



Guy Pène du Bois

Left: **Mother and Daughter**, 1928

Right: **Father and Son**, 1929

Facing page:

Louis Schanker

The Ten Whitney Dissenters, 1938

Color woodcut, 16⁷/₈ x 12¹/₈ (42.9 x 30.8)

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Modernities and Realities

Peter Wollen

The triumph of modernism in the visual arts did not entail the end of realism, even though the rhetoric of modernism often seemed to suggest that realism's demise could be the only logical outcome. In fact, realism—taken in the broad sense—has flourished throughout the twentieth century, both in Europe and in the United States, the heartlands of modernity. Its survival in the heyday of modernism has certainly depended on its somewhat slippery ability to present itself as something else—often enough, as a variant of modernism, as it did in the case of *Neue Sachlichkeit* or Mexican muralism or Surrealism or Pop Art. In fact, I would argue, the more art moved toward abstraction and the more artists tried to avoid the representation of recognizable objects, the more realism clung on and came back knocking at the door—as an inevitable return of the repressed.

There is no doubt that art in the twentieth century has been concerned to find new ways of representing the world. However, one of the constant assumptions of modernism has been that our mode of perceiving the world has changed with the world itself—that the experience of living in a great city, of traveling at unprecedented speed, of encountering constant change and contrast, of being bombarded with man-made images on billboards and on TV sets, that all the myriad ways in which modernity has been articulated visually have made it necessary for artists to represent the world in new, unprecedented, and initially disorienting forms. If we take “realism” simply to mean a traditional vision of the world, then realism and modernism will be incompatible. But if we take “realism” to include the creation of new modes of representation to grasp the new visual reality in which we live, then much of modernism simply becomes a new mode of realism, one more appropriate to the twentieth century.

The standard history of American modernism, looked at schematically, begins with the Stieglitz circle, reaches its first breakthrough with the Armory Show in 1913, which is followed by Duchamp's impact on the Arensberg circle. Then it peaks prematurely in the 1920s with the work of a fresh cohort of artists influenced by Cubism and the machine aesthetic, before going into recession during the 1930s (seen as a period of realist reaction). For a while, nothing much happens until the appearance of such groups as the Whitney Ten (1935) and American Abstract Artists (1936). Then, during World War II, the whole climate changes completely, due in part to the impact of Surrealist abstraction; soon afterwards, Abstract Expressionism is launched. Meanwhile, Rauschenberg and



Johns appear on the scene. Then, during the sixties, Pop Art contends for supremacy with Color Field painting, Minimalism, Serialism, and a number of other trends. Eventually, Conceptual Art clears the field for the rise of the new genres which dominate the American art world today—installation, performance, photography, video, etc.—a process punctuated by recurrent revivals of both figurative and abstract painting and an increasingly reflexive postmodernism.

Of course, this “history” is very crude, but it has a certain logic, founded on the idea that the destiny of American modernism was to make a clean break with a persistent, indigenous attachment to realism, in order to overtake and surpass an exhausted French modernism. Once this was achieved, realism could be readmitted into the modernist canon in such intrinsically American forms as Pop Art and Photo-Realism, or simply as the work of gifted artists, ranging from Leon Golub to Cindy Sherman. What is immediately striking is the inconsistency inherent in the refusal to acknowledge the modernity



John Sloan
**The Hawk
(Yolande in
Large Hat), 1910**

of realism before Pollock, while happily admitting it afterwards. In this context, it is provoking to see how Edward Hopper, for example, was successfully rehabilitated as a precursor of this new American “postrealism,” whereas the early Ashcan School painters and then the thirties social protest painters and Magic Realists were not, even though they might easily be viewed as precursors of, respectively, Leon Golub and Cindy Sherman.

Let’s begin by looking at Hopper. Hopper was a pupil of Robert Henri, the acknowledged leader of The Eight (who were not dubbed the Ashcan School until 1934). The group’s landmark exhibition at the Macbeth Galleries in 1908 drew a sharp dividing line between a journalistic and an academic version of realism. I say “journalistic” advisedly. The core of The Eight came, as did Henri, from Philadelphia, where they had begun as newspaper illustrators for the Philadelphia press. William Glackens worked for the *Record*, George Luks and Everett Shinn worked for the *Press*, John Sloan for the *Inquirer*. The work these men did was threatened by the advent of newspaper photography, and they wisely reoriented themselves as professional artists, under Henri’s tutelage. To launch themselves, they joined forces with three other painters, Arthur B. Davies, Ernest Lawson, and Maurice Prendergast, who had been influenced by “advanced” French painting—Symbolism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism.

The Philadelphia group carried their reporters’ habits and impulses into the New York

art world. They went out on the beat, so to speak, to sketch moments of city life, which they then worked up, following the guidelines learned from Henri, into finished oil paintings. In particular, they often painted subjects that were considered sordid and, as a result, were under constant attack from guardians of morals and proponents of censorship. In a sense, they were the Mapplethorpes and Goldins of their day. The Macbeth Galleries exhibition launched them in the New York art world and their influence proved long-lasting, mainly through Henri's continued activity as a teacher. Among his students were Edward Hopper, George Bellows, Stuart Davis, Guy Pène du Bois, and Rockwell Kent, as well as Morgan Russell and Patrick Henry Bruce, who later gravitated toward abstraction.

This second generation remained fascinated with everyday life, particularly city life, but frequently with a more modernist inflection, as was the case with Hopper, who listed himself as an "illustrator" in the New York city directory while he learned how to manipulate converging lines and areas of color to pinpoint his human figures. Stuart Davis and Rockwell Kent also became dominant figures in the thirties, when they each played an important role in the artists' politics of the day. I don't think there is any doubt that Davis was the most ambitious member of this group, the only one who eventually succeeded in fusing the Ashcan School subjects drawn from city life and popular culture with a personal post-Cubist idiom. In fact, Davis ended up, in the 1950s, as a premature Pop artist. Like Bellows, his career was grounded in his early illustrations for *The Masses* and *Harper's Weekly* (for which Sloan and Shinn also worked) back in 1913, but unlike Bellows he was deflected away from Ashcan realism by his experience of the Armory Show.

Reginald Marsh studied with Sloan and Luks at the Art Students League in the early 1920s, but was most influenced by another teacher, Kenneth Hayes Miller, who was more concerned with the rendering of volume in a shallow space. Philip Evergood, a leading Social Realist painter of the thirties (though American, he was educated in England at Eton and Cambridge), also studied under Luks on his return to America in 1923. Among other painters who emerged in the thirties, Isabel Bishop studied with Miller and Guy Pène du Bois, Moses Soyer was taught by both Henri and Bellows, and his twin brother, Raphael Soyer, by Pène du Bois. Thus the legacy of The Eight passed directly into the thirties, where it became a basic constituent of the social protest painting which emerged in the period of the New Deal and the Popular Front.

The other major ingredient in thirties Social Realist painting was the legacy of Mexican muralism. It is often forgotten how important Mexico was to American artists in the inter-war period. Due largely to the efforts of José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, Mexican painting became a model of how to combine modernism with social protest realism. And the Mexican artists also worked in the sphere of journalism, providing illustrations for the Communist *El Machete* just as American artists did for *The Masses* and *The New Masses*. Moreover, Mexican muralism was the inspiration for the state-sponsored WPA mural program which formed the centerpiece of New Deal

policy for the visual arts. Finally, all three of *los tres grandes* worked for a considerable time in the United States and produced major work both on the West Coast and in the Northeast, including New York. Rivera's prestige was such that, despite his revolutionary Marxism, he worked successively for the San Francisco Stock Exchange Club, Edsel Ford, and finally Nelson Rockefeller.

Primarily, the Mexican muralists influenced the Social Realist artists—leading disciples were the artists of the Coit Tower murals in San Francisco or Ben Shahn in New York. Yet, ultimately, the most successful disciples of the Mexicans were two artists and old friends from Los Angeles—Philip Guston and Jackson Pollock, who eventually turned to abstraction. During the thirties, Guston was an extremely successful figurative painter—his 1937–38 *Bombardment* is a masterpiece of protest art. Guston painted a mural in Mexico, with his friend Reuben Kadish, under Siqueiros' sponsorship, and Pollock worked in Siqueiros' New York studio in the mid-1930s. Pollock also studied under Thomas Hart Benton, the nearest North American equivalent to the Mexicans, who began as an illustrator of Leo Huberman's *We The People*, but moved from the left toward the right as the thirties progressed, leaving New York for his native Kansas in 1935 and becoming a leader of the Regionalist school, or American Scene painters. Pollock later spoke of his turn to abstraction as a reaction against Benton's overpowering influence on him in earlier years, which evoked a necessary aesthetic counterforce.

Mexico, however, also attracted artists who had nothing to do with muralism or social protest, including both Marsden Hartley and Milton Avery, who lived there for a time during the early thirties and mid-forties, respectively. Hartley began his career in the Stieglitz circle, together with Dove and O'Keeffe, and like them eventually turned away from New York. His Mexican paintings are visionary landscapes, painted in bright, saturated colors, full of the "soil-and-spirit" ethos which Stieglitz came to propagate. Avery also responded to Mexico as a colorist with a series of paintings in a vivid and schematized neo-Fauvist style. For these artists, Mexico (like Taos for O'Keeffe) was a way of escaping not simply New York, but the Depression and the stress and strain of art world politics. In their work, Mexico is not the site of politics and revolution; rather, it is an overwhelming spectacle of color, reminiscent, in its way, of Matisse's vision of Morocco.

Avery had been a friend of Mark Rothko since the end of the twenties; they had even exhibited together. Avery, it now seems, passed on his preoccupation with color to Rothko. Around the same time, Rothko met Adolph Gottlieb and introduced him to Avery. In 1935, Rothko and Gottlieb were instrumental in founding a group known as The Ten, whose joint exhibitions culminated in 1938 with a show titled "The Ten Whitney Dissenters." In their publicity for the show, they accused the Whitney of supporting the "reputed equivalence of American painting and literal painting" and protested that "the symbol of the silo is in the ascendant at our Whitney Museum of modern American art"—implying that the Whitney had surrendered to the forces of Regionalism, American Scene painting, and



Philip Guston
Bombardment, 1937–38
 Oil on wood, 46 (116.8) diameter
 Private collection; courtesy McKee
 Gallery, New York

a conservative realist pastoralism. Soon Rothko and Gottlieb would join forces with Surrealist-influenced painters, such as Baziotes, Motherwell, and Pollock, to launch a new wave of abstraction.

The Whitney Museum was indeed preponderantly realist in its early years. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney had been the main buyer at the Macbeth exhibition of The Eight, and her protégé, Juliana Force, followed the same line. Force had originally been Gertrude Whitney's secretary, but, in time, she was appointed first as manager of all the Whitney art activities (building Gertrude Whitney's collection and running the Whitney Studio Club, with its own library, billiard table, life class, and program of exhibitions) and then as director of the new Whitney Museum, which opened in 1931. The Whitney Studio Club had no explicit policy, but in effect it was a gathering point for the Ashcan painters and their second-generation students. By the end of the twenties, Mrs. Whitney and Juliana Force had expanded their purview to include the painters who later formed the core of the Regionalists—Benton and John Steuart Curry, although they resisted Grant Wood for a considerable time. Stieglitz's antipathy to the Whitney Studio Club enterprise had left gaps in Mrs. Whitney's collection, which she filled in by buying work by Stieglitz artists Demuth and O'Keeffe for the new Whitney Museum. She also splurged on Bellows' *Dempsey and Firpo*, hanging it on the main staircase for the opening. (It cost her \$18,750, the highest price the Whitney paid for any work until 1960).

Gradually, the Whitney spread beyond the boundaries of the old Club habitués to justify its role as a museum of American, rather than Greenwich Village art. However, neither

Mrs. Whitney nor Juliana Force ever really adapted to the changes that overwhelmed the New York art world during the thirties. Neither woman had any interest in politics and resented the politicization of art. Conversely, they had little concern with the new European trends—such as purist abstraction or Surrealism—that were beginning to make an impact on artists in New York, largely as a result of Alfred Barr's Museum of Modern Art, which, unlike the Whitney, specialized in modernist art—albeit European rather than American. Battle lines were being drawn on both aesthetic and political grounds as New York embarked on the turbulent period which would finally lead to the triumph of Abstract Expressionism. At this point, the Whitney simply opted out.

It was not till 1945 and 1946 that the Whitney finally showed Rothko for the first time, along with Pollock and Motherwell. By then, Force had made contact with James Johnson Sweeney and come to realize that she had to adapt, if only for the sake of appearances. When abstract art triumphed in the forties and fifties, realism was tarred with the brush of “nativism,” “isolationism,” and “reaction.” As a result of the battle between right and left within the art world, realist painting was associated negatively first with Fascism and then subsequently with Communism, once the latter had lost its appeal following the Great Purge and the Hitler-Stalin pact; the association of realism with Communism then continued into the cold war years. This diagnosis of the political meaning of realism and modernism had a grain of truth, but it by no means told the whole story.

As we look at the history of art in the twentieth century, we can see that abstract artists were not necessarily on the left and realist artists were not necessarily Fascists or Stalinists. Both left and right articulated their points of view in many different ways. Similarly, abstraction could be the medium for inner-directed mysticism as well as for the machine aesthetic, for wild romanticism as well as severe classicism, for utopian radicalism as well as decorative formalism. Realism could be socially critical (as with the Ashcan School) or celebratory (as with Pop Art). America, however, never had an avant-garde in the European sense—a coherent group with both a political and an artistic program, like that of the Constructivists or the Surrealists, until the advent of Conceptual Art in the late sixties, when a true aesthetic revolution coincided with intense politicization of the art world.

In fact, Conceptual Art refigured the concept of artistic practice itself and thus made the whole discussion between realists and abstractionists completely irrelevant. Up until that point, America had a long, zigzagging period of modernization, of learning from France, competing with France, and eventually surpassing France. But if history followed Pollock rather than Bacon, Dubuffet, or CoBrA, it was because Pollock's originality came at the right time politically and economically—a time when American power was being asserted with means far more potent than those which art could ever muster. But even the triumph of American abstraction was not the end of the story. Painters like Philip Guston passed through abstraction only to abandon it again and return to figuration. Alice Neel,

a social protest artist in the thirties who painted the portraits of Communist militants and union organizers, reemerged in the sixties as a “New Realist,” painting curator Henry Geldzahler and art star Andy Warhol.

As we look at the art of the twentieth century from the vantage of a new millennium, what will probably strike us is not the end of realism, but the decline of easel painting. Easel painting was undermined by a number of seemingly disparate forces—photography, muralism, Pollock’s fateful decision to put his canvas on the floor, the monumentalization of the art work, Warhol’s silkscreens, and, above all, by Conceptual Art and the “new genres,” including photography. Some of these forces threatened the idea of realism. Others did not. Some, like the acceptance of photography as fine art, equal in status to painting, and the use of slide projectors as tools, have actually promoted a new taste for realism. We should think carefully about the great revolution in the canon that modernism itself ushered in—a revolution that stripped prestige and value from painters like Gérôme and Puvis de Chavannes, Leighton and Moore, Whistler and Sargent. Can we be entirely sure that Gottlieb or Rothko will not be devalued in the same way as the *pompier*s? When the canon changes again, as it surely must, will Juliana Force and the Whitney be vindicated? The process of reevaluation begins with exhibitions such as this.