for its contradictions. But the American public at that point was still relatively conservative and insecure. They wanted something that would glorify themselves, not cast any doubt on their pretensions for social upward mobility.

805 Arthur Dove, Plant Forms

Narrator: In 1912, Arthur Dove exhibited a series of pastel drawings—including this one—at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery. In doing so, he became the first American artist to publicly embrace abstraction.

Barbara Haskell: Dove, like a lot of the artists within that circle, looked to nature forms as an antidote to the mechanized, kind of scientific basis that was in everyday life.

Narrator: Curator Barbara Haskell.

Barbara Haskell: There had been a lot of discoveries at the turn of the century—quantum physics, Einstein's theory of relativity, Freud's theory of the unconscious—all of those things that were challenging the idea that what we see is the true reality. Dove was one of those artists who looked at everyday life and didn't want to imitate it. He said, "I would rather look at nature than imitate it," and he began the search for the more elemental underlying forces, the kind of vital energies of nature. It was nature that was his subject—he saw it as an American idea, almost a transcendental idea, that through nature individuals can reach some sense of understanding wisdom, connection to the world. And those swelling forms that he introduced in *Plant Forms*, in the pastel in the Whitney's collection, he would continue to redefine and rework throughout his entire career.

806 Pamela Colman Smith, Tarot cards + The Wave

Narrator: The artist Pamela Colman Smith illustrated these Tarot cards in 1909. Today, it is the most popular deck used, with an estimated one hundred million copies in circulation. Tarot cards contain archetypal symbols, and are divided between the major arcana and minor arcana—arcana meaning “secrets.” The major arcana includes characters like the Fool, the Magician, and the Devil, as well as forces such as the Wheel of Fortune. The minor arcana are numbered, and are divided into Wands, Pentangles, Cups, and Swords. They’re meant to be shuffled and read as a form of divination, depending on which cards are drawn. For many people, though, they simply offer an opportunity for psychological reflection.

Melissa Staiger: Hi, I'm Melissa Staiger. I co-curated an art exhibit about Pamela Colman Smith at the Pratt Library in 2019 with Colleen Lynch.

Each of these cards has so many details. I actually don't know how she did this deck in such a short time. It's like a genius quality to symbolically place all these small little details on the cards. I'm always learning something new off her deck.

Narrator: These details guide readers in interpreting the cards’ narrative. As an artist, Smith was well-suited to being in the role of a storyteller. She was heavily involved in theater, including costume and set design. She also staged her own performances of folktales from Jamaica, where she had grown up. Like many artists around the turn of the century, she became interested in mysticism, and developed a personal form of spirituality. Her otherworldly approach is also reflected in a watercolor called *The Wave*, on view nearby. Grieving figures rise up out of the ocean, their robes seeming to trail into the waves.

Melissa Staiger: In her works, we start to see figures becoming elements like mountains here. We see them as water. When I'm thinking of the symbols in the tarot, you know, they're elemental.

807 Chiura Obata, Silence, Last Twilight on an Unknown Lake [first rotation]

Narrator: In the summer of 1927, the artist Chiura Obata spent six weeks camping in Yosemite National Park, sketching and making watercolors. A year later, he wrote about the trip in a Californian Japanese-language newspaper. His words show that he was as inspired by the details of the landscape as he was by Yosemite's grandeur. He wrote:

"Adorning the heights of the Sierra range are the wildflowers. Every three to seven days they bloom in white, red, yellow, and purple, bursting out in a kaleidoscope of beauty and giving us untold lessons and valuable experiences. The seeds and roots of the wildflowers find a bed of ground in between the rocks. For eight or nine months of the year they patiently lie buried under several feet of snow. In the warm light of July and August they burst out toward the wide sky."

Obata had emigrated to the United States in 1903. By his first visit to Yosemite in 1927, he had become a prominent figure in the San Francisco art world. He made this woodblock print as part of a larger portfolio while on a return trip to Japan in 1930. In part, he drew on traditional Japanese woodblock printing practices. At the same time, he re-created the improvisatory freedom of his original watercolor sketches—taking an atmospheric approach that was more associated with western modernism. He developed innovative techniques for carving the appearance of brushwork into the wooden printing blocks. The process was quite complex, with each of the work's subtle color gradations made up by different blocks of wood for each color.

The article by Obata that we've quoted here was translated in the book *Obata's Yosemite*, published by the Yosemite Conservancy.

807 Chiura Obata, Untitled (Lakeshore) [second rotation]

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Narrator: During the 1920s, the artist Chiura Obata traveled all over California, painting its diverse landscape. He was particularly inspired by scenes of fog or mist like the one he found at this lake in Alma, near Santa Cruz. He depicted such atmospheric scenes using an experimental “wet on wet” technique—applying liquid sumi ink to a wet support, in this case silk.

Obata had emigrated to San Francisco in 1903. It was a time of extreme xenophobia and anti-Japanese sentiment. Two years after his arrival the *San Francisco Chronicle* argued that North America needed to be “cleansed” of Japanese presence. Like many fellow Japanese immigrants, Obata experienced random assaults.

Through most of his first two decades in the United States, Obata had worked mostly for Japanese-language newspapers and magazines. He entered California’s contemporary art scene in 1921, co-founding the East-West Society, a group of artists from diverse backgrounds who were dedicated to the intersections of Japanese art and modernism. After participating in several successful group and solo shows, Obata joined the faculty of the University of California in Berkeley, where he taught sumi ink drawing and discussed Zen-inspired philosophy. Despite his popularity as a professor and his growing success as an artist, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1942, he was declared an enemy alien and incarcerated. He began art schools in each of the two camps where he was detained. After his release, he refocused his artistic efforts on more strictly traditional Japanese techniques.

808 Richmond Barthé, African Dancer

Narrator: This sculpture of an African dancer is by the artist Richmond Barthé.

Margaret Rose Vendryes: He is the only African American sculptor of his era who worked on the nude. The only one. It was quite daring.

Narrator: Margaret Rose Vendryes is a painter and author of *Barthé: A Life in Sculpture.*

Margaret Rose Vendryes: There was almost a restriction on using the nude because of all of the difficulties that have come out of this sort of hypersexualization of Black people during that time. And so Barthé, he took some risks, and he leaned in on his classical training to say that the nude is the standard, and that Black figures should be represented within the standard.

Narrator: Barthé made a number of these African Dancers during the 1930s. Like this one, they all stand on a circular form.

Margaret Rose Vendryes: And that is an indication that it is a spotlight, that it's a stage performance. But of course, at least in New York, which is where he was when he made this, you would not have seen a performance of a near nude African woman on stage publicly. That would not have happened.

Narrator: Barthé never went to Africa, and would have based this figure on photographic research.

Margaret Rose Vendryes: I did a lot of research on when would a woman appear dancing with that kind of long covering on her? There are some celebrations and rituals where they're actually pieces of metal. So when they dance, there is a pretty loud sound that comes with it. But the closer you look at it, to me they look like leaves that are covered there. And that is a sign of a woman in mourning. And that matches up with the sort of possession, the posture of her head, the gesture on her face, that it does look like we are witnessing someone in mourning.

809 Florine Stettheimer, Sun

Barbara Haskell: Florine Stettheimer was part of a family of a matriarch and three sisters.

Narrator: Curator Barbara Haskell.

Barbara Haskell: They lived in New York,they established a salon—they entertained Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Stella, all the figures that were part of the avant garde at that moment. And she was very beloved by that group. She didn't have a lot of public exposure. She had one exhibition in 1917 of very early work that was not so well received. And she decided after that to never have a one person show. And she didn't need to because she came from a wealthy family and she had all the money that she needed.

In the work, she develops this very unusual style that captures the kind of tinsel glamour and the artifice of the 1920s. There's a sense of carefree abandonment that she has in her work. Those kind of confectionery colors that's in *Sun*.

Narrator: Stettheimer signed the work near the bottom, using only her first name—Florine. There's a sense of intimacy in this move that makes sense for a painting made for a small audience of esteemed friends. But by linking the bouquet of flowers to her own name—with its floral roots—Stettheimer also suggests that the painting is a kind of self portrait.

810 Georgia O’Keeffe, Music Pink and Blue

Narrator: With its soft, petal-like folds, this painting by Georgia O’Keeffe seems floral—but it doesn’t depict any particular flower. It’s an abstraction that the artist has rooted in natural form.

Wanda Corn: One of the features of this painting is the beautiful sense of movement that you have where nothing is static in the picture.

Narrator: Wanda Corn is a historian of American art.

Wanda Corn: You feel as if every form is breathing and opening up to the form next to it. This was a very important concept of keeping forms in the stage of becoming. This was something that artists tried to do in their abstractions in the late teens, and O'Keeffe is responding to that notion of time not stopping, of there being a constant movement in the work itself.

When these paintings were seen for the first time, very often critics would see in them female forms. They would see in it allusions to the womb or to female reproductive organs. They would see womanly colors such as the pinks, the blues and the lavender. And it would be read as a painting that was one that could only have been made by a female intelligence.
This was a common way of talking about O'Keeffe's paintings in her early years. It was one that was prompted by her husband Alfred Stieglitz who liked to read in O'Keeffe's paintings an expression of the sort of eternal female.

O'Keeffe herself felt as if that was more a comment on the critic than what she intended. She often would say it's about natural forms, but it's not to be tied to exclusively the female body. And she would have you rather see in a work like this a kind of slipperiness of form where you can't tie it to any one thing, be it a flower or be it a female body or be it a landscape. But that it has poetic allusions to all of those.

811 Marsden Hartley, Painting, Number 5

Narrator: Adam Weinberg is Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney Museum.

Adam Weinberg: *Painting Number Five*, by Marsden Hartley, is an exuberant cacophony of color and pattern. Near the center of the canvas, two circles overlap—one contains the German Iron Cross, a medal of valor awarded to German soldiers for their courage in battle. The other contains a red cross. Look carefully and you can find references to flags, military insignia, and even an army uniform. The effect is like a collage, combining impressions of things Hartley encountered in Berlin, where he lived before the start of the First World War.

What is the real subject of this painting? Think about how you recall things that have happened to you in the past. Often, it's hard to conjure up a sense of something in its entirety. We remember a person or an event in the details—a gesture, a smell, a color. Hartley's paintings function that way too; it's *actually* a portrait, although the literal image of an actual person is altogether absent. The painting commemorates a young German officer, Karl von Freyburg, who died in the early months of World War I. Hartley was in love with von Freyburg, and he made this painting after learning of his death.

Inspired by European avant-garde artists of the time, Hartley began to move away from direct representations of his subject matter toward more abstract, evocative imagery. Hartley once said that the artist's challenge was to reveal what he called "the magic that is beneath the surface of what the eye sees." In this painting, he captures a sense of an individual personality, and the emotional content of his relationship to Berlin and to von Freyburg.

~~The semi-abstract style of Hartley's painting means that we have to struggle a bit to decode its meaning. If you'd like to hear about it, please tap the button to continue.~~

812 Stuart Davis, Egg Beater No. 1

Narrator: In 1927, Stuart Davis began work on a series of five paintings based on a still life he had created by nailing an eggbeater, an electric fan, and a rubber glove to a table in his studio. In *Egg Beater No. 1*, Davis eliminated all recognizable traces of the still life objects—leaving only this complex composition of colors and overlapping geometric shapes. But as he later explained, he resisted the idea of abstraction.

Stuart Davis: I have never regarded myself as an abstract artist. Personally I felt that the idea of talking about “abstract” art had many dangerous and misleading implications. It cut off the real fact that what is interesting in any painting is its specific references, which however they may differ with different people who look at the painting, are nevertheless specific. And to call those specific things abstract always worked the wrong way with me. As to the content of it, I regard the fact that I give importance to simple things that give me pleasure, that is the content that has validity with me.

813 Agnes Pelton, Ahmi in Egypt

Carrie Moyer: Agnes Pelton's *Ahmi in Egypt* from 1931 gives the sense of a kind of film still. It has ~~again~~ this kind of glowing light and really hard shadows.

Narrator: Artist Carrie Moyer.

Carrie Moyer: So we're looking at something that is silhouetted. We assume it's a kind of hillside or some abutment with this fantastic—I almost want to say extension or some kind of flower—that's glowing to the left, with the swan in the foreground. It's so grandiose in this interesting way.

This painting was made a few years after Tutankhamun's tomb was found this idea about ancient Egypt, and the fascination that designers and artists had with ancient Egypt, feeds into the ideas around art deco and the aesthetics of art deco. You can see this in the painting because everything in it is incredibly rounded and stylized, there's something obviously magical about this. It feels a little bit more descriptive than some of her other paintings, which tend to be more abstract. So this feels like it's part of a fairytale, or some kind of encampment or something where the protagonists are off to the left, but the colors in it are completely saturated and vibrant, and for that reason really unusual for this time.

Norman Lewis, American Totem

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Narrator: In *American Totem*, Norman Lewis painted most of the canvas a deep, velvety black. This background sets the stage for brushy, white shapes. They're ambiguous—they could suggest bones, or faces, or ghosts. Some observers have compared the triangular shape at the top to the hoods worn by members of the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist hate group. But it was important for Lewis that the readings of his work remained open. And he believed that even if he painted abstractly, some of what he felt as a politically active Black artist would come through. He spoke to the Archives of American Art in 1968.

Norman Lewis: I used to paint Negroes being dispossessed, discrimination, and slowly I became aware of the fact that this didn't move anybody. I found the only way to solve anything was to go out and take some kind of physical action. I find that civil rights affects me, so what am I going to paint, what am I going to do. I don't know. I am sure it will have nothing to do with civil rights directly but possibly I just hope that I can materialize something out of all this frustration as a Black artist in America. I think it has to come from Black artists.

I was born in New York, Harlem. Somebody said violence is as homogenous as apple pie to America. And this is true, you know, but we don't realize it. White America is so goddamn aggressive that it negates anything that gets in its way.

[Oral history interview with Norman Lewis, 1968 July 14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.]