

28.13 Grant Wood, *American Gothic*. 1930. Oil on beaverboard. 29 7/8 x 24 7/8 in. Art Institute of Chicago (Friends of American Art Collection). Wood studied in Europe, but returned to his native Iowa to paint the region with which he was most familiar. In this work, the two sober paragons of the American work ethic depicted as Iowa farmers are the artist's sister and dentist.

reveals the influence of European Expressionist and Cubist trends, although the subject and theme are purely American. Lawrence creates a powerful image of the abolitionist Harriet Tubman sawing a log by a combination of flattened planes and abrupt foreshortening. Tubman's single-minded concentration, as she fills the picture plane and focuses her energies on the task at hand, engages the observer directly in her activity. The geometric abstraction of certain forms, such as the raised left shoulder, contrasts with three-dimensional forms—the shaded right sleeve, for example—to produce a shifting tension. The result of such shifts is a formal instability that is stabilized psychologically by Tubman's determination.

28.14 Jacob Lawrence, *Harriet Tubman Series, No. 7*. 1939-40. Casein tempera on hardboard, 17 1/8 x 12 in. Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia. From the age of ten, Lawrence lived in Harlem, and in 1990 he was awarded the National Medal of Arts. This painting is from his 1939 to 1940 series celebrating Harriet Tubman (c. 1820-1913). She was an active abolitionist and champion of women's rights, who helped southern slaves to escape. From 1850 to 1860, as a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, she freed more than 300 slaves.

Edward Hopper (1882-1967), also a painter of the American scene, cannot be identified strictly as either a Regionalist or a Social Realist. His work combines aspects of both styles, to which he adds a sense of psychological isolation and loneliness. His settings whether urban or rural, are uniquely American, often containing self-absorbed human figures whose interior focus matches



28.15 (left) Edward Hopper, *Gas*. 1940. Oil on canvas, 2 ft 2 1/4 in x 3 ft 4 1/4 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund).

Excerpted from Laurie Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 1995, 478 – 486.

## America Between the Wars

### Regionalism and Social Realism

American painting of the 1920s and 1930s was affected by economic and political events, particularly the Depression and the rise of Fascism in Europe. Two different types of response to the times which had political overtones of their own can be seen in the work of American Regionalists and the Social Realists.

*American Gothic* (fig. 28.13) by Grant Wood (1892-1942) reflects the Regionalists' interest in provincial America and their isolation from the European *avant-garde*. Although the influence of Gothic is evident in the vertical planes and the pointed arch of the farmhouse window, the figures and their environment are unmistakably those of the American Middle West. Wood's meticulous attention to detail and the linear quality of his forms recall the early fifteenth-century Flemish painters. All such European references, however, are subordinated to a regional American character.

The African-American artist Jacob Lawrence (b. 1917) dealt with issues of racial inequality and social injustice, and can therefore be considered a Social Realist. Figure 28.14



the still, timeless quality of their surroundings. In *Gas* of 1940 (fig. 28.15), a lone figure stands by a gas pump, the form of which echoes his own. The road, for Hopper a symbol of travel and time, seems to continue beyond the frame. Juxtaposed with the road are the figure and station that "go nowhere," as if frozen within the space of the picture plane.

## The Harlem Renaissance (1919 – 1929)

With the dawning of the Jazz Age in 1919 came a new cultural movement among the Black community in America. After World War I, over two million Blacks migrated to the North and began to develop a new sense of identity. Many congregated in Harlem, in northern Manhattan, and formed the New Negro Movement to raise awareness of the contributions of Black Americans to the history and culture of their country.

The Harlem Renaissance was primarily a literary movement, but it included philosophers, performers, political activists, and photographers, as well as painters and sculptors. The philosopher Alain Locke (1886-1954) urged Black artists of African descent to reflect their heritage in their works. In 1925, he published *The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts* to promote interest in the tribal sculptures that had influenced the late-nineteenth-century avant-garde in Europe.

28.16 Aaron Douglas,  
*Aspects of Negro  
Life: From Slavery  
Through  
Reconstruction*.  
1934. Oil on canvas,  
5 ft X 11 ft 7 in. Art  
and Artifacts Division,  
Schomburg Center  
for Research in Black  
Culture, New York  
Public Library (Astor,  
Lenox, and Tilden  
Foundations).



The leading African-American painter of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s was Aaron Douglas (1898-1979), who used the principles of Synthetic Cubism to depict the history of his people. Douglas was born in Kansas and studied art in Paris, where he was exposed to the avant-garde. He became interested in the affinities between Cubism and African art, and combined these concerns with Black experience in America. In 1934, Douglas painted four murals entitled *Aspects of Negro Life* for the New York Public Library. The second in the series—*From Slavery Through Reconstruction* (fig. 28.16)—depicts three events following the American Civil War. At the right, there is rejoicing at the news of the Emancipation Proclamation (of January 1, 1863), which freed the slaves. The man on the soapbox in the center represents the success of the Black man, whose voice is now being heard. At the left, the Union Army leaves the South, and Reconstruction with its anti-Black backlash follows.



The exuberance of the figures recalls the dynamic energy of jazz which also appealed to Matisse (see p.460). Music appears in the subject matter of the mural—the trumpet and the drums—as well as in the rhythms of its design. The main colors are variations on the hue of rose, while concentric circles of yellow convey a sense of sound traveling through space. At the same time, the unmodeled character of the color allies the work with Synthetic Cubism. The green and white cotton plants in the foreground refer to the work of the American slaves, and create an additional pattern superimposed over the light reds.

28.17 (left) James van der Zee, *Portrait of Couple. Man with Walking Stick*. 1929. Silver print. James van der Zee Collection

## Photography

Photography aims at social documentation in America as well as in Europe. Harlem Renaissance photographer James van der Zee (1886-1993) took pictures in his Lenox Avenue studio, and also recorded the life of Black New York. His *Portrait of Couple, Man with Walking Stick* of 1929 (fig. 28.17) was taken in the studio against a landscape backdrop. The couple seems self-

conscious of the camera. The man's walking stick and the woman's hat are prominent features in the composition.



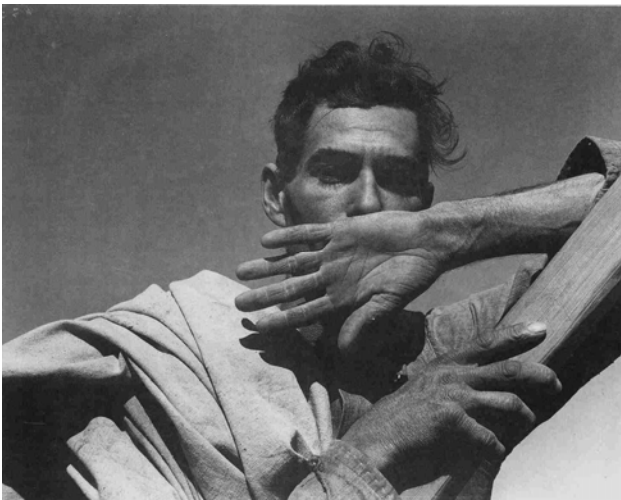
consciously well dressed in an urban style that is slightly at odds with the scenery. Their costume places them in the 1920s, and their poses convey a sense of self-confident composure.

*The Shoeshine Sign in a Southern Town* of 1936 (fig. 28.18) by Walker Evans (1903-75) evokes the atmosphere of the Deep South in the 1930s. During the Depression, until 1937, Evans took pictures for the Resettlement Administration—later the Farm Security Administration (FSA). This organization hired photographers to illustrate rural poverty, as is suggested here by the ramshackle wall and the bare light bulb. The necessity of earning money by shining shoes stands for the larger social picture of American life in the 1930s. At the same time, however, Evans has exploited the abstract qualities of black and white contrast and textured surfaces. The prominence of the word "SHINE" is reminiscent of collage, and reflects Evans's interest in the formal possibilities of the billboards, shop signs, and posters that are part of the American landscape.



28.18 (above) Walker Evans, *Shoeshine Sign in a Southern Town*. 1936. Gelatin-silver print, 5 5/8 x 6 5/8 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Stephen R. Currier Memorial Fund).

28.19 (below) Dorothea Lange, *Migratory Cotton Picker*, Eloy, Arizona. 1940. Gelatin-silver print. 10 1/2 x 13 1/2 in. Oakland Museum.



Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) also worked for the FSA. But she was less interested in formal abstraction than Evans, and more committed to conveying the desired social message. Her *Migratory Cotton Picker* of 1940 (fig. 28.19) is typical of the way in which she ennobled the poor and the working class. The man is physically attractive, but worn by laboring in the fields and toughened by the hot sun. The earth still clings to his hands, whose lines and veins create abstract patterns by virtue of the close-up view. The arid climate of Arizona is reflected in the clear, crisp sky and in the precise outlines of the worker. In such images, Lange succeeded in evoking sympathy for, and identification with, her subjects, thereby achieving her political goals.

## Mexico

Another approach to social concerns can be seen in the murals of the Mexican artist Diego Rivera (1886-1957). He had lived in Europe from 1909 to 1921, during which period he painted in a Cubist style. On returning to Mexico, however, he renounced modernism and the avant-garde in favor of Mexican nationalism. The government commissioned him to create a series of large murals for the National Palace, which he used as a vehicle for depicting Mexican history. In this approach Rivera was influenced by Marxist ideology and Soviet Socialist Realism which glorified the working classes. Figure 28.20 shows the first mural in the



28.20 (above) Diego Rivera, *Ancient Mexico*, from the *History of Mexico* fresco murals. 1929-35. National Palace, Mexico City.



series. At the left, the Spanish conquerors fight the native population, who perform ancient ceremonies at the far right. References to Quetzalcoatl, the Pre-Columbian feathered serpent-god, appear on either side of the sun, which stands above a Meso-American pyramid. The seated figure resembles Lenin, which leaves no doubt about Rivera's political message. Rivera has thus combined a kind of historical imperative with contemporary issues and, even though he departed from the avant-garde, there are unmistakable Cubist forms in his imagery.



28.21 (left) Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Diego on My Mind)*. 1943. Oil on canvas, 38 X 31 7/8 in. Kahlo Museum, Coyoacan, Mexico.

Frida Kahlo (1907-54), who was married to Rivera, painted in a style that incorporated her Mexican heritage with Surrealism. She did many self-portraits—one is illustrated in figure 28.21. Here she represents herself as a Tehuana, one who is from the Tehuantepec region of southern Mexico. Her face emerges from a white lace costume with bridal implications. Her frontality evokes the icons of Mexican churches; but the black and white curves extending from the flowers are oddly unexplained and somewhat dreamlike. The painting's subtitle—*Diego on My Mind*—refers to the little portrait of Diego Rivera, which is literally “on” her forehead. This is clearly a Surrealist element, for it makes visible the world of the imagination.

### Toward American Abstraction

Countering the Regional and Social Realist currents of American art between the wars was the influence of the European avant-garde. The 1913 Armory Show (see p.471) had brought examples of avant-garde European art to America, and Duchamp had lived in New York since 1915. A few private New York galleries, run by dealers who understood the importance of the new styles, began to exhibit “modern” art.

As early as 1905, the American photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) had opened the 291 Art Gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York, where he exhibited Cezanne, the Cubists, and Brancusi, along with more progressive American artists. The Museum of Modern Art, under the direction of Alfred Barr, Jr., opened in 1929, the year of the stock market crash. A year later Stieglitz opened the American Place Gallery to exhibit abstract art. Also during this period, government support for the arts was provided by the Federal Arts Project, operating under the aegis of Franklin Roosevelt's social programs. The Project provided employment for thousands of artists and, in doing so, granted some measure of official status to abstract art.

Stieglitz's photographs straddle the gulf between the concerns of American Social Realism and avant-garde abstraction. Many of his pictures document contemporary society, while others are formal studies in abstraction. In 1922, he began a series of abstract photographs entitled *Equivalent* (fig. 28.22), in which cloud formations create various moods and textures. Stieglitz believed in what is called “straight photography,” as opposed to achieving unusual visual effects by the manipulation of negatives.

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1996), who was married to Stieglitz, became a major American painter. She is difficult to place within a specific stylistic category, but it is clear that she was influenced by photography and early twentieth-century abstraction. Her *Black and White* of 1930 (fig. 28.23) is an abstract depiction of various textures, motion, and form, without any reference to recognizable objects. By eliminating color, O'Keeffe makes use of the same tonal range that is available to the black-and-white photographer.

28.23 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black and White*. 1930. Oil on canvas; 36 X 24 in. Collection, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (Gift of Mr. and Mrs. R. Crosby Kemper). O'Keeffe was born in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. In 1917 Stieglitz gave O'Keeffe her first one-woman show at “291.” She married Stieglitz in 1924, and after his death moved permanently to New Mexico, where desert objects—animal bones, rocks, flowers—became favorite motifs in her work.



28.22 Alfred Stieglitz, *Equivalent*. 1923. Chloride print, 3 4/5 x 4 1/2 in. Art Institute of Chicago (Alfred Stieglitz Collection). Stieglitz was born in Hoboken, New Jersey. He organized the 1902 exhibition that led to Photo-Secession, an informal group that held exhibitions all over the world and whose objective was to gain the status of a fine art for pictorial photography. In 1903 he founded the quarterly Camera Work, which encouraged modern esthetic principles in photography.

