

No One Exists Alone

The subjects of family and community took new prominence during a period when migration became a hallmark of the American experience. Artists such as John Steuart Curry and Arshile Gorky used painting to conjure people and formative experiences from childhood. Curry evoked the rural Kansas of his youth, while Gorky painted the mother he lost in the Armenian genocide. Other artists, like James Van Der Zee, created pictures during the Harlem Renaissance that, countering a history of racist depictions, show the dignity of Black families and communities. PaJaMa (the name assumed by Paul Cadmus, Jared French, and Margaret French for their collaborative photographs) gave visibility to queer relationships that continue, in our time, to demonstrate the commonality of love and to enrich our understanding of what family and community mean.

The Furniture of Home

From a site of retreat to a repository for the objects with which we identify, the home can serve as a window into the period when an artwork was made, a stand-in for its inhabitants, or a symbol of the class of its residents. Works that depict ordinary objects—for example, a stove in James Castle’s drawings or in a painting by Beauford Delaney—suggest that each of us sees our own home uniquely: even though our things might be in common, our experiences of them are not. These works call into question what a term like *everyday life* means. The home’s interior also can act as a metaphor for the space of fantasy. Edward Hopper’s *A Woman in the Sun* (1961) and Henry Koerner’s *Mirror of Life* (1946) use the domestic scene to stage the rich inner life of each painting’s protagonist. Hopper’s *New York Interior* (c. 1921) captures the privacy and intimacy that being at home can afford while other works in this gallery acknowledge that a traditional home is not a given. Depictions of the incarcerated and the displaced reveal the domestic lives of a large, if underrepresented, American population. The works on view here raise questions about what home looks like and how it makes us who we are.

The Strength of Collective Man

During the first half of the twentieth century, the United States continued its transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, experienced an unprecedented economic downturn, and recovered as the nation entered World War II. American artists responded to this seismic moment in the history of labor with works that portray the sites of production, scenes of working, and the individuals who constituted the workforce. John Steuart Curry's *The Stockman* (1929) presents the keeper of livestock as heroically as it does the animals that are his products and domain. Charles Sheeler's pristine 1932 depiction of the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge Plant in Dearborn, Michigan, celebrates American industry even if it obscures the labor of the American worker. Isaac Soyler's *Employment Agency*, painted in 1937 as the United States was attempting to pull itself out of the Great Depression, shows the tedious and frequently dispiriting work of trying to find a job. In his second inaugural address, given in the same year that Soyler's painting was made, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said: "In our personal ambitions we are individualists. But in our seeking for economic and political progress as a nation, we all go up or else all go down as one people." By making labor a central theme of artistic production, American artists also were asserting themselves as fellow workers at a time of collective national effort.

In a Euphoric Dream

George Washington characterized the United States as a “great experiment,” but it also could be described as a collective dream—a gathering of diverse, and sometimes competing, aspirations, beliefs, symbols, and histories. Artists working in this country have looked to these symbols to study the nation’s history and their contemporary moment. Jasper Johns famously disclosed that the idea for painting an American flag came to him in a dream. The emblem remains potent and is part of our collective consciousness. Artists also have rendered the individuals—both unsung and eminent—who have fought for it. Daniel Chester French’s *Standing Lincoln* (1912) memorializes a figure whose actions during the Civil War guided how the United States might endure. In Herman Trunk Jr.’s 1932 depiction of Washington’s family home, Mount Vernon, the building is pulled apart to reveal another version within its walls. A surreal painting of a real place, it affirms that the dream and the reality of the nation are inseparable.

Of Eros and Dust

Searching for alternatives to what many saw as a culture of materialism and war, some American artists sought recourse in spirituality and mysticism. Rather than making particular declarations of faith, the artists represented in this gallery embraced the spiritual through the symbolic, the sublime, the natural, and the abstract. Charles Burchfield, who worked in Ohio and upstate New York, looked to nature for feelings of ecstasy and dread similar to those that religion stirred in him. Painted at the scale of a Renaissance altarpiece, with Gothic elements that evoke medieval churches, Joseph Stella's 1939 meditation on the Brooklyn Bridge endows the secular with divinity. Clyfford Still, whose monumental painting from 1956 is on view in this gallery, once said: "I never wanted color to be color. I never wanted texture to be texture, or images to become shapes. I wanted them all to fuse into a living spirit." For Still and the others whose work is shown here, art and the world remain domains of mystery, awe, and wonder.