The Era of the Dust Bowl

September 6th, – October 5th, 2013

“A few good years, with good prices, would be followed by too many horrid years and massive die-offs from drought and winter freeze-ups.”

The Era of the Dust Bowl

Feeling detached from the European avant-garde and chastened by the Great Depression, many American artists of the 1930s turned to local, often quintessentially American subjects depicted in easily accessible styles. Collectively these artists were dubbed the American Scene Painters. In many ways their work was an extension of the genre painting that flourished in America in the mid-19th century and provides a valuable visual record of American life. They were in fact engaged in a continuing search, one that had existed since the country’s birth, for an artistic identity independent from European models. The much less populist and nationalistic style of Abstract Expressionism would finally bring sought after international recognition to American artists during the 1950s. Sometimes referred to as Regionalism with conservative rural values and imagery or Social Realism with urban scenes and left-leaning political views, American Scene Painting was intended to be appreciated and understood by the common man and was thus by definition anti-modernist and anti-abstractionist. Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) along with Grant Wood (1891-1942) of American Gothic fame, are perhaps the best remembered of these artists today. Regionalist artists are well represented in the twenty-two lithographs from the Grant Arnold Collection of Fine Art Prints seen here. Thomas Hart Benton’s She’ll be Comin’ Round the Mountain, Ozark Musicians, 1931, though appearing stylistically “modern”, with its dynamic, undulating forms, in fact harkens back to the artist's training with French art when he was a student in Paris, starting around 1908. Benton was an avowed, outspoken anti-modernist. Here Benton celebrates the folk music and social life of the Ozark region. Appropriate to the music and dancing depicted, each form is enlivened and seems to embody motion; no area of the composition seems unaffected by this spirit of communal joy.

Charles Cecil Pollock (1902-1988) was originally committed to the Regionalist style and ideals but, like his younger brother Jackson, he later abandoned it in favor of an abstract approach. Both also studied painting with Thomas Hart Benton. In Skull in a Western Landscape, 1931-32, Pollock places a sun-bleached cow skull unnervingly close to the viewer with a low point of view surveying the arid landscape. Unlike Benton, Pollock acknowledges the human trials of the era; though a rancher is not pictured, his misfortune is suggested by the loss of valuable livestock.

The federal government began several relief programs that directly benefited artists during the Great Depression. Feeling detached from the European avant-garde and chastened by the Great Depression, many American artists of the 1930s turned to local, often quintessentially American subjects depicted in easily accessible styles. Collectively these artists were dubbed the American Scene Painters. In many ways their work was an extension of the genre painting that flourished in America in the mid-19th century and provides a valuable visual record of American life. They were in fact engaged in a continuing search, one that had existed since the country’s birth, for an artistic identity independent from European models. The much less populist and nationalistic style of Abstract Expressionism would finally bring sought after international recognition to American artists during the 1950s. Sometimes referred to as Regionalism with conservative rural values and imagery or Social Realism with urban scenes and left-leaning political views, American Scene Painting was intended to be appreciated and understood by the common man and was thus by definition anti-modernist and anti-abstractionist. Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) along with Grant Wood (1891-1942) of American Gothic fame, are perhaps the best remembered of these artists today. Regionalist artists are well represented in the twenty-two lithographs from the Grant Arnold Collection of Fine Art Prints seen here. Thomas Hart Benton’s She’ll be Comin’ Round the Mountain, Ozark Musicians, 1931, though appearing stylistically “modern”, with its dynamic, undulating forms, in fact harkens back to the artist's training with French art when he was a student in Paris, starting around 1908. Benton was an avowed, outspoken anti-modernist. Here Benton celebrates the folk music and social life of the Ozark region. Appropriate to the music and dancing depicted, each form is enlivened and seems to embody motion; no area of the composition seems unaffected by this spirit of communal joy.

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