

The American Collection: Works on Paper

The American Collection in the Department of Prints and Drawings ranges from some of the earliest surviving representations of American subjects to twentieth-century evocations of the American scene and the most contemporary forms of artistic expression. The acquisition of material by artists who came from or gravitated towards the United States from the late-nineteenth century onwards, has been a principal objective since the late 1970s. This has been expanded to include artists working in Canada and Latin America.

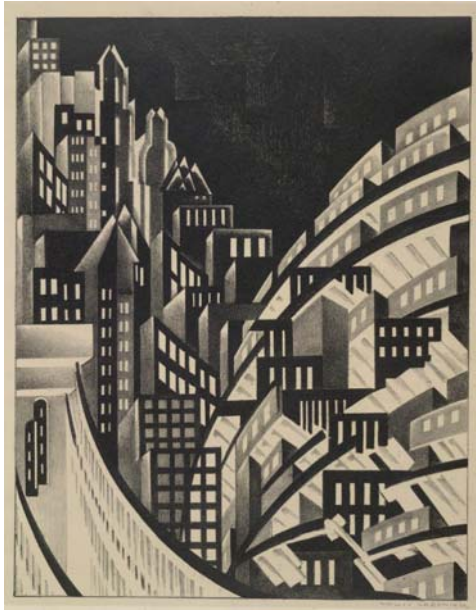
Drawings

The earliest drawings in the collection are a priceless record by the artist John White (active 1585-1593), of the flora, fauna and native peoples he observed in the course of expeditions for the colonisation of Virginia organised by Sir Walter Raleigh between 1585 and 1590. All the drawings as well as those of non-American subjects were published in facsimile in 1964.

Chronologically the next substantial group of drawings of American interest belongs to the history painter, Benjamin West (1738-1820), who arrived in England in 1763, becoming the second President of the Royal Academy in 1792. He was followed to London in 1774 by the Boston portrait painter, John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), by whom the Department owns a book of anatomical drawings made in 1756 at the very beginning of his career. Two other distinguished artists of American origin who spent the greater part of their careers in Europe, were first of all J.A.M. Whistler (1834-1903), who is principally represented by an *Amsterdam Nocturne* of 1883-84; the only one to remain outside the Freer Collection in Washington, it formerly belonged to Whistler's protégé, the British artist W. R. Sickert. Secondly, there was the fashionable portrait painter John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) by whom the Museum has fourteen drawings including watercolours of Venice, Genoa and the Alhambra in Spain, and a pastel of his friend, the French artist Paul Helleu.

From the early twentieth century there are vivid examples by Abraham Walkowitz (1878-1965) whose *City Abstraction* of 1912 captures the dynamism of New York, and by the Canadian David Milne (1882-1953), for whom watercolour was his preferred medium; Milne did some of his best work in the United States such as *Ferris Wheel, Coney Island*, of 1912 and *Reflections, Glenmore Hotel* (in the Adirondacks) of 1923, both of which have been acquired by the Department. The impact of European Surrealist and Expressionist traditions can be seen in drawings by the French-born artist Louise Bourgeois (b.1911), and the Swiss émigré Hans Burkhardt (1904-1994), who worked with Gorky and de Kooning in New York before moving to California in 1937. A clearly identifiable New York School began to emerge from the 1940s onwards, represented by an abstract watercolour of 1944 by Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), a large sculptural gouache of 1951 by David Smith (1906-1965), two drawings of 1948-50 by Dorothy Dehner, Smith's first wife, and a brush drawing of 1957 by Franz Kline (1910-1962). In Toronto, a group of artists interested in abstraction exhibited together in the 1950s under the name *Painters Eleven*, whose work is represented by Oscar Cahén (1916-1956) and Kazuo Nakamura (b.1926). The period from the mid-1960s to the present day is represented with both abstract and figurative work by artists such as Jim Dine, Philip Guston, Sol Lewitt, Lawrence Weiner, Joel Shapiro, Jay Defeo, Edda Renouf, and Kiki Smith.

Prints



The Department now has the best collection of American prints from the late-nineteenth century up to the mid-1960s of any museum outside the United States. The key factors in the diversity of the material from this period were the inherent vitality of so much American subject matter and a belief in the importance of prints as a means of communication at all levels. Native-born artists and foreigners, narrative artists and abstractionists alike were captivated by the drama and geometry of American urban, industrial and agrarian life, from New York street architecture, to railway goods yards and Mid-Western grain elevators. During the Depression, printmaking was further stimulated by the Federally-funded Graphic Arts Divisions run from 1935-43 under the Works Progress Administration for the relief of unemployed artists. Political upheavals in Europe brought a stream of émigrés with their own skills and stylistic innovations who further helped to transform the artistic scene in America.

Left: Louis Lozowick (1892-1973), *New York from the El train*, around 1925, lithograph, 292 x 229mm, bequeathed by Mrs Kathleen Gray (1993-7-25-58), © 2000, The Lozowick Estate

The Department's collection of prints by modern American artists really began in 1863 with the acquisition of its first set of Whistler's etchings from the artist. In 1905 the son of the printer T.R. Way, presented the greater part of Whistler's lithographic output, while Whistler's fervent admirer, Joseph Pennell (1869-1929), also presented much of his own considerable graphic oeuvre. One of the Department's principal benefactors was Campbell Dodgson, the Keeper from 1912-1932, who in 1926 gave four of Edward Hopper's most important etchings, including *Night on the El Train* of 1918 and *Evening Wind* of 1921. A cross-section of the work of John Sloan (1871-1951), whose portfolio of 1905-6, *New York City Life*, was such an inspiration to Hopper in its use of plebeian urban narrative, was presented to the Museum as a single gift from the artist's estate.

The bulk of the collection, however, has been built up by purchase, supplemented by some generous gifts, since 1979. The very favourable public response to an initial exhibition *American Prints 1879-1979* held in 1980, convinced us that this should become a major area of acquisition. Among the wealth of material represented are outstanding groups of work by George Bellows (1882-1925), one of the most forceful American artistic personalities at the beginning of the century; by Hopper's friend, Martin Lewis (1882-1962), who produced haunting images of New York in the shadows; by the numerous people experimenting with screen printing during the 1940s when it was in its infancy as an artistic medium; by the new cosmopolitan body of artists for whom S.W. Hayter's *Atelier 17* was such a magnet in New York from 1940-1955, when American artists like Jackson Pollock made contact with Europeans like Miró and Masson; and by artists working across the United States in the Mid-West and California. American printmaking from the 1960s is represented by key figures such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Jim Dine, Roy Lichtenstein, Ed Ruscha, Richard Estes and the leading Minimalist artists. To these names must be added Chuck Close, Vija Celmins, Philip Guston and Richard Diebenkorn all of whom are represented by key works from Alexander Walker's collection bequeathed to the Museum in 2004.

Further Reading

Carey, F. and Griffiths, A.V. *American Prints 1879-1979*. London, 1980

Field, R.S. *American Prints 1900-1950*. Yale University Art Gallery, 1983

Sloan, K. *A New World: England's first view of America*. British Museum Press, 2007

Tallman, S. *The Contemporary Print from Pre-Pop to Postmodern*. Thames & Hudson, 1996

Watrous, J. *A Century of Printmaking 1880-1980*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1984