

## AMERICAN SCENE PAINTING

American Scene Painting is a naturalist style of painting and art that was popular during the first half of the twentieth century, primarily between World War I and World War II in the United States. The artists painted scenes of typical American life and landscape, usually in a naturalistic, realistic, descriptive style. They produced views of local color and every day celebrations of community, democracy and hard work. American Scene is an overall term that describes “American Regionalism” depicting rural scenes and “Social Realism” which is more urban and politically-oriented.

After World War I, a grass roots or Regionalist movement with a strident distaste for European modernist traditions emerged in the Midwest. The rejection of European influenced painting styles and adoption of an academic realism depicting every day scenes of American life began. This was an attempt to define a unique American style of art. Thomas Hart Benton, John Stuart Curry and Grant Wood were known as the “Regionalist Triumvirate”, the three major representatives of Regionalism.

*They had studied art in Paris but they declared their goal to create an art form that would be truly American. These artists insisted that the real solution to the many and growing problems of urban American life, made clear by the Great Depression, was for the United States to return to its agrarian roots.*<sup>1</sup>

American Regionalism stressed local and small town themes. The style shunned the city and the rapidly developing technological innovations and focused on rural scenes and lifestyles. Grant Wood defended his regional beliefs stating that it was good for American art because those artists who could not afford to study in Europe were forced to rely on their own tradition. It was time to look toward America for artists’ inspiration and it created an independent style of American art.

Social Realism depicted urban scenes. The drawings and paintings of the time in which industrial and urban scenes coexist with images of the land suggested a connection between all working people regardless of the job.

The art market was one of the first Great Depression casualties. An entire generation of aspiring artists had no prospects and even established artists struggled. Their frustration and discontent led them to identify with the masses and led to the concept of the “people’s art.” The WPA Federal Art Project made it possible for artists to survive the Depression and permitted social realism to flourish. It was the prevailing type of art done under the WPA program.

*American Social Realist painting reflected the economic crisis of the Depression. The impact of that traumatic and tragic event was to force a new kind of reappraisal among American artists of their cultural identity, first through themes of social protest in a style of parochial realism.*<sup>2</sup>

The WPA arts projects did not compel artists to work in a defined style. American Scene became the unofficial style. Public works, such as murals, depicted local history and color. The artists depicted everyday life, including the mundane things, such as waiting for a train to birthday celebrations. They were trying to represent life's vignettes of modern American life. Their work promoted a sense of national identity during difficult times and yielded art that people could easily be understood and appreciated. These projects also probed deeper into the issues of American character and identity.

*Regionalism had a strong influence on popular culture. Regionalist imagery appeared in magazine advertisements, and influenced American children's book illustrators.*<sup>3</sup>

This significant time in American art shaped its art perceptions and influences for decades following the Depression.

1 <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/americanscene/>

2 Modern Art, Sam Hunter, 1977, Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York, p. 257

3 <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/americanscene/>

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/goldstein/goldamer.html>

[http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/new\\_deal\\_for\\_the\\_arts/index.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/new_deal_for_the_arts/index.html)