

“Coming Home:” Selections from the Schoen Collection of American Scene Paintings

This exhibition features 22 paintings that characterize the social, economic, and political changes occurring across the United States during the period between World Wars I and II, an era framed by the beginning of the Great Depression and the end of World War II. Jason Schoen is passionate in his devotion to the visual arts, especially of the Depression era.

These paintings reflect upon our country’s history as seen through the eyes of some of its most compelling artists. The PWAP, Public Works Arts Project, was a recognition of the value of culture and the arts in American life. It was one of the New Deal projects that affected the welfare of artists, contiguous with other programs enacted in the 1930’s under President Franklin Roosevelt. The artist had been accepted as a useful member of society whose work was a valuable asset to the entire nation. 16,000 works of art were created in over 1,000 American cities, the first completely democratic art movement in history. It aroused a consciousness of art where many people had never seen an original work.

The succession of political measures aimed at generating economic reform, providing job relief, and instilling a positive sense of self and national survival among the American people. The New Deal’s generally non-discriminatory hiring practices encouraged African American, Native American, Latino, and Asian Americans.

Most of the artists received commissions for post office or federal building murals. The prominent style is realism, though several of the artists leaned toward Abstraction and Expressionism. They rejected prettified Impressionism and ossified Academicism. The dynamism and vitality of culture in face of economic bleakness and social dislocation are portrayed.

These American artists “discovered in some Midwestern tank town, or New England textile mill, the same powerful urge to create that Gauguin sought in exotic Tahiti and Van Gogh found in windswept Arles.”¹

1. Art critic Peyton Boswell, Jr. in 1940

For example: Soon after the artist Jerry Bywaters, whose work *Texas Subdivisions* is part of the exhibition, received his A.B. degree from Southern Methodist University, he left Dallas, Texas and continued his study of art in New York, Europe, and Mexico. Through this period he taught himself not to belittle his roots. The implied influence of his literary idol Ernest Hemingway inspired him to travel to Spain, parts of which (Cordoba, Seville, and Granada) reminded him of West Texas. Upon his return, he eventually became an instructor of art at S.M.U. and, in 1943, was named director of the Dallas Museum of Fine arts.

Also, when viewing Robert Gwathmey's *Sunny South*, one can see how the artist combined satire with politics in this 1944 work. It is a complex panoramic configuration challenging many southern political myths. A monument to the Confederate war hero dominates the upper center. Three dowager Daughters of the Confederacy have placed a wreath in front of it, while listening to the local congressman give an oration. A white farm couple strikes a pose on one side. On the opposite side, a black couple is in the identical pose, expressing that both races of sharecroppers are on the same economic level. Thus, the whites, by becoming Ku Klux Klaners, are fighting against themselves by attacking those who are equals economically.

Bibliography

Catalogue from "Coming Home:" Selections from the Schoen Collection of American Scene Paintings, Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 2003

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