Gatecrashers: The First Generation of Outsider Artists in America

by

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Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies
Duke University

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Bernard L. Herman

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy, in the Department of
Art, Art History & Visual Studies in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2015
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Although interest in the work of untrained artists has surged recently, appearing everywhere from the Venice Biennale to *The New Yorker*, the art world’s fascination with American autodidacts began nearly a century ago. My dissertation examines how and why American artists without formal training first crashed the gates of major museums and galleries between 1927 and 1940 through case studies on the most celebrated figures of the period: John Kane (1860–1934), Horace Pippin (1888–1946), and Anna Mary Robertson "Grandma" Moses (1860–1961). All three painters were exhibited as “modern primitives,” a category that emerged in the wake of the French naïve Henri Rousseau (1844–1910) but which took on a distinct character in the United States where it became a space for negotiating renewed debates about authenticity in American art as well as pervasive social anxieties over how immigration, race, and industrialization were changing the country. In addition to establishing how the “modern primitive” fit into the pluralistic landscape of American modernism, my dissertation reaches into the present, exploring how the interwar breakthroughs of Kane, Pippin, and Moses prefigured the ubiquity of self-taught artists—often referred to as “outsider” artists—in American museums today.
Dedication

To my parents and Matt for their love and support, and to Mabel for giving me just enough time.
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Thanks to the Robertson Scholars program, I was also able to take classes at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, whose Art History and American Studies departments and Folklore program greatly enriched my intellectual development. There I met Bernard L. Herman, who has been such an important teacher and mentor to me,
teaching me volumes about the emergent field of folk and self-taught art and always encouraging me to question institutional histories and entertain alternative points of view.

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Last but certainly not least, thanks to my friends and family who have supported me throughout this journey. Especially to my mother and my husband whose help over the past six months, the first of my amazing daughter’s life, made this moment possible.
1. Introduction: From “Modern Primitives” to “ Outsider” Artists

A flurry of interest in the work of self-taught artists has consumed the art world in recent years. The scope of this renaissance is international, encompassing curator Massimiliano Gioni’s high profile inclusion of self-taught artists in the 2013 Venice Biennale, the expansion of the Outsider Art Fair to Paris the same year, and the exhibitions of the itinerant anti-museum, the Museum of Everything, in various European cities since 2009.¹ On a national level, self-taught artists have been attracting more attention as well, especially in the press. Artists such as Thornton Dial, Jr. and Lonnie Holley have been featured at length in publications like The New York Times Magazine and The Wall Street Journal.² In addition to exhibition reviews and artist profiles, national newspapers and magazines have been highly attentive to major upheavals occurring within this often insular subculture of the art world, whose network of specialized collectors, dealers, and curators had been the domain of niche publications like Raw Vision and Folk Art Messenger. For instance, when the American Folk Art

Museum (AFAM) was faced with giving up its East 53rd Street location, which the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) would eventually purchase and demolish, art and architecture critics came out of the woodwork in support of AFAM, advocating for the importance of its mission and decrying the imminent demise of its Todd Williams and Billie Tsien-designed building—a bewitching folk art fortress that did not draw enough annual visitors, but made quite an impression on me. Indeed the exhibitions there while I was working as a journalist in New York between 2006 and 2009 ignited my curiosity about the legacy of self-taught artists in this country, which is all too often neglected in histories and galleries of American art.

As my interest in this enigmatic art grew, I was fascinated to see New York Times art critic Roberta Smith seize upon the neglect of folk art as one of her pet causes, calling on all curators to “figure out how to integrate the outsider geniuses or near-geniuses” into their programs. In 2013 she criticized institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the National Gallery of Art (NGA) and the Yale University Art Gallery for keeping folk and academic art segregated in their recently rehung galleries of American art, which she felt remained monotonous and uninspired as a result. “The ‘snowglobe’ needs to be shaken. Homogeneity dulls the eye and lulls the brain. It is the discrepancies that grab our attention and make us look more sharply
and deeply,” she wrote.3 As if heeding Smith’s call, some of the nation’s largest museums—including those she specifically chastised—have made notable room for self-taught artists in their permanent collections and exhibition programs of late. In the fall of 2014, the Met announced its acquisition of 57 works of Southern vernacular art from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which will be exhibited in 2016 in the museum’s new Modern and Contemporary display at the Marcel Breuer-designed building on Madison Avenue that used to be home to the Whitney Museum of American Art. The following spring the Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened an exhibition of 50 recent gifts that included five works by Sam Doyle, Josephus Farmer, Clementine Hunter, and Herbert Singleton from the collection of Gordon W. Bailey—the museum’s first major acquisitions of self-taught art. And in 2018, the NGA will open a touring exhibition organized by the international superstar curator Lynne Cooke that examines the interactions between the “outside” and the “mainstream” over the past century.

Meanwhile, institutions that have been committed to the legacy of American folk artists for decades, such as AFAM, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the High Museum of Art, have recommitted themselves by hiring new curators specializing in folk art.4

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4 I began my role as the Merrie and Dan Boone curator of folk and self-taught art at the High in 2015; Valérie Rousseau was named the curator of self taught art and art brut at AFAM in Spring
All of this activity contributes to the impression that we are living in the midst of unprecedented boundary breaking, or, in the catchy parlance so popular with countless headline writers, a moment when “outsiders” are becoming “insiders.” The reality, however, is that the American art world’s love affair with self-taught artists began nearly a century ago, during a period when nationalism and populism governed the cultural zeitgeist in a manner not seen before or since. In the decades between the first and second World Wars, a Scottish American steelworker, an African American veteran and a farmer’s wife old enough to remember Lincoln’s re-election captured the attention of the American public with their refreshing artistic abilities. Dubbed “gatecrashers” by the contemporary press, John Kane (1860–1934), Horace Pippin (1888–1946) and Anna Mary Robertson “Grandma” Moses (1860–1961) were celebrated in autobiographies, radio programs and constant media coverage as their paintings reached the inner sanctum of the American art world after 1927. In that year, Kane’s Scene from the Scottish Highlands was accepted to the Carnegie International, the premier exhibition of contemporary art in the United States, when a jury member threatened to reject every work if Kane’s was not accepted. About a decade later, Moses’s idyllic paintings of Eagle Bridge, New York hung in a local drugstore while two canvases by Pippin, one featuring

2013; and the Smithsonian American Art Museum hired Leslie Umberger as the curator of folk and self-taught art in 2012.
a log cabin, appeared in a West Chester, Pennsylvania shoe repair shop. Art enthusiasts stumbled upon the work of Moses and Pippin in these non-traditional display venues and, recognizing how their folksy subject matter and crude realism would appeal to the mainstream art world, helped launch their careers. By 1940, all three artists had appeared at MoMA under the aegis of the “modern primitive,” a double-edged designation that underscored how they both reinforced and challenged dominant paradigms of modernism.

The following chapters reposition Kane, Moses, and Pippin—the three most celebrated self-taught artists of the interwar period—within the context of American modernism and the larger history of “outsider” art in this country. The arc of the art world’s interest in the self-taught artist, which began with John Kane, peaked with Horace Pippin and diminished with Grandma Moses, encompassed a period when the American artists, curators, and collectors grappled with the relationship between the primitive and the modern, but also with an expanding sense of national identity. In Chapter Two I examine how John Kane’s paintings of Pittsburgh’s industrial landscapes were resonant with mainstream movements like Regionalism and Precisionism, while his occupational history and approachable style appealed to a wide range of viewers. Kane may have been an immigrant, but his Scottish origins were tolerable in the period of nativism directed at “new immigrants” that characterized the 1920s. Effectively assimilated as white, Kane became a representative of American art both at home and
abroad, his work appearing in key interventions like MoMA’s gutsy 1938 national
survey at the Jeu de Paume in Paris and the best-selling text on American art of the era,
Peyton Boswell’s *Modern American Painting* (1939). In Chapter Three, I consider how
Horace Pippin negotiated the American art world, achieving recognition that was
atypical for an African American artist of his time. When his diverse oeuvre, which
included genre scenes of the American South as well as history paintings featuring John
Brown, came to the attention of the New York and Philadelphia circles after 1937,
institutions like the Harmon Foundation had been increasing the visibility of African
American artists for more than a decade. Nonetheless, there were few opportunities for
African Americans to exhibit in integrated contexts at this time. Pippin proved an
exception to this rule, uniting the largely segregated black and white art establishments
by gaining a diverse body of supporters from Alain Locke, the leader of the New Negro
movement, to Federal Art Project director Holger Cahill. The reception of Grandma
Moses was, by contrast, divisive, as we will see in Chapter Four. Moses’s first solo show,
“What a Farmwife Painted,” at the gallery of European émigré Otto Kallir did not occur
until 1940, by which time enthusiasm for self-taught artists was waning. Institutions
devoted to modernism, especially MoMA, folded their incorporative visions of the
relevance of “modern primitives” to contemporary art in the early 1940s, but the ever
resourceful Moses found other audiences for her art. The popularity of Moses’s rural
scenes—which were reproduced on everything from greeting cards to lampshades—
hung in the Oval Office and exhibited abroad in occupied European countries, was
rooted in the mid-century need for escapism. Her regressive views of America’s horse-
and-buggy filled golden age acted as a potent panacea for the anxiety that both fueled
and surrounded the so-called triumph of Abstract Expressionism, which was concurrent
with her rise.

I am not the first to frame the work of Kane, Moses, and Pippin within the
context of greater social, cultural and political forces like primitivism and cultural
nationalism: Scholars such as Lynne Cooke, Jane Kallir, Karal Ann Marling, and Charles
Russell have made many foundational efforts in this regard. I am also indebted to the
methodological approaches of art historians, including Wanda Corn, Randall Griffin,
and Jacqueline Francis, who have used reception history as the link between specific
artworks and the larger formulations of American identity that defined their moments
of creation. My study goes beyond this to consider what made these artists such
effective “gatecrashers,” but also what cultural conditions made the American art
world’s ivory tower particularly susceptible to their widely celebrated intrusions. The
reception of the “modern primitive” thus reflects a conception of the American that was
in formation and which demonstrated a nascent multiculturalism that will be discussed
in my Conclusion.

Additionally, my presentation of these artists as windows into their period
follows the proposals that sociologists and philosophers like Howard Becker and Arthur
Danto have made about the special significance that “outsider” artists hold for understanding “the patterns of collectivity we call the art world,” insofar as their apotheoses signal important deviations in traditional definitions of art. With these approaches as well as original archival findings guiding my interpretation of the artists’ work, the following chapters contextualize the interwar support of untrained artists and locate it as the beginning of a continuing, institutionally-driven process of “outsider” art canonization that has endured and evolved since the 1930s. For decades of exhibitions, collection building and publications have indeed turned this supposedly “anti-canonical” art into a field with its own canon that is in need of exposure and historicization.

1.1 Literature Review

Prior to my dissertation, the bulk of existing scholarship on self-taught American artists has been published in anthologies, exhibition catalogues and surveys. The first major texts devoted to twentieth century self-taught artists, Masters of Popular Painting (1938) and They Taught Themselves (1942), were published by the Museum of Modern Art and the American dealer Sidney Janis, respectively, in conjunction with exhibitions of the same names. These texts opened with introductory essays and collected the work and biographies of more than 40 American self-taught artists; Janis claimed that for his survey, which included Kane, Moses, and Pippin, he considered the work of more than
500 artists. Exhibition-related texts remained the primary source for information on self-taught artists for the better part of the century, but in recent decades, surveys and anthologies have also emerged, such as Charles Russell’s *Groundwaters* (2011), a book that devotes chapters to a dozen international self-taught artists from Adolf Wölfli to Michel Nedjar, and Colin Rhodes’ comprehensive Thames & Hudson survey, *Outsider Art* (2000). Russell has also been a constant presence, either as an editor of or contributor to, many of the essay collections devoted to self-taught artists (see eds. Bronner and Vlach, 1992, eds. Hall and Metcalf, 1993, eds. Cherbo and Zolberg, 1997), which typically draw an interdisciplinary mix of contributors from fields such as art history, folklore, philosophy and sociology. These collections proliferated mostly in the 1990s, with the most recent volume, *Self-Taught Art* (ed. Russell) published in 2001.

As for artist-specific literature, Kane has not been the subject of a lengthy study since 1971, when the former director of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Leon Anthony Arkus, published the artist’s catalogue raisonné. A little over a decade later, on the occasion of the fifty-year anniversary of his death, Galerie St. Etienne principal Jane Kallir published a small but important catalogue to accompany the exhibition, *John Kane: Modern America’s First Folk Painter* (1984). Pippin has attracted a new wave of recent scholarship, most notably *Horace Pippin: The Way I See It*, the catalogue for his 2015

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exhibition at the Brandywine River Museum, and Celeste-Marie Bernier’s forthcoming
*Suffering and Sunset: World War I in the Art and Life of Horace Pippin.* These publications
build significantly on the initial biographical and theoretical foundations laid by Judith
Stein’s 1996 catalogue, *I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin,* which accompanied the
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art’s traveling Pippin retrospective and included essays
by scholars Richard J. Powell and Cornel West, among others. The bulk of the Moses
literature, meanwhile, has come from the prolific Kallirs of Galerie St. Etienne. Otto
Kallir, who began representing Moses in New York in the early 1940s, published the first
text devoted to the artist, *Grandma Moses: American Primitive,* in 1946, a catalogue
raisonné in 1973, with many other texts in between. Jane Kallir maintained her
grandfather’s devotion to Moses, authoring and editing important books on the artist
such as *Grandma Moses: The Artist Behind the Myth,* and *Grandma Moses in the 21st Century,*
the catalogue that accompanied the last traveling exhibition devoted to the artist in 2001.
In 2006, art historian Karal Ann Marling contributed another important text detailing the
many dimensions of Moses’s success, *Designs on the Heart: The Homemade Art of Grandma
Moses.*

In addition to adding new object-based interpretations and archival discoveries
to the foundational accounts of these artists, what sets this dissertation apart from
existing scholarship is my analysis of how the success of these artists was intertwined
with larger trends in American modernism. Through my close attention to reception
history, I demonstrate how the discourse on Kane, Pippin, and Moses in the press, exhibition matter, and art criticism indexes larger critical debates of the era. Using the contemporary writing of period tastemakers such as Alain Locke, Constance Rourke, and Holger Cahill, as well as numerous art critics and newspaper writers, I delve deeply into how these artists were embraced as part of a larger push to invent a national tradition in the arts between the wars. Key texts demonstrating how cultural nationalism fueled American modernism in the visual arts at this time from scholars such as Wanda Corn (1999), Erika Doss (1991) and Victoria Grieve (2009) as well as Elizabeth Stillinger’s encyclopedic account of folk art collecting in the United States (2011) have greatly influenced my historicization of these artists. Ultimately, my dissertation does much more than chronicle the widespread popularity that Kane, Moses, and Pippin experienced in their lifetimes; it interrogates what that popularity reveals about how attitudes of multiculturalism, populism, and antimodernism mediated the interwar art world’s search for artists who were eligible to represent American art in both national and international contexts. For American artists had historically viewed their positions outside of the European academy, and later as underdogs of the European avant-garde, as both an opportunity and a handicap. This complex, which combined inferiority with possibility, was especially strong at the turn of the century as the American art world—often in collaboration with its European counterpart—attempted to reshuffle artistic hierarchies by validating cultural products created outside of the art academy, such as
New England weathervanes, American plumbing, and eventually, the painting and sculpture of American self-taught artists. Indeed, the rise of the self-taught artist between the wars was highly dependent on a strain of indigenous primitivism that developed in the United States, which deserves preliminary explanation here.

1.2 American Primitives

The vanguard scholars of the emerging field of “outsider” art, which increasingly draws attention from the academy in the form of seminars and conference panels, have established that this idiosyncratic subcategory of 20th century art grew from two “roots,” one that originated in Europe, the other in the United States. Out of Europe came an interest in autodidacts that included Henri Rousseau, the art of psychiatric patients, and Jean Dubuffet’s art brut. Although the American interest in self-taught artists would absorb many of these developments, it also flourished thanks to indigenous phenomena, most notably the reappraisal of folk art after World War I. During the teens American painters and sculptors, especially those participating in the summer art school in Ogunquit, Maine, began collecting pre-industrial utilitarian and decorative arts, taking objects such as hooked rugs, weathervanes, and decoys as early examples of American ingenuity and design that held meaning for their own art. By the 1920s, Americana was

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to American artists what African art had been to European artists in the first decades of the century. As Wanda Corn has written about enthusiasm for folk art among America’s avant-garde, “It was an American variant of primitivizing, repeating the pattern of transformation that tribal arts underwent as they moved from ethnographic museums to progressive artists’ studios, the commercial market, and, finally, the art museum.” But unlike African art, which was received as culturally remote, American folk art was considered culturally representative. As opposed to European modernist primitivists who sought self-reinvention through a primitive other from foreign lands, American modernist primitivists were more attune to how their own country identified as primitive; they did not need to go beyond national borders to find anti-academic wellsprings of creativity on which they could draw because the United States had long been considered incapable of reproducing or rivaling Europe’s academic tradition.

America’s reputation as a primitive land dated back centuries, taking on different characters as time passed, from the Age of Exploration, when its environs and native inhabitants were exoticized by European publishers like Theodor De Bry, to the Gilded Age, when Europeans turned their noses up at the materialism of America’s nouveau riche. American artists struggled against the assumption of the country’s cultural inferiority throughout the 19th-century, founding academies in Philadelphia and

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New York and participating in international art events like the 1867 exposition in Paris.\(^8\)

But by the 1930s, when art historians and critics began publishing the first major wave of American art surveys, the domestic challenges to cultural maturity became an accepted—even celebrated—part of the narrative of American art. In his 1941 text, *The American Artist and His Times*, Homer Saint-Gaudens explained how the early American artist, who lacked access to basic art supplies, persevered with “Yankee ingenuity.”

"Over here, though, the best a man of art could make of it was to purchase red and yellow lumps of earth from the Indians, or steal a bit of indigo from the pot that tinged the starch of mother's neckware," Saint-Gaudens wrote.\(^9\) The son of the renowned American sculptor, August Saint-Gaudens and eventual supporter of John Kane, Saint-Gaudens came of age during the ascent of Frederick Jackson Turner’s school of history, which proposed that the frontier was the defining element of American society.\(^10\) By the 1930s, this school of thought had also become a means for explaining the American artist’s failure to thrive either in both domestic and foreign markets. Art critic Peyton Boswell, for instance, put the slow development of American arts within the broader


social historical context of the nation’s early development in his best-selling 1939 American art text, *Modern American Painting*:

> After material conquest comes leisure, and with leisure follow art, music, literature. In the economically significant years of America’s development, when its people were struggling against the forces of nature—some to drive westward the frontier; some to make the soil yield subsistence; some to refine raw materials into manufactured products, invent means of communication and transportation—the minds of men were given over to material problems that left little room for an interest in beauty.¹¹

The subtext of these narratives is an admission that a national school of art had failed to emerge, despite the efforts of 19th century American art world. But several decades into the 20th century, with the European academic model no longer the gold standard of art thanks to the revolution of modernist movements like Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, American inferiority could be transformed into a cultural positive. Folk art played a central role in this reversal. Of course European artists had also embraced folk art—the inclusion of Bavarian mirror painting in the *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac* of 1912 comes to mind—but there was more at stake when artists like Yasuo Kuniyoshi and Eli Nadelman began using Americana as inspiration for their modernist forms because of how folk art related to the ongoing search for a national tradition in the arts. In their many writings on American folk art, the tastemakers who created a market for handcrafted woodcarving, ironwork, textiles, and amateur painting between the

wars, most notably the curator Holger Cahill and the dealer Edith Halpert, emphasized that folk art was not merely a source of formal inspiration for contemporary artists, it was also material proof that art flourished outside the academy in pre-20th century America. When Cahill opened his seminal 1932 exhibition at MoMA, “American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America,” he offered the objects in the show, which were almost all drawn from the collection of founding MoMA board member, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, as representing “the unconventional side of the American tradition in the fine arts” and “an authentic expression of American experience.”\(^\text{12}\) The show drew praise from kingpins of American art like William Macbeth of the Macbeth Galleries, who declared, “It's an epoch-making show! [...] What you have done should prove the answer, definitely and for all time, to the question "Is there an American art?"\(^\text{13}\) And Lincoln Kirstein, who admitted, “It is the first time I have had any comprehensive idea of the whole realm of American art.”\(^\text{14}\)

While the mostly unattributed pre-industrial creations of pre-20th century folk artists demonstrated the historic legacy of American originality, by the late 1920s, the cultural capital of living, identifiable self-taught Americans was increasing as well. These artists were introduced by Cahill in another MoMA exhibition, 1938’s “Masters of


\(^{13}\) “Letter from William Macbeth to Holger Cahill,” October 31, 1932, 1932 Folk Art Exhibition File, Museum of Modern Art Archives.

Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America,” as the heirs to pre-
industrial folk artists insofar as both represented “the art of the people.” The
appreciation of contemporary self-taught artists was also licensed by the popularity of
the French autodidact, Henri Rousseau, who featured prominently in “Masters of
Popular Painting,” as the show had an international scope. Rousseau had been known in
the United States since 1910, when Max Weber brought his canvases back from Europe,
and Alfred Stieglitz gave him a memorial show.\(^\text{15}\) But the American art world’s interest
in finding a Rousseau “upon its own shores” did not go into full swing until the late
1920s, when folk art’s growing market and museum presence led to a new frontier for
American autodidacts.\(^\text{16}\) Soon high profile collectors like Rockefeller, Albert C. Barnes,
and Duncan Phillips and the institutions they were linked to even began supporting the
work of artists like Kane, Moses, and Pippin,
If anything, it is surprising that it took so long for self-taught artists to gain recognition
from the American art world given the degree to which they resonated with such
principles of national culture as egalitarianism and self-sufficiency. Indeed the personal
biographies of the artists celebrated in “Masters of Popular Painting” had the “up from
nothing character” that, as Michael C. Hall and others have observed, struck a “deep

\(^{15}\) Gail Levin, “American Art,” in “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art, ed. William Rubin (New
\(^{16}\) Russell Bowman, “Imaging the Academy: ‘Naive’ Art and the Mainstream,” in Self-Taught
Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art, ed. Charles Russell (Jackson, M.S.:
University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 84.
chord in the American popular imagination.”

But the social climate of the interwar period—and especially the 1930s—was particularly amenable to the underdog character of these artists. That “modern primitives” gained traction when they did was, as Jane Kallir has observed, a sign of the times: “Untrained artists represented beliefs America needed in order to survive the Great Depression: democratic egalitarianism, self-made success and resilience in the face of adversity,” she writes. “These artists, plucked from obscurity by the arbiters of art-world trends, represented the melting-pot ideal: they came from all walks of life, all racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds; many of them were immigrants.” They also offered an art that was highly accessible in an era when audiences felt increasingly alienated from styles associated with modernism. On the one hand, the self-taught artist’s success was often interpreted through the lens of modernism. John T. Hailstalk, a self-taught artist who operated an elevator in a building with an art gallery, challenged the gallery’s proprietor that he could paint better than his artists. Coverage of Hailstalk’s 1928 show concluded that Hailstalk had indeed “out-moderned the moderns.” Kane, Moses, and Pippin were likewise compared to and often judged to exceed the styles of their trained contemporaries. As Sidney Janis explained in They Taught Themselves, "Paradoxically, although the self-taught artist does

not make a selection from the complex and developed painting tradition of today, he often independently achieves isolated results that parallel those of cultivated expressions.” Part of the self-taught artist’s “outdoing” of his school-trained peer thus owed to his achievement of the formal attributes of modernism—such as non-naturalistic color and flattened space—without recourse to intellectual engagement with the theories of modernism. In her 1942 survey on contemporary art, which included the work of Kane and Pippin, Rosemary Frost complained about the overwrought nature of art theory. “The man who is trying to read a picture with his eyes with the assistance of the catalogue in his hand comes up against terms like proto-Dada-mechano-morphic, an explanation so painstaking that it is guaranteed to bring enjoyment to halt. What’s more, the picture he is looking at goes blank,” she wrote.21

Often presented as unadulterated by the influence of international modernism, folk and self-taught art maintained a populist character that was also considered deeply American. Introducing the 1931 “American Folk Sculpture” exhibition that was also curated by Cahill, Newark Museum president Arthur Egner emphasized the link between national character and straightforwardness: "What is so stimulating about the present exhibit is that we have in it a truer and more indigenous expression of the American artistic sense because of its very absence of pretense and importance,” he

20 Janis, They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters in the 20th Century, 10.
wrote. Self-taught artists were not only a balm for anxiety about modernism and international influence, but also about modernity in general. Cahill emphasized this in the essay for his 1932 folk art show, writing, "Folk and popular art is significant for us because, in our fear that contemporary civilization has almost abandoned its form-creating function in favor of the sterile mathematics of machine-form, we are startled and reassured to find this rich creativeness still alive in the unpretentious activities and avocations of the common man."23

The self-taught artist thus had all the oppositional promise of any primitivized object, offering alternatives to alienating art theory, dehumanized modernity, and the American artist’s destiny to remain forever in the shadow of his European peer. His rise was primed by the folk art fever that emerged in the second decade of the 20th century, which fed into the broadly populist cultural climate of the 1930s. In that decade, “art for the people” manifested itself broadly, especially in the public art works of the New Deal era’s Federal Art Project, which was directed by none other than Cahill himself. While Kane, Moses, and Pippin are largely absent from histories of American art between the wars, as the following chapters evidence, their successes were deeply intertwined with larger anxieties about the direction of art and society during this period.

1.3 Rethinking Outsider:

Before I proceed, I want to address terminology. Throughout my dissertation I use a myriad of terms to refer to the “self-taught” artist, including “folk,” “naïve,” “outsider,” “modern primitive,” and “popular.” For more than half a century, the art world has struggled to find a label that accurately describes the untrained artists that enter its orbit. As Sidney Janis mused in 1942, “The confusion caused by the various descriptive terms for self-taught artist leads one to ponder the problem of a name that will convey without ambiguity his place in the world of art.” Janis concluded that despite its shortcomings, “self-taught”—a term that is the most straightforwardly descriptive of the attribute that sets these artists apart from their trained peers—was preferable to terms like “non-professional” and “folk,” and this victory by default still reigns today. “Outsider” and “folk” remain popular in the marketplace, providing useful shorthand for art fairs and auctions, but they have been largely discounted in academic and museum circles. “Folk” is now considered inappropriate because the majority of 20th-century self-taught artists did not create their art according to the passed

24 Janis, They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters in the 20th Century, 11.
25 At “Divine Disorder: Folk and Outsider Art,” a 2015 conference devoted to discussing the preservation of folk art environments, one of the event’s organizers, Jason Church, shared an interesting observation. At any and every gathering like this, there will inevitably be an impassioned exchange between attendees about the impropriety of the term outsider. When this occurred at Divine Disorder, Church interjected with an anecdote: When he was organizing the conference, he originally used only “folk art” in its subtitle, but he found this title failed to attract the proposals he envisioned, about the dynamic and imperiled “environments” that many self-taught artists elaborate and which are difficult to conserve. As soon as he added “outsider,” the right proposals started flowing in. So despite the objections among scholars and specialists in this field, “outsider” is still effective in hailing the field.
down traditions of a communal society but rather in highly individualistic modes.

“Outsider” has been villainized for the way it falsely inscribes the marginality of these artists; after all, their very presence in the art world contexts that name them “outsiders”—museums, auctions, art fairs, art books—demonstrates the degree to which they are inside the art world, or at the very least, temporarily annexed to it.

Many also object to the ahistorical use of the term to describe American artists. Since Roger Cardinal introduced “outsider” as an Anglophone translation of *art brut* in 1972, however, the term has been widely adopted to describe individuals beyond Jean Dubuffet’s original canon of artists—all European—who supposedly created outside of culture.26 Today the term surpasses the specificity of its original editorial iteration, or as Colin Rhodes has it: “Like all good monsters, […] [Outsider] broke free from the focused reference to *art brut* intended by its inventor and quickly came to stand for a much more expanded field.”27 In addition to objecting to its European origin, academics have pilloried “outsider” for the false sense of an outsider/insider binary it promotes. In 2000, for instance, the philosopher Arthur Danto declared the “End of the Outsider,” not merely in response to the fact that the self-taught Alabama artist Thornton Dial, Jr. was exhibiting at the Whitney Biennial that year—a perfect example of the outsider moving in—but also because trained artists were working in styles that increasingly diminished

27 Colin Rhodes, “Orphans, Urchins and Safe Bets: Canonicity and Outsider Art” (College Art Association, Dallas-Fort Worth, TX, 2008), 5.
their training—evidence of the insider moving out. “The concept of visual art today, by contrast, has been so revolutionized that it is open to the most highly trained artist to work in any style whatever, no matter how vernacular," Danto wrote.28

 Nonetheless, I have invoked “outsider” in the title of this dissertation for several reasons. Francis Connelly’s argument against jettisoning the equally pejorative term “primitive” is a useful place to begin. In her stunning study of the ideological frameworks that have governed the European outlook on the “primitive” since the 18th century, Connelly writes, “The real need is not for neutralized substitutes, but for the recognition that the term does not describe a Yoruba figure or an Egyptian relief, but a set of ideas belonging to Europeans.”29 Similarly, “outsider” is a term that does not describe the essential characteristics of an object or an artist, but rather a “set of ideas” belonging to the art world that anoints the “outsider.” For while an artist may be engaged in locally recognized or personally meaningful modes of art making long before a representative from the art world comes along and recognizes his or her work, but there is no such thing as an “outsider” artist proper until there is an art world that creates the condition of one.30 As a relational construct, “outsider” has such a highly

30 Charles Russell has discussed how "no single distinguishing feature defines all self-taught artists (including the term self-taught)—except that they are seen not to be ‘mainstream’ artists [...] a case is not defined, but a condition is.” Charles Russell, “Finding a Place for the Self-
subjective and unstable meaning that it is tempting to disavow it as a useless fiction, but its persistence—for instance, it is still widely used despite Danto’s declaration of its demise 15 years ago—forces me to resist that temptation. Once again, observations about another problematic term, this time “folk,” are useful here. T.J. Jackson Lears, a scholar who has written extensively about the romantic illusionism associated with the construction of the folk in this country nonetheless refuses to disregard the term altogether. “Yet both within and outside the academy, belief in an American folk has persisted,” he writes. “Given the resilience of that belief, we might consider taking it seriously rather than merely dismissing it as a nostalgic myth.”

One way to take “outsider” seriously is to consider it as a term that is highly revealing of the art worlds that have constructed it. As curator Joanne Cubbs has explained, “The history of outsider art’s ‘discovery’ is really an account of its appropriation by the art world and its repositioning as an imaginative pawn within that world’s ongoing aesthetic protests, iconoclastic struggles and cultural debate.” In other words, the phenomenon of “outsider” art is generated at moments when the art world

transgresses itself. The 1930s, versions of “outsider”—such as “modern primitive” or “popular painter”—were also marginalizing labels, delineating the difference between self-taught artists and their trained peers, but their existence signaled an unprecedented acceptance of autodidacticism in the arts that was rooted in the populism and nationalism of the period. During the Great Depression, self-taught artists, with their irrepressible ingenuity, underdog trajectories and everyday aesthetics, held a timely appeal, which Cahill acknowledged in his “Masters of Popular Painting” catalogue essay, writing, “The work of these folk and popular artists has special significance for our generation because we have discovered that we can take seriously, once more, the idea of art for the people.”

Acknowledging that “outsider” remains useful insofar as it reveals to us the shifting boundaries and ideological frameworks of an art world at any given moment does not take the sting away from the term, which Robert Farris Thompson once described as a dagger to the heart. I fully recognize the way that calling a black artist from a poor Southern community an “outsider” reinscribes an oppressive system of center-periphery power. On the other hand, given what an important role the broader concept of outsiderhood has played in our country’s national mythology, I think it can also be seen as an empowering term. After all, despite the discursive distancing of such labels as “modern primitive” or “outsider,” self-taught artists have been offered, since

33 Cahill and Gauthier, Masters of Popular Painting, 103.
the interwar period, as paradigmatic Americans, and in my conclusion I will explore the degree to which their gatecrashing led to a more inclusive concept of national cultural identity early in the 20th century. Therefore while I agree that self-taught artists should be considered American artists—hung in American wings, as Roberta Smith suggests, as well as those featuring modern and contemporary art—we should also avoid promoting integration to the point that the difference of these artists is completely diminished, for they too have a distinct story to tell. Specifically, we should let these artists redefine our conceptions of American art, reminding us that once upon a time, all American artists were considered “outsiders” and that many considered the notion of American culture itself to be an oxymoron.

So apologies in advance for the dizzying use of terms, which will henceforth appear without quotations, and also for the ahistoric invocation of outsider in my title, which I am overdue in addressing. Even though Kane, Moses and Pippin were very rarely referred to as outsider artists, they were still the predecessors—or the first generation, if you will—of the artists to whom that label has stuck since the 1970s. Calling self-taught artists only by historically appropriate terms gives a sense that the self-taught artists of today are somehow entirely distinct from those that came before them. Indeed, there are tremendous differences between the successive generations and even within them, but what binds all self-taught artists together is the fundamental commonality that their untutored art making—whether their practice entailed easel
painting like Kane or performance like Sister Gertrude Morgan—both challenged and resonated with the status quo of mainstream art. Indeed I would argue that one reason that self-taught artists have been trapped in the purgatory of art history, appearing here and there in surveys but never getting their due, is that they are perpetually received merely as outliers who materialized and disappeared, like shooting stars. In reality, they exist in a complex constellation with dozens—perhaps even hundreds—of other self-taught artists who lived and worked at a distance, but were made visible by shifting atmospheres of art world interest. There is no historiography of how these atmospheres crystallized and changed over the long 20th-century—a topic too lengthy and complex for a single dissertation—but I hope this text serves as the first chapter in such a project, at least giving the sense that the atmosphere of interest we live in today is indeed a case of history repeating and not an unprecedented phenomenon. In acknowledging the questionable propriety of my suggestion that Kane, Moses, and Pippin marked the emergence of American outsider art, I am reminded of something Alain Locke wrote in 1939 in relation to African American art: “Art doesn’t die of labels, but only of neglect. For nobody’s art is nobody’s business.”34 The primary goal of this dissertation is to make self-taught artists the business of art history—an intention that does not require a consensus on terminology, but rather a wide-ranging consideration of how they fit into

34 “Advance on the Art Front,” *Opportunity*, May 1939, 133.
larger cultural landscapes and set a precedent of “gatecrashing” that would be repeated by self-taught artists for generations to come.

In 1938, after more than a century of condescension and reproach, the American art world had a chance to show Europe that it had matured. Upon the invitation of the French government, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exported “Three Centuries of Art from the United States,” an expansive survey that sent more than 300 works of art to Paris’s Jeu de Paume from May through July. In his foreword to the show, MoMA president A. Conger Goodyear underscored the gravity of the moment, emphasizing that, “before now, the work of American artists has never been adequately presented in any city of Europe.”1 Art Digest editor Peyton Boswell described how the “East Coast” trembled awaiting the “verdict of that remarkably well-adjusted unit of French economy, the Parisian art critic. Would it be thumbs up or thumbs down?”2

Although both Boswell and his fellow critic Edward Alden Jewell ultimately agreed that the French response was a “thumbs down,” it was, as Jewell put it, a “cordial” thumbs down.3 For while the standard response that “America is still culturally young, still no more than a branch of the parent tree” was still in evidence, the critics’ patronizing diminution of the nation’s art was not totalizing. Painting and

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2 Boswell, Modern American Painting, 15.
sculpture by trained artists still left something to be desired, but the presentations of media not traditionally considered fine art attracted critical acclaim. François Fosca of _Je suis partout_ wrote, "I would give all the contemporary paintings in the United States for a few meters of the American films!" Jewell noted that most of the French art critics also "referred with delight to our 'primitives.'" For in addition to sections on cinema, architecture and photography, the show included one devoted to folk artists of the past and present. Surveying the French response in his aptly-titled 1939 book, _Have We An American Art?_, Jewell observed the following advice: "Look to your folk art, a firm voice urged. It is through ingenious manifestations such as we find in those maîtres populaires that American artists will become increasingly conscious of, and will reinforce, their own original potentialities. It is through such manifestations also that they will learn to despise pale imitators of French art."

Of course, the argument that folk and self-taught artists offered a form of expression that was authentically American did not originate with the French, but rather with a subset of the American art world that made possible the "American Folk and Popular Art" section at the Jeu de Paume show. As discussed in my Introduction, the enthusiasm for preindustrial utilitarian and decorative arts that emerged in the United States after World War I was one manifestation of a wide-ranging effort to uncover what

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4 Ibid., 44.
5 Ibid., 41–42.
literary critic Van Wyck Brooks called a “usable past.” Such seeking out of historical cultural patrimony would be both generative for contemporary arts and letters and a counterargument to the longstanding assumption of America’s cultural poverty. Wanda Corn has neatly summarized how the spread of “folk art fever” was fast and far-reaching: "What is 1924 had been an artist’s enthusiasm, with lingering Dadaist overtones of undermining official taste by exalting crude and unpolished art forms, had by 1931 become a serious market commodity with an increasingly weighty cultural presence.” Whereas 1924 marked “Early American Art,” an exhibition at the Whitney Studio Club of weathervanes, decoys and the like mostly drawn from the collections of artists, 1931 was when Edith Halpert opened The American Folk Art Gallery, an annex to her already successful Downtown Gallery, where she “promoted folk art as if it were modern.” Along with Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, the founding MoMA board member who was her number one folk art client, Halpert lent 23 of the 26 objects presented at the Jeu de Paume show. The remaining three works were, unlike those lent by Rockefeller and Halpert, by three artists who were still alive in the first quarter of the 20th-century — Joseph Pickett, William Edmondson, and John Kane. Founding MoMA director Alfred Barr, Jr. introduced these “popular painters,” who the museum also referred to as

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8 Ibid., 323.
“modern primitives,” as survivals of a pre-industrial folk tradition. “Today in the machine age the traditions of American popular art are dying out but, just as in France, individual artists without formal training continue to appear from the ranks of the people and sometimes put the professional to shame,” Barr wrote.

The Jeu de Paume exhibition might have included even more works by self-taught artists like Kane had it not coincided with MoMA’s biggest exhibition of such artists to date, “Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America,” which ran from April to June of that year and traveled to six American cities thereafter. MoMA’s support of self-taught artists—which climaxed with “Masters of Popular Painting”—may be the most well known example of institutional attention to autodidacts between the wars, but museums all across the country were engaged in this truly national phenomenon: The Barnes Foundation, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the San Francisco Museum of Art were among the institutions that supported self-taught artists, either through acquisitions of their work, exhibitions or both. Although many artists benefited from these endorsements, the Pittsburgh painter John Kane, whose 1929 Self-Portrait traveled to Paris in the Jeu de Paume show, possessed certain distinctions among them. By 1938, the work of the French autodidact

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9 MoMA had already thrown its weight behind both Edmondson and Kane, giving the former a exhibition—its first devoted to an African American artist in 1937, and acquiring its first work by Kane in 1935, with more to follow in 1939.
Henri Rousseau had been celebrated for decades, but Kane was the first “American” self-taught artist to “crash the gates” of the mainstream art world.11 Compared to Rousseau from the moment of his breakthrough exhibition at the Carnegie International in 1927, Kane appeared not only in exhibitions of self-taught artists, but also in displays devoted to contemporary and American art more generally. In the short time between his discovery and his death from tuberculosis in 1934 Kane managed to squeeze in five appearances at the Carnegie International and two at the Whitney annual. After his death, in addition to a series of memorial exhibitions in New York, Washington, D.C. and Pittsburgh, Kane’s work also appeared in no fewer than half a dozen texts on contemporary art published before 1940 including Boswell’s Modern American Painting, which set a record for art book sales in the United States by selling a quarter of a million copies between its first and second editions in 1939 and 1940.

A revival of interest in Kane’s oeuvre, which consists of around 150 paintings, followed Leon Anthony Arkus’s 1971 publication of Kane’s catalogue raisonné, an indispensable resource for my own study of the artist. Then, after becoming the representative of Kane’s estate in 1983, New York’s Galerie St. Etienne organized a

11 The trope of gate-crashing was invoked frequently in relation to Kane. For instance, he was described as having “crashed the International Exhibition at Carnegie Institute” and the “gate crasher of Internationals.” “Dewey Buys Two Paintings from Kane, ‘Strip’ Artist” (Pittsburgh Press, December 28, 1930), Press Folder, John Kane Artist File, Carnegie Museum of Art; “Kane Dispute to Be Climaxed By One-Man Show in New York” (Pittsburgh Press, September 13, 1931), Press Folder, John Kane Artist File, Carnegie Museum of Art.
traveling exhibition, “John Kane: Modern America’s First Folk Painter,” whose catalogue by Jane Kallir includes a lengthy critical essay on Kane. Other important scholarship on the artist has appeared in essay collections like Charles Russell’s Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art, but Kane remains relatively obscure in “insider” art histories. Despite Kane’s near absence in accounts of interwar American modernism today, this chapter is not merely a recuperative account of his swift rise from a working-class Scottish American immigrant to an artist whose work “hung with that of the ponderous mandarins of two continents.”

Rather, through the consideration of key works that span his oeuvre, the record of Kane’s life story published as Sky Hooks, and the countless articles that Kane inspired in the art press, I examine how key conditions of American modernism and modernity made possible Kane’s rise, and alternatively, how his success informs our understanding of those conditions. For Kane may have been embraced precisely because he was an art world outsider—“the votary of no school, and the pupil of no master”—but his success unfolded both in opposition to and in tandem with contemporary developments.

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13 I embrace Jennifer Marshall’s neat synopsis of the distinction between modernity, “the technologic and political procedures by which global economies were transformed in the mid- to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” and modernism, “a set of cultural, artistic practices” that responded to those changes. Jennifer Jane Marshall, Machine Art, 1934 (Chicago; London: University Of Chicago Press, 2012), xv–xvi.
proliferating across the pluralistic interwar landscape of American modernism. After introducing Kane through his critically acclaimed 1929 *Self-Portrait* as well as his posthumous “autobiography,” I consider his industrial and local subject matter in relation to various contemporary trends, including the Pittsburgh painters working in the school of Aaron Gorson as well as contemporary movements like Regionalism and Precisionism. Apart from his smoky Pittsburgh scenes, Kane was also celebrated for his depictions of Scottish Highland festivals—a factor in his reception that illuminates how the nativism of the 1920s was negotiated in American art circles. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that while there is no question that Rousseau and his posthumous appreciation “quickened awareness of the inherent qualities of our own self-taught artists” Kane’s acclaim as the American who “approached the thrown of Le Douanier” was not arbitrary. There were, as we will see, a battery of reasons why he was uniquely eligible to fill that role.

### 2.1 Portraits of The Artist as a Worker

In his *Self-Portrait* of 1929, Kane appears nude from the waist up, elbows scraping the edges of the canvas as he flexes his arms and tightens his pectorals (Fig. 1). Shadows darken the left side of his body, deepening the effects of age that leave his skin

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hanging in small ridges down his rib cage and across his collarbone. Kane allegedly painted this picture in front of a mirror that stood over his wash basin, where he was accustomed to stripping to the waist after a day’s work, which in 1929 meant painting houses. The white orbs that appear over his head are reportedly based on strips of muslin that his wife of 30 years, Maggie, ripped for Kane when he asked her to help him design a backdrop for the painting.\(^{16}\) The commanding frontality of Kane’s gaze, whose intensity is compounded by the blankness of the black vacuum beyond his imposing figure, has provoked comparisons to Albrecht Dürer’s iconic 1500 self-portrait (Fig. 2), although there is no evidence that he was familiar with that painting.\(^{17}\) It is more possible that Kane, an amateur boxer in his earlier days, may have been fashioning himself after photographs of John Sullivan, the Irish-American boxer who became the first heavyweight in champion of gloved boxing in the last decade of the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century. Sullivan appeared a brawny half-length nude with arms crossed over his chest in photographs and cigarette trading cards that would have been easily accessible to Kane (Figs. 3-4). Kane’s portrait shares with depictions of Sullivan an attitude of immodest showmanship and implicit combativeness that would have resonated with European stereotypes about brutish Americans when the work was shown abroad as well as with a legacy of rogue force that was part of Americans’ own self-mythology.

\(^{16}\) “Unidentified Document Related MoMA’s Acquisition of Kane’s Self-Portrait,” March 1939, Leon Anthony Arkus Papers, Series 2, Marie McSwigan Box F, Carnegie Library.

MoMA director Alfred Barr, Jr. offered another potential source for the painting, which the museum acquired courtesy of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller in 1939, when the museum exhibited the work again in 1941. A draft of his wall text for the painting reads, “Rarely has an artist revealed himself so unflinchingly. At the same time, by the curious canopy and the strange formality of the pose (as if he were a priest or dead), the artist has given his lean, aging nakedness an austere, even awe-inspiring dignity. This secular Ecce Homo is one of the unforgettable ikons of our time.”18 It is unlikely that Kane was familiar with Russian icons, but he did admire and copy religious imagery, both from the collection of the Carnegie Museum of Art (CMA), his local art museum, as well as more popular sources like illustrated palm cards distributed at mass services he attended regularly, especially in the last years of his life.19 Kane was a deeply pious individual who connected his love of art to the salvation he sought. Speaking of his triumph at the CMA in 1927, Kane modestly devalued the art world’s embrace: “I have lived too long the life of the poor to attach undue important to the honors of the art world or to any honors that come from man and not from God,” he said.20 Yet he very

19 A reporter for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette recounted the requiem mass given for Kane upon his death in August 1934. Reverence Leo J. Fallon praised Kane for attending mass nearly every day of the preceding two years and held up Kane’s life “as an example of the success each man may achieve by using the talents the Lord has given him to the best of his ability.” “Art Leaders at Kane Rites,” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, August 14, 1934.
much saw his love and talent for art as something that was related to his final judgment, remarking, "For I believe generally God finds a way to help those inclined to art," and, "A man who really loves art cannot commit a misdeed—that is to say, a mortal sin."21

Yet the visceral vitality of Kane’s Self-Portrait suggests there is more than just piety operating in this image. Kane’s rippling but worn musculature, work pants, clean shaven face, and close cropped hair establish his identity as an “American working man” and put this image squarely in the iconography of labor that, as Erika Doss has shown, emerged in fits and starts during the Gilded Age with artists like Thomas Anschutz and John Ferguson Weir but flourished during the Depression era.22 Kane may never have seen Anschutz’s Ironworkers at Noontime—an important antecedent of bare chests and flexed arms—but he lived it.23 For Kane originally emigrated from Scotland to work in mines and mills during the boom years of the United State anthracite industry. As Kane put it, "In America I did almost every kind of work a laboring man can do," sketching and eventually painting only when he was not hauling coke, filling furnaces, laying stone or painting houses—four of the many jobs that Kane held in the decades

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21 Ibid., 101.
23 For how that work broke the mold of the “Vulcan-at-the-forgue figure” of previous depictions of laborers, see Randall C. Griffin, “Thomas Anshutz’s ‘The Ironworkers’ Noontime’: Remythologizing the Industrial Worker,” Smithsonian Studies in American Art 4, no. 3/4 (July 1, 1990): 129–43.
surrounding the turn of the century. The legacy of manual labor implicit in his *Self-Portrait* was made explicit on the cover of *Sky Hooks*, Kane’s posthumously published autobiography, where his portrait is embedded in a composite scene of industry (Fig. 5). Flanked by furnace complexes and their rising plumes of smoke, Kane’s otherworldly self-representation levitates above a series of houses and a central locomotive that passes between two workers—a street paver and a house painter—who represent two of Kane’s many former trades. The cover is a fitting design for the four part chronicle of Kane’s life that follows, for as magazine editor Frank Crowninshield wrote in his foreword to the volume, “the actual story of his life, is not the autobiography of an artist; it is the autobiography of a workman.”

Kane was one of many immigrants recruited in his home country to come work for Pennsylvania steel. At nineteen, he followed his stepfather and older brother Patrick to Braddock, Pennsylvania leaving behind his mother, two sisters and a younger brother in his native West Calder, Scotland. Kane arrived with nearly a decade of mining experience as he had joined the ranks of the worker at the age of nine—three years shy of the legal age for mining in West Calder, though the authorities, despite their periodic

25 The illustration for the book cover is unattributed.
raids, were none the wiser.27 Once in the United States, Kane took his first job at a pipe factory in McKeesport, just outside of Pittsburgh, but it wasn’t long before higher pay in the coke mines of nearby Connellsville drew him back into the mines. “There has always been a pull for me around a mine. Unless a man has gone down into the pit and has helped to dig out the coal or coke or shale or whatever, swinging his pick with his strong right arm, doing a man's work in a manly way, he will not understand how much mining means to those who have done it,” Kane later recalled.28 Although Kane was ecstatic when his mother and siblings immigrated to Braddock, where he was able to find employment at the Edgar Thomson Steel plant, by the fall of 1884, he began venturing farther from his Pennsylvania base for work. He learned something of the South, where racism and mountain feuding perplexed him, as he migrated between mining towns in Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky. But by 1887 an affliction in his eye and homesickness for his mother, “Big Babbie,” brought him back to Pennsylvania. After several years more of the Connellsville coke mines, Kane got his best paying job as a street paver, but his work with the Callahan Street Company came to an end when he got “caught by a shifter with no lights” escorting his drunk cousin Patty across the tracks of the B&O railroad one night.29 Losing his leg in the collision, Kane, who was by

27 Unless otherwise noted, all biographical details are drawn from Kane, Sky Hooks: The Autobiography of John Kane.
28 Ibid., 40.
29 Ibid., 47.
then providing for his recent bride Maggie Halloran and their first daughter, Mary, was no longer employable in the mines or the mills.

The change of profession required by his injury proved to be fortuitous. Kane asserts that he “became a painter” during his next gig coloring boxcars for the Pressed Steel Car Company: “I learned the use of lead paint, the mixing of colors, the necessity of keeping colors clean and a deal else of information.”³⁰ Just as Kane’s paving job ended abruptly after his accident, however, the Panic of 1901 foreshortened Kane’s experiments in a new medium, at least temporarily. This stock market crash fueled in part by a conflict between shareholders in the Northern Pacific Railway destabilized the railroad industry, causing plants like the McKee’s Rocks location of the Pressed Steel Car Company where Kane worked to close. It was also around this time that Kane and Maggie lost an infant son to typhoid just days after his birth, before their local priest could even baptize him. The next 25 years were difficult. Kane endured a personal struggle with alcohol and the limited employability of an amputee, sometimes letting years go by between visits to his family as he took jobs in Ohio and West Virginia. By the time he made it back to Pennsylvania, settling permanently in Pittsburgh in the early 1920s, Maggie had moved with Mary and their younger daughter, little Margaret, to Alexandria, Virginia. Kane was not reunited with his wife until 1927, when she read

³⁰ Ibid., 55.
about his sensational debut at the 26th Carnegie International and arrived on his doorstep.

The above is but a brief sketch of the epic life that emerges from the first three quarters of *Sky Hooks*, an enduring source on Kane’s life that Leon Anthony Arkus reprinted it in his 1971 catalogue raisonné. Although it is packaged as an autobiography, *Sky Hooks* was compiled by Marie McSwigan, the journalist who, like Kane’s estranged wife Maggie, arrived unannounced on his doorstep in autumn 1927. The daughter of a newspaperman who was just cutting her chops at *The Pittsburgh Press*, McSwigan got a tip from CMA business manager, John O’Connor, who informed her that the Carnegie International—an annual exhibition of contemporary art then in its 26th year—would include "a picture behind the door, which in art parlance,” McSwigan explained, “is a painting that shouldn’t be there.” McSwigan soon discovered that O’Connor was referring to Kane’s “Scene from the Scottish Highlands” a jaunty scene in which two children dance to the sounds of a bagpipe player behind them, that hung in Gallery 8 of the American section alongside works by well known American modernists like George Luks and Maurice Sterne (Fig. 6). As McSwigan and many others would later report, the jury of the American section sought to pass on Kane’s four submissions to that year’s show, but a single member—the painter Andrew Dasburg—insisted upon including

Scene from the Scottish Highlands, making a show of good faith by purchasing the work from Kane for $50.32 Dasburg never articulated precisely what attracted him to Scene from the Scottish Highlands, but he was an artist who was sensitive to any number of “primitive” things by the late 1920s, having spent time in Taos and Santa Fe where he painted rustic pueblo landscapes and began collecting Hispanic and Native American crafts. Dasburg’s support for Kane also may have been primed by an encounter with the work of Henri Rousseau, which was on display at the 1913 Armory Show where Dasburg was also an exhibitor.33 Or he might simply have admired the modernist strains evident in Scene from the Scottish Highlands: Apart from the schematically conceived figures, whose rotund trunks and heads are curiously matched with small feet and hands in a manner of playful disproportion that resembles the contemporaneous painting of Yasuo Kuniyoshi, the work is pregnant with an intriguing tension. While one dancer performs unequivocally—content to be set on the stage that Kane carefully constructed in the work’s foreground with craftsmanship that betrays his past as a carpenter—the other glances at his partner apprehensively, his jig slightly out of sync. This drama is set against the music of a ghostly bagpipe player, who is indeed an

32 In some versions of this story, Dasburg threatened to vote down every other painting if Kane’s was not admitted. By the 1930s, he had sold it to the Pittsburgh collector George David Thompson, who would eventually gift it to the CMA. “Art Jury Row Made John Kane Famous,” Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph, August 12, 1934.

33 Although there is a letter from Kane to Dasburg thanking him for his purchase in the Leon Anthony Arkus Papers at the Carnegie Library, I have not found any accounts from Dasburg that explain why he was so adamant in his support.
incarnation of Kane’s deceased brother Patrick, which gives the painting the surreal
infusion of another spiritual dimension.

The conservative critic Royal Cortissoz did not discuss Kane’s work in his brief
essay introducing the American section, and because the catalogue did not include artist
biographies at that time, the only detail that could be gleaned from it about Kane was his
address: 1711 Liberty Street. McSwigan followed that lead to a “grim and oppressive”
boarding house in an immigrant neighborhood wedged between the Pennsylvania
Railroad tracks and the Allegheny River known as “The Strip.” Peeking into his
apartment after her knocking received no answer, McSwigan took in “a mad man’s
jumble of everything in the world, everything, that is, that is poor and mean and used
beyond the point of discard. Newspapers covered the floor to the waist.”34 Kane eluded
her then, as he was out painting houses, but he arrived the very next day in her office,
“collarless and hatless.” Despite his shabby appearance, McSwigan remembered, “The
dignity was monumental; the quiet a simple declaration of absolute, unshatterable
integrity.”35

As a city desk reporter, McSwigan was more typically writing obituaries than art
reviews, but over the course of her career she covered Kane’s exhibition appearances for
the rival Pittsburgh dailies that kept close tabs on Kane and his subsequent successes,

The Pittsburgh Press and The Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph. In 1932, she began visiting Kane on a weekly basis with the aim of recording his life, a project that was drawing to a close by the time Kane died of tuberculosis in August of 1934. Although it took McSwigan several years to find a publisher, the fact the manuscript was published at all in an era when monographs on American artists—let alone autobiographies—were exceedingly rare, is a testament to the marketability of Kane’s work and life. The Philadelphia house J.P. Lippincott accepted McSwigan’s manuscript in 1937, a decision that may have been motivated by the success of Thomas Hart Benton’s autobiography published earlier that year by Robert McBride and Company. The life stories of Kane and Benton were comparable insofar as they were archetypally American in a manner best understood through Constance Rourke’s seminal 1930 study of national character, American Humor. Drawing on American literature and popular theater, Rourke offered three stock characters or “types” that had taken shape in the United States over the course of the previous century and half: The Yankee Peddler, the Backwoodsman and the Negro Minstrel. Benton, a swashbuckling tough from the frontier, was a Backwoodsman through and through, while Kane was a classic Yankee, whose attributes Rourke describes as follows: “It was a prime part of his character to be a-doin’ […] He was a symbol of triumph, of adaptability, or irressible life—of many qualities needed to

36 Lippincott also had a history of supporting the work of Joseph Pennell, who also celebrated Pittsburgh in his art.
induce confidence and self-possession among a new and unamalgamated people.”37 It is not only the broad array of ways that Kane was “a ‘doin’ in his life, but also the exceptionalism with which he did them, that is a major theme of Sky Hooks. With frequency, Kane represented himself through superlatives. Not to be deterred by his lost leg, he declared, “I became the most accomplished peg leg wearer in the world. I could even dance a jig.”38 His exceptionalism also manifests itself in stories of his leadership, as when he settled a strike in Harlan country, saved non-English speaking Eastern European workers from a mine fire, or roused a group of exhausted African American soldiers to join him in a round of “John Brown’s Body” one night while working as a carpenter at Camp Sherman in Chillicothe, Ohio during World War I.

The astonishing variety of Kane’s successes inevitably lead to questions about the integrity of Kane’s recollections of his own life as well as McSwigan’s interpretation of them. McSwigan was adamant that the only transformative work she did to the narrative presented in Sky Hooks was to sequence it—a claim that is supported by her two extant reporter’s notebooks at the Carnegie Library, whose pages are filled with handwritten transcriptions of the same stories that appear in the pages of Sky Hooks, giving a sense that she really was taking her material “as it spilled from Kane’s lips.”39 She also testified in an unpublished version of her addenda to Sky Hooks, “There were times

38 Kane, Sky Hooks: The Autobiography of John Kane, 47.
39 This is how her role as amanuensis is described on the book jacket of the 1938 edition.
when I doubted [sic] the accuracy of a statement, and I set myself to hours and hours of research. I might have spared my pains. I never yet had the tiniest reference which did to check with the highest authorities available.”

McSwigan’s confidence in Kane’s memory and adherence to real events notwithstanding, Sky Hooks must be understood as emerging from what Patricia Sawin, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and M.M. Bakhtin, calls “a recursive and dialogic process.” Framing the life story of her subject, the folk artist Bessie Eldreth, Sawin explains, “She inevitably constructs a self rhetorically in relation not only to her current listeners but also to prior interlocutors and to the discourses that are the sedimented and internalized forms of social attitudes expressed in the past.”

Prior interlocutors, such as other journalists and art critics, surely impacted Kane, who repeated for McSwigan many episodes that had already been reported in the press. Kane not only knew what had worked in the past—tales of his pugilist exploits, for instance, which included a bout in Glenmary, Tennessee with future heavyweight champion Jim Corbett—but also was attentive to his current listener: an unmarried woman who had not known him in his more virile days.

Kane emphasized his physical prowess, telling McSwigan about how he “liked to swing his

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41 Patricia Sawin, Listening For A Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth through Her Songs and Stories (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004), 1.
42 Ibid., 4.
43 McSwigan’s notebooks include an entry that is an interview with Sam Harry, a miner with whom Kane traveled through Appalachia, taking different jobs that confirms Kane’s story about Corbett. This is an example of how McSwigan fact-checked some of Kane’s claims.
pick and dig,” and enjoyed “doing a man's work in a manly way” which, in turn,
McSwigan emphasized by titling the section devoted the heyday of his laboring years,
“Brawnyman.”44 This is not to imply that there was anything tawdry in the relation
between Kane and McSwigan, who probably regarded each other more as a father and
daughter figures than anything else.45 Rather, it is to understand Sky Hooks as mediated
both by Kane’s rhetorical self-construction, as well as McSwigan’s journalistic talent. For
while McSwigan insisted that her only editorial work on the narrative was chronological
reconstruction, she also admitted to at least one major conceptual tinkering: Naming the
book Sky Hooks, after the steel brackets that connect painters’ platforms to building
exteriors. Although Kane objected to it, the evocative title remained.46

Kane’s art “seemed to him neither more nor less dignified than his house
painting or carpentering,” and his equalizing treatment of his manual and artistic
labors—which the packaging and contents of Sky Hooks accentuated—hit a nerve with
the American art world that exalted his work in the early 1930s, when it was compelled
to re-envision the role of the artist in a society humbled by worldwide economic
depression.47 For, as A. Joan Saab has argued, while the turn-of-century moment was

45 After all, McSwigan was near the ages of Kane’s two daughters. McSwigan’s father had passed
away five years before she met Kane.
46 McSwigan remembers that Kane came to her office and asked her, “Why not the beautiful sky
the way God made it without putting any hooks in it?” They would detract, he felt, from the
characterized by Gilded Age cultural stratification, the 1930s marked a “desacralization of culture” through institutions like the Federal Art Project whose funding of murals, public statuary, community art centers and more was based on an underlying commitment to art as work. “By recognizing the American artist as a legitimate worker,” Saab writes, “Federal Art Project programs challenged the idea of art as a sacred object and the notion of the artist as a social outsider.” Having made his first sketches of Pittsburgh while laying the cobblestones of Carson Street, Kane was the antithesis to the conception of an artist laboring in isolation in a studio. “When my back wasn’t hunched over a blockstone, at lunch, or some other time, I would get out my pencil and make drawings,” Kane remembered. The press seized on the fact that even after he was a nationally renowned painter, Kane still worked in the manner he had been accustomed to throughout his life. One writer for the Los Angeles Times noted that while crowds gathered to see Kane’s work at the Carnegie International in 1928, “He was not perched before an easel, but was aloft on a ladder, swinging a broad brush against the side of a dwelling.”

As “the man who learned to mix his colors while painting signs, whose houses sit right on their foundations in his pictures because his trade as a carpenter taught his

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49 Kane, Sky Hooks: The Autobiography of John Kane, 45.
50 “Prize Artist Paints House: Grim Old Scotchman Makes His Living Outdoors as Critics Honor Him in Exhibit,” Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File), February 11, 1928.
how to build such houses,” Kane represented an extreme version of the artist “as the farmer or bricklayer” promoted by FAP ideology. And although he died before Congress appropriated funds for the FAP in 1935, his work did join the landscape of federally appointed artwork in March of that year when the Department of Labor opened a show of 15 of his works organized by the dealer Valentine Dudensing. The Carnegie Museum’s O’Connor suspected that of the many affirmations that Kane received from various institutional bodies, recognition from the Department of Labor, was “the honor that John Kane would have appreciated most.” His daughter, Margaret Kane Corbett agreed, writing, “To have been designated the representative American labor-artist. To have exhibited in the United States Labor Department. This to John Kane would have been worth any sacrifice.”

From Marie McSwigan’s breaking story, “Only Pittsburgher Admitted to the International is a House Painter,” to his posthumous Department of Labor exhibition, references to Kane’s labor history were a hallmark of his reception. Another constant was the comparison to Henri Rousseau, the French painter and tollbooth collector who had gained the admiration of modernists earlier in the century. Rousseau had been celebrated in American art circles since 1910, when Max Weber returned to New York

51 George Biddle quoted in Saab, For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars, 15.
53 Margaret Kane Corbett, “John Kane,” Undated, 2, Leon Anthony Arkus Papers, Series 2, Marie McSwigan Box D, Carnegie Library.
from Paris and convinced Alfred Stieglitz to mount a memorial show for Rousseau, who
died that September. Three years earlier, Weber had met Rousseau through Robert
Delaunay, the French modernist who along with Alfred Jarry and Guillaume
Apollinaire, was among the earliest supports of Rousseau.\textsuperscript{54} By the time of the Armory
Show in 1913, other Americans had begun collecting Rousseau and the earthshaking
exhibition included ten of his paintings. Even more of Rousseau’s works went on view
in New York in 1924 when Marius de Zayas curated a solo show for the artist at the
Whitney Studio Club.\textsuperscript{55}

MoMA’s “Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and
America,” was the next major exhibition of Rousseau’s work in the United States, and
this time Kane appeared alongside him. As its title implies, the exhibition brought
together 150 works by autodidacts from two continents. MoMA director Alfred Barr, Jr.
famously framed the exhibition as the third in a series of shows “intended to present
some of the major divisions or movements of modern art,” thus redeeming a gesture he
had made three years earlier in his now infamous tree diagram of modernism’s
development, where Rousseau was accorded his own node informing Cubism along

\textsuperscript{55} Lynne Cooke, “Outside In: Outliers, Institutions, and the Interwar Years” (CASVA Colloquium CCLXX, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., April 17, 2014).
with another primitive art, “Negro Sculpture” (Fig. 7). As Lynne Cooke argues, Barr’s approach to “modern primitives” was, like Barr’s broader taste in art, international in focus. Three years after overseeing continental pluralism of “Masters of Popular Painting,” which was equal parts French and American, with two Canadians thrown in, to, as Cooke sees it, “add credibility to the claim that this was an international phenomenon,” Barr presented self-taught artists as “international in character, even more than their professionally trained colleagues.” Barr made this assertion in 1941, upon the opening of “Modern Primitives,” MoMA’s first exhibition drawn from its permanent collection, and he qualified it as follows: “It is hard to tell a French primitive from an American. All share the common denominator of Western culture at its most democratic level and all express the straightforward, innocent and convincing vision of the common man, ignorant of art or unaffected by it.” Yet even within this exponent of “Western culture at its most democratic level” there were still hierarchies. For “Masters of Popular Painting” elevated Kane and Rousseau to a kind of grandmaster status within their respective national sections, as they were represented by 20 and 19 paintings each while the other artists included in the exhibition were afforded far fewer entries.

57 Cooke, “Outside In: Outliers, Institutions, and the Interwar Years.”
58 Ibid.
Rousseau’s posthumous success undeniably made the American art world more receptive to finding “a Rousseau upon its own shores.” But, Cooke’s point about Barr’s internationalist approach to “modern primitives” notwithstanding, when the mantle of “American Rousseau” came to rest on Kane’s shoulders, it represented both a translation and a transformation—Rousseau, Americanized. Consider the bare-chested Kane we find in Self-Portrait as contrasted with the nattily dressed Rousseau in the latter artist’s Myself, Portrait-Landscape (1890) (Fig. 8). Rousseau towers over his surroundings in the outfit of a Salon painter—imaging himself in a manner that, Nancy Ireson suggests was “grander than those seen in the few known photographic portraits” of the artist. Meanwhile, Kane’s self-representation, here as in Sky Hooks, is subsumed not by the aspirational artist identity that is evident in Rousseau’s self-portrait, but, as previously discussed, by his self-identification as a workman humbled physically by a life of manual labor and spiritually by his faith in a God who favors self-effacing artists. Even when John Kane did edge toward a beaux-arts depiction of his artisthood, filling his hands with a palette and paintbrush in works like Touching Up and John Kane and His

60 Cooke’s cataloguing of Barr’s internationalist approach adds an important dimension to our understanding of the modern primitive category, which is too often associated only with nationalist programs like Holger Cahill’s folk art movement. However, Kane is a case in point of how American modern primitives were also received by the press and other members of the art world in terms of their national relevance rather than their international character, despite Barr’s intention.
Wife, he was never idly posturing in the manner of Rousseau. Even in those works Kane was at work like a good Yankee: always a ‘doin, proudly wearing the work clothes that Rousseau eschewed, especially at his easel.

In 1929, an Art Digest article outlined another difference between Kane and Rousseau: “It looks as if Kane has ‘arrived’ without waiting to die, as Henri Rousseau had to do in France, and that he has ceased to be regarded as a ‘joke,’ as was the poor Douanier up to the day he gave up the ghost.”62 After all, Rousseau may have been championed by the avant-garde during his lifetime, but he was rejected by the official establishment to which he aspired. Whereas Rousseau’s only recourse to exhibitions in his lifetime had been through non-juried salons, it was, as one Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph headline put it, “Art Jury Row Made John Kane Famous.”63 The degree to which Kane’s self-representations, in paint and print, accentuated his identity as an artist-laborer that fit with an Depression era ethos of art as work was one way that Kane achieved the mainstream success that eluded Rousseau in his lifetime. It is important to point out, 

62 “Kane, House Painter, Ceases to Be a Joke,” Art Digest, November 1, 1929, 18.
63 “Art Jury Row Made John Kane Famous”; John House has emphasized how crucial the existence of the non-juried Salon de Independents was to Rousseau's success: "Without such an outlet, there was no way in which Rousseau could have found a public for his art. Although, initially at least, his canvases were reportedly hung in the most remote corners of the exhibitions, the independents gave Rousseau one crucial thing: exposure." John House, “Henri Rousseau as an Academic,” in Jungles in Paris, ed. Frances Morris and Christopher Green (Tate Publishing: London, 2005), 182–89. Other self-taught artists like Emile Branchard and Patrick Sullivan benefited from the permissiveness of the American version of the Salon des Independents, The Society of Independent Artists—the rejection of Marcel Duchamp’s The Fountain notwithstanding—but Kane’s art was exalted in a variety of juried shows. The 1927 International was just the beginning of his vetted art world appearances.
however, that Kane’s storied acceptance at the 1927 International was preceded by unsuccessful attempts on the gate. His submissions in 1925 and 1926 included a copy of an Old Master work and a derivative religious painting that caused CMA director Homer Saint-Gaudens to send Kane a kind rejection, explaining that his copies could not be included in an exhibition of “original” work. Just being a self-taught artist with a desire for recognition was not enough; there was also the matter of what Kane was painting and when he was painting it. As we will see in the next section, while enthusiasm for the possibility of an American Rousseau may have helped get Kane past the gate, it was the appeal of his native subject matter and folksy industrialism in the increasingly conflicted machine age that kept him there.

2.2 Folk Poet of Industry

During the year that followed his initial success at the 26th Carnegie International, Kane did not rest on his laurels. In the spring of 1928 he submitted six paintings to the annual exhibition of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh (AAP) and four to the 27th Carnegie International that Fall. The AAP accepted all of his submissions, awarding second honors to Turtle Creek Valley, while the International accepted only Old Clinton Furnace (Figs. 9 & 10). The successes of these two paintings are important not

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65 As Cooke has argued, for instance, unlike their French counterparts, “The American autodidacts, differed relatively little from that of their professional compatriots. These affinities could be attributed to the fact that many vanguard artists had adopted what Goldwater would term “primitivizing” strategies in order to shake off the taint of European influence and heritage.”
only because they proved that Kane was more than a flash in the pan, but also because of how these works prefigured the expansive Pittsburgh views that would become the most significant part of his oeuvre. In Turtle Creek Valley, the lush greenery of a rural suburb dominates. The only hint of its industrial “urb” are distant smoke plumes to the northwest, which emerge as a “counterforce to the pastoral” in the same manner that Leo Marx describes the train whistle that disturbed Nathaniel Hawthorne’s idyllic portrayal of Sleepy Hollow. In a sense these works can be considered sister pieces: If the bustling steel industry that drew Kane to Pittsburgh in the last quarter of the 19th is nearly invisible in Turtle Creek Valley, it is the centerpiece of Old Clinton Furnace, where the dusky sprawl of a historic Pittsburgh mill dominates the canvas.

While absorbing the successes of these atomized Pittsburgh views—one devoted to the garden, the other to the machine—Kane began working on a much larger vista that stitched together Pittsburgh’s pastoral and industrial swatches. In Through Coleman Hollow up the Allegheny Valley, Kane captures a view of the Monongahela Valley in which passing locomotives—a hallmark of his future canvases—cross cut verdant hills, running parallel to a steamboat pushing a load of coke or slag upriver (Fig. 11). Kane sold the work to David G. Thompson in 1929, but later borrowed it back to make a larger version, which was later sold to Henry Luce. This version, taken from a different vantage point, included “machines” like passing locomotives.

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66 They are “significant” both in the sense that he made the most of them and they were the most popular.
68 Kane sold the work to David G. Thompson in 1929, but later borrowed it back to make a larger version, which was later sold to Henry Luce. This version, taken from a different vantage point, included “machines” like passing locomotives.
valued this painting, which was his largest canvas to date, as his “Best.” So he must have been surprised when, upon submitting it to the 29th Carnegie International in 1930, it was rejected in favor of Homestead, a view of the notorious mill town where workers initiated a series of industry-hobbling strikes in 1892 (Fig. 12). At only 24 inches by 27 inches, Homestead lacks the proportions of Through Coleman Hollow, but it is a tighter composition. In Homestead, the passing trains provide a visual path for wending toward the smoky steel complex—a more inviting framing device than the chunky cleft of Through Coleman Hollow. Despite being about half the size of Through Coleman Hollow, Homestead also offers an impressive amount of detail, the artful hoarding of which would become one of the most commented upon aspects of Kane’s painting. Through Coleman Hollow also represented a breakthrough in the balance between the industrial and the pastoral that would flourish in Kane’s subsequent Pittsburgh views, causing one writer to observe, “The mills of Pittsburgh were his constant theme, but always to relieve the industrial scene was the background, where green hills and valleys were done with minuteness and delicacy that is unbelievable when it is realized that the hand

69 Leon Anthony Arkus, John Kane, Painter. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 167. In his entry for Through Coleman Hollow up the Allegheny Value, Arkus excerpts a letter that Kane wrote to Eugene Williams, the first buyer of the work, in which he writes: “Now Mr. Williams up to date the Allegheny Valley is my Best painting.”

70 “In the painting of a highway scene, it was said that Kane had so carefully painted the automobiles that one could almost tell the make of each car,” one reporter recounted. George Johnson Carr, “John Kane, 74, House Painter and Artist, Dies,” New York Herald Tribune, August 11, 1934. Others noted how his “wealth of detail never confuses the simple movements of his composition,” also calling his detail “painful” and “painstaking.”
that painted them was the same that long since should have lost its sensitiveness through the hard labor it performed.”

Although *Through Coleman Hollow* would eventually have its own day in the sun, when MoMA board member Stephen C. Clark purchased it for a reported $6,000 at Kane’s memorial show in 1934, the 1929 jurors’ choice of *Homestead* was immediately redeemed when Abby Aldrich Rockefeller purchased the work, causing a frenzy in the press that included headlines like, “Laborer’s Art Goes to a Rockefeller.” At the two subsequent Carnegie Internationals, Kane’s views of the Steel City prevailed: the 1930 jury chose *Across the Strip*, a view of the “scrambled poor section” where Kane lived, which was purchased by Duncan Phillips and became the first Kane to enter a museum collection (Fig. 13); and in 1931 Kane’s view of the Jones & Laughlin steel plant, *Monongahela Valley*, gained entry (Fig. 14). The Carnegie International was suspended in 1932, but in 1933 and 1934, two other Pittsburgh views—*Industry’s Increase* and *Crossing the Junction*—made the cut. Kane had surely detected the pattern in the art world’s response to his Pittsburgh paintings. While he continued to paint smaller pieces featuring human figures as well as pictures with Scottish subject matter, which will be

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71 One writer noted Kane’s balance of the garden and the machine: “John Kane Artist and Laborer,” *Unidentified, in Misc. Folder*, n.d.
72 “LABORER’S ART GOES TO A ROCKEFELLER: Pittsburgh Box Car Painter’s Canvas Chosen for Modern Collection Here. SCENE SHOWS STEEL MILLS Prof. Dewey Buys Another Picture by John Kane, Whose Genius Is Acclaimed by Authorities.,” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, January 5, 1931.
discussed in the next section, after 1930 more than 80 percent of the works he painted were expansive views of Pittsburgh.73

In addition to painting specific steel mills, Kane depicted Pittsburgh’s most famous landmarks, further anchoring his paintings to the visual hallmarks of his adopted city. Kane devoted entire canvases to attractions such as St. Paul’s Cathedral, the diocese of Pittsburgh, but he also incorporated such iconic architectural signposts into larger views. Along with St. Paul’s gothic spires, the Cathedral of Learning—the 42-story Gothic Revival tower of the University of Pittsburgh that began construction during Kane’s lifetime—appear in works like Panther Hollow and even one of Kane’s few religious works, Pietà, in which Christ appears curiously splayed beneath the skyline of Pittsburgh’s Schenley Park (Figs. 15 & 16).74 Although Kane certainly was not received as part of the Benton-Curry-Wood “triumvirate” that art critic Thomas Craven famously hailed in his now infamous 1934 Time article, the specificity of place in Kane’s work links his painting with the Regionalist movement that gained momentum during the same years that his paintings were ascendant.75

73 I made this calculation based on the catalogue raisonné.
74 Dorothy Kantner, “Kane’s ‘Pieta’ Returned to Pittsburgh,” Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph, May 4, 1936. Kantner reported that Kane copied this religious scene—sans Pittsburgh setting—from a copy of a Pietà attributed to the 15th-century Avignon School that hung at the CMA. She credited Kane with using this historical precedent just “as Van Gogh copied Delacroix or Millet. Intentionally and in minute detail.”
75 Thanks to Jane Kallir for pointing out to me that artist and folk art collector Michael D. Hall has written about the confluence between Regionalism and the work of Anna Mary Robertson Moses. Kane is an even more apt example, because as Hall admits, Moses was “late” the Regionalist scene, as her first New York exhibition was not until 1940, while Kane’s rise was
Kane’s picturing of his adopted city, the so-called “Gateway to the West” can be understood in relation to Midwestern regionalism in the same way that Donna Cassidy has argued that Marsden Hartley’s late, New England-centric work “intersected” with it. For Kane was not ideologically engaged with the Regionalists’ opposition to “Manhattan-centrism and Europhilia,” but his work nonetheless rehabilitated the degraded reputation of Pittsburgh, which was famously described in 1868 by a journalist as “hell with the lid taken off.” Critics praised Kane for highlighting the “idyllic patches of nature amidst the hell hole of smoky Pittsburgh” and making “beautiful pictures out of a smoky suburb, a land cut by railroad bridges and besmirched by factories.” As with his Self-Portrait, Kane’s landscapes derived their power and originality from their channeling of raw, rugged subjects—his own aged body in the former, and his polluted native city in the latter. Between 1929 and 1935, Kane’s work was shown by MoMA, the Whitney and the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art alongside painters associated with Regionalism and the American Scene more generally, contemporaneous with the early rise of Regionalism. See Hall, “Picturing Myth and Meaning for a Culture of Change.”

and when Edward Hopper juried the AAP annual in 1933, Kane’s Liberty Bridge, a view of Pittsburgh’s Southside, won first prize. Further evidence that Kane’s work harmonized with an American Scene aesthetic is that he attracted the patronage of Henry Luce, a major supporter of the Regionalists. In 1934, Luce paid a reported $3,200 for Kane’s Turtle Creek Valley (1932), a painting that reversed the view of his earlier Turtle Creek Valley toward Pittsburgh, showing the hilly region from its South end, where it is carved through by the iconic Westinghouse Bridge (Fig. 17). A prime example of Kane’s comely ordering of Pittsburgh’s rough edges, this later, larger Turtle Creek Valley appeared in a two page full color Vogue spread in 1938 called “Four American Artists Look At America,” that also featured works by Curry, Hopper, and Reginald Marsh (Fig 19). Luce’s own publications did not run any major stories on Kane, although in 1938 Life magazine named Sky Hooks one of the best books of the year, and Turtle Creek Valley was included in Peyton Boswell’s best-selling 1939 book, Modern American Painting, which was drawn from the Luce collection (Fig. 18). Just as Kane was contextualized with painters associated with the American Scene in the pages of Vogue, Modern American Painting reproduced his work above Vermont Landscape, Luigi Lucioni’s Regionalist vision of a red silo against the state’s rolling Green Mountains. Although Kane was, as I will soon discuss, far from the first painter to capture Pittsburgh, by the

mid 1930s, he had arguably become to the Steel City what Grant Wood was to Iowa and John Steuart Curry to Kansas. In an unsigned 1936 review of Kane’s memorial show at the Carnegie in *The Bulletin Index*, the critic attested to Kane’s mastery of Pittsburgh, writing that “he had caught her tortuous, troubled spirit and her cut-up hills and the sweep of her green valleys as no other man before him.”

Kane’s reputation as Pittsburgh’s “poet laureate” originated with Henry McBride of *The New York Sun*, a critic who was suspicious of the propagandistic character of most Regionalist painting. McBride’s interest in Kane was more related to his perennial fascination with romantics like William Blake, Albert Pinkham Ryder and Louis Eilshemius, hence his dubbing Kane a poet. McBride first described Kane in literary terms in his review of the 29th Carnegie International for *Creative Arts*, where *Across the Strip* was “the only picture in the whole collection that did give me that stir of the pulses that Emily Dickinson said is the true test of poetry.”

Two years later, in his review of Kane’s first New York show at Gallery 144, McBride connected Kane’s painterly poetry with his ability to transform Pittsburgh into a thing of relative beauty:

That Mr. Kane lives in Pittsburgh is proof, if more were needed, that a poet’s choice of residence is unimportant. The main thing is to have the seeing eye. Not that Pittsburgh is terrible. It is simply that Pittsburgh is one of those places that has to be viewed by ordinary people in a special light, say at sunset or in a heavy snowstorm in order to gain an effect. But to Mr. Kane such

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enhancements were unnecessary. It was only necessary for him to see the baker’s wagon delivering bread in the early morning to realize that he had a subject worthy for a poet to paint.  

Previous painters of Pittsburgh had relied on the environmental effects that McBride identifies as an effective filter for beautifying the city. The city’s chaotic topography—marked by constant interruptions of mountains and rivers—was further complicated by the explosion of the steel industry after 1850. By the end of the century, however, these industrial intrusions would become a source of pride among those associated with Pittsburgh’s largest annual art event, the Carnegie International. Established by Andrew Carnegie in 1896, the Carnegie International was intended to stimulate domestic art production by providing American artists exposure to a selection of contemporary art that was international in scope. The International brought many European artists to Pittsburgh to serve as jury members of the show’s national sections and, according to Rina C. Younger, their service included a trip to see Carnegie’s Homestead works at night. One of the earliest paintings of Pittsburgh industry thus came via Norwegian artist Frits Thaulow, who served on the 1898 jury, and was inspired to create the pastel Steel Mills along the Monongahela, Pittsburgh, 1898 after one such crepuscular visit (Fig. 20).  

As Younger chronicles, American artists soon followed suite: In 1904, for instance,

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83 Carnegie Institute, Department of Fine Arts, Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings from Previous Internationals, 1896-1955 (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute, 1958).
Martin Leisser painted *Jones and Laughlin Mill At Night* in an impressionistic style similar to Thaulow’s, using the smoke plumes rising from the Eliza furnaces of the titular mill to frame the blasts happening at the Hazelwood Coke Works across the river (Fig. 21). Younger asserts that Thaulow and Leisser were among the first to image Pittsburgh in the medium of painting, but suggests that it was Aaron Gorson who originated “the Pittsburgh School.”

A Lithuanian-Jewish immigrant who trained with Jean-Paul Laurens and Benjamin Constant at the Academie Julien at the turn of the century, Gorson returned to the United States with a focus on portraiture in his early career, but the painter soon switched gears, embracing his adopted city as the inspiration for his art after 1909. “My aim is to supply the world of art with something new and Pittsburgh gives me this opportunity. Pittsburgh is not only the greatest industrial city in the world, but perhaps the most beautiful as well,” Gorson said. Gorson’s work appeared at the inaugural exhibition the AAP in 1910, and his industrial landscapes would be a fixture at these exhibitions in subsequent decades (Fig. 22). Christopher “Christ” Walter, who served as AAP president from 1922 until his death in 1938, was one of the many painters influenced by Gorson. Walter has also been, in addition to his predecessor at the AAP,

85 Ibid., 129.
James Bonar, described as self-taught—a fact that is surely not incidental to the AAP’s embrace of Kane and other naïve painters during his tenure.\textsuperscript{87}

Kane claimed to frequent local art exhibitions so it is reasonable to assume that before his own industrial views began earning prizes at the AAP, he was taking in the work of painters from the Gorson School that exhibited there.\textsuperscript{88} Kane thus benefited from the fact that by second decade of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, depictions of industry were no longer solely the domain of engravers like Joseph Pennell, whose collection of “highly expressive and celebratory illustrations of American foundries and steel mills,” \textit{Wonders of Work and Labor}, was published in 1916 by J.P. Lippincott—the same Philadelphia house that released Kane’s \textit{Sky Hooks} two decades later (Fig. 22).\textsuperscript{89} In \textit{Wonders of Work and Labor}, Pennell remarked of the Edgar Thomson Steel Works in Braddock—one of Kane’s first places of employ—“how much more impressive is a row of blast furnaces, oil wells,

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\textsuperscript{88} A major inquiry must be done into popular sources for Kane’s industrial imagery as well. The journalists who visited Kane during his lifetime, Marie McSwigan included, commented on the preponderance of newspapers in his apartment, which he apparently kept in stacks several feet high. Furthermore, as I will touch on later in this chapter, Kane made a practice of painting over photographs, so his use of supporting material for the subjects of his paintings is well known. Unlike Grandma Moses, whose sources, which included Currier and Ives prints, calendar illustrations, postcards and more, have been preserved, whatever media Kane’s may have collected as inspiration for his paintings were not archived after his death. Therefore, a broad search into popular print material that circulated nationally and locally must be done in the future.

\textsuperscript{89} Doss, “Looking at Labor,” 236.
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and coal breakers, than trees!"\textsuperscript{90} Pennell was far from alone in this sentiment. By the time his book was published, the transatlantic Vorticist movement had already begun publishing a periodical called \textit{Blast!} that aestheticized modern industrial machinery both through word and image. Yet while the blast furnace—along with many other processes in steel production—were invented in England, as Betsy Fahlman has argued, “the howling roar of the blast furnaces, whose smoke, flames and sparks lit up the nighttime sky like the ancient eruption of Vesuvius, symbolized American industrial muscle and production.”\textsuperscript{91} A seminal moment in the Americanization of industrial might arrived the same year as Pennell’s \textit{Wonders of Work}, when the dealer Robert J. Coady penned his manifesto on American art in the debut issue of his short-lived Little Magazine, \textit{The Soil}. After declaring, “There is an American Art. Young, robust, energetic, naive immature, daring and big spirited. Active in every conceivable field,” Coady enumerates a list of more than 100 exemplars, beginning with “The Panama Canal, the Skyscraper” and ending with, “Steam Hammers, Stone Crushers, Steam Rollers, Grain Elevators, Trench Excavations, Blast Furnaces—This is American Art!”\textsuperscript{92}

In subsequent years, many of Coady’s favored machines would be visualized in a thoroughly modernist style by such artists as Morton Schamburg, Charles Demuth, Louis Lozowick, and, most famously, Charles Sheeler in a movement retroactively

\textsuperscript{90} Fahlman and Schruers, \textit{Wonders of Work and Labor}, 16.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 31.
labeled Precisionism. Having established that blast furnaces were, by 1916, a muse both to Pittsburgh painters working in outdated styles as well as the circle of “moderns” who were the audience of Coady’s manifesto, I now return to Kane’s *Old Clinton Furnace* as a departure point for considering how to reconcile Kane’s depictions of industry with the Precisionist painting that was ascendant contemporaneously. For Kane’s idiosyncratic realism is seemingly the antithesis of the “‘precise’ style of linear forms and almost imperceptible brushwork” for which artists like Sheeler were praised.93 As we will see, however, it was precisely Kane’s lack of technique that allowed his work to exalt a vision of industry appropriate to the time.

Built on Pittsburgh’s Southside by Graff, Bennett and Company but named after the parent company of this firm, Clinton Iron Works, the mill that Kane painted in *Old Clinton Furnace* was first “blown” in late October 1859.94 Before this plant, Pittsburgh’s mills had struggled to effectively transport raw material from mines scattered throughout the Allegheny region’s rich ore vein to the mills along the Ohio and Monongahela rivers. Graff, Bennett and Company was the first Pittsburgh mill to use coke from the Connellsville region Southeast of Pittsburgh, which arrived at the plant via the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Line, which Kane depicts across the bottom of the

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picture. Mount Washington—the overlook that still affords one of the best views of Pittsburgh—towers over the plant, while the Wabash Bridge, which conveyed railcars across the Monongahela’s North and South banks, stretches to the East. With the exception of one photograph that was probably staged for a newspaper story, Kane never painted en plein air. Rather, he sketched his subject matter on scraps of paper and reformulated his compositions in his studio, which often resulted in editorializations.95 As Jane Kallir has observed, “He had a tendency to tighten up or compress "empty" spaces. Alternatively, he might make a tree-covered hillside more interesting by filling it with little houses.”96 Comparing an early 19th-century photograph of Graff, Bennett and Company with Old Clinton Furnace, we can see how Kane both deviated from and stayed true to his subject (Fig. 24). While Kane forewent the incline of the railroad as it passed before the plant, he was precise about the composition of the furnace complex, although he did make some adjustments to enable a better view of its parts. For the blast furnace is a complex aggregate of components that are not easy to read from a frontal perspective. In the photograph, for instance, the incline used to convey the coke to the top of the furnace appears to run almost straight down the body of the furnace. Charles Sheeler had a strategy for making components like this steep conveyer legible in his photograph of a blast furnace at Ford’s River Rouge plant (Fig. 25): he arranged the

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95 Which later included envelopes from the Carnegie and the AAP.
furnace by photographing it from below in a manner that emphasizes the top chamber’s position at a junction between the conveyer (above left), the pipe (above) connecting the furnace to combustion chambers beyond the frame, and the bridge (above right) where workers intervened in the process, top filling the furnace. Instead of changing his vantage point, something he would do in later paintings featuring furnace complexes, like Monongahela Valley, Kane improvised with Old Clinton Furnace, splaying the conveyer to the right to capture its slope and moving the red brick cast house farther to the side to accommodate it. To the left of the furnace, he loyally depicts the two combustion chambers that heated the air piped into the bottom of the furnace, where it generated the namesake “blast” that transformed the top-loaded coke into molten steel. Kane images that powerful internal explosion, which had Graff, Bennett and Co. producing 12,000 tons of steel annually, in a fiery blaze that surrounds the belly of the beast.

Clinton furnace may have represented an important turning point in Pittsburgh’s Steel production, but it was quickly superseded by new technology like the much larger Lucy furnace, which Andrew Carnegie opened in 1872. In fact, at the time Kane painted this scene, Clinton furnace had been recently decommissioned. As “the first furnace he saw when he came to Pittsburgh,” the complex had sentimental value to Kane, and in a rare gesture, he added an epigraph to his painting—“Gone But not

97 Fahlman and Schruers, Wonders of Work and Labor, 32.
Forgotten”—at the bottom right of the canvas, thus recording a sense of obsolescence that was deeply personal for this former steel worker. “I do not believe many people realize what the steel workers of fifty years ago went through,” Kane remarked in *Sky Hooks*. “All that is changed now. Machinery takes care of the heavy jobs of carrying furnace and top-filling.”98 Like old Clinton furnace, Kane belonged to another era of steel, one that was increasingly in the past due not only to technological advancement, but also the Great Depression’s toll on production, which, Erika Doss argues, contributed to a waning enthusiasm for Precisionism’s glorification of industry. “With industry shutdowns and a dramatic slump in urban construction (by 1932, steel plants operated at only twelve percent of capacity and industrial construction had dropped from $949 million to seventy-four million dollars), Precisionist images of smoking factories and towering skyscrapers were no longer viable American icons,” Doss writes.99

Even when Kane depicted still functioning steel mills in *Homestead* and *Monongahela Valley*, his paintings can be considered paeans to the golden age of the American anthracite industry that had drawn to a close by the end of the 1920s insofar as they were highly idealized views painted in a “folk” style. *Homestead*, for instance, makes a pleasing picture of the steel town that became the site of a bloody standoff.

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between strikers, the Pinkertons that Carnegie sent to stymy them, and eventually the National Guard. In the 1935 issue of *Survey Graphic*, Kane’s paintings appeared as illustrations of poet Haniel Long’s “Pittsburgh Memoranda”—an account of Pittsburgh’s history that includes a long episode devoted to the Homestead Strike, which Long memorializes as “a bad affair... July sixth a bad day in Homestead... an all-day battle, with dynamite and dead men. The Pinkerton brigade was run out of town between lines of slugging.” Yet Kane’s *Homestead*, one of the six paintings chosen as companions to Long’s prose, bears no signs of this strife: Smoke from the furnaces form an uncommonly thick veil blowing to the East, but the bright colors of the dense yet orderly houses, the steady reflection of the Homestead Grays Bridge over still water, and the neatly chugging trains render this a picturesque scene of production, which was in keeping with Kane’s tame approach to worker’s rights. Although he belonged to the Knights of Labor and the Miner’s Union, Kane was dismissive of strikes, saying, “There isn’t any sense in them.” And whereas many former workers in Carnegie’s steel mills resented the steel magnate, Kane paid tribute to him with the work *Andrew Carnegie’s Birthplace*. According to Arkus, this painting, which features a kindly effigy of Carnegie hovering over a Scottish estate, may have been called “My Birthplace” in earlier

exhibitions—a difference in title that would deepen the kinship that Kane felt with his fellow Scotsman.  

Indeed Kane’s paintings idealized the harsh reality of the Allegheny steel mines that involved 12 hour shifts, six days a week, and other inhumane working conditions. When they appear in his paintings at all, workers are industriously engaged in labor, usually on roadways or train tracks in the bottom registers of paintings like *Old Clinton Furnace* and *Monongahela Valley*. They are dwarfed by the industrial complexes they serve, which are, in turn, integrated into larger landscapes whose natural and domestic elements defuse the otherwise alarming incursion of industry. In 1936, *Art Front*, the mouthpiece of the John Reed Club, ran an article on Kane in which author John Boling seized upon the discrepancy between what Kane must have experienced in the mines and the tidy scenes he depicted:

Never did he paint the tortuous hell of Pittsburgh and McKeesport as he had experienced it himself, never the sweat of work nor the industrialization of the country as he saw it. He viewed the city architecturally, certain buildings within the static frame of the settlement, typical little houses of the suburbs without stamina or character, two or three trains puffing against each other. A makeshift world into which the drawn-in pattern of every single cobblestone and blade of grass fitted perfectly. Kane’s painstaking attention to detail and talent for arrangement left no room for the perception of fracture or ambivalence and was also called upon as evidencing his high

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102 Arkus, *John Kane, Painter.*, 335.
103 Boling, “A Perfectly Honorable Business.”
level of craftsmanship, which was not to be confused with technique—something that was associated with trained artists. In a 1957 survey of American art, MoMA curator Dorothy Miller celebrated Kane’s painting in terms of his handiwork: “He had the artisan’s respect for his medium a sure feeling for surface and pattern, and the craftsman’s insistence upon exactness and carefully studied detail.” Miller supported her argument with an oft-repeated quote from Kane, in which he articulated his quality guarantee: “One thing I cannot abide is sloppy work in any form. I think a painting has a right to be as exact as a joist or a mold or any other part of building construction,” said Kane. Although Kane’s “exact” paintings were highly opposed to the pictorial efficiency that Sharon Corwin attributes to Sheeler’s Precisionist painting, the devotion to exactitude Kane voiced recalls Sheeler’s own—much more morbid—description of his process: “I favor the picture which arrives at its destination without the evidence of a trying journey rather than once which shows the marks of battle. An efficient army buries its dead,” Sheeler famously said. Despite their common commitment to hard won finish, their results were wildly disparate. Yet the contrast between Kane’s idiosyncratic “constructions” and Sheeler’s invisible “battles,” became, quite literally, a selling point for Kane’s work. Art critic Murdoch Pemberton opened his catalogue essay for Kane’s sell-out memorial show at New York’s Valentine Gallery with the

observation, “Living in a stream-lined age where the ideal is a mechanized slickness, the 
suspicious layman may look upon Kane as a joke the dealer is perpetrating on a public 
that takes its opinions second and third hand.” Murdoch goes on to hail Kane as “one of 
the few great American painters of this age”—a superlative that he attributes to Kane’s 
spiritual commitment to relating “his conception of life, through his medium, without 
regard for current fashion and without slavery to mere technique.”

Pemberton presents Kane as liberated from technique, elevating his idiosyncratic 
realism in a manner that has recurred throughout discourse on self-taught artists—from 
the 1930s to the present day. Holger Cahill, in his 1938 catalogue essay for “Masters of 
Popular Painting,” lauded the hampered realism seen in the work of self-taught artists 
for its loyalty to emotion and experience. “Surface realism means nothing to these 
artists,” he wrote. “With them realism becomes passion and not mere technique. They 
have set down what they saw, but, much more, they have set down what they knew and 
what they felt [...] their art is a response to the outside world of fact and they have very 
definite methods for its pictorial reconstruction.”

Robert Goldwater was not quite so 
generous in his book of the same year, Primitivism in Modern Painting, which linked 
Henri Rousseau’s naïve style to “mechanical inadequacy,” and emphasized that 
Rousseau aspired to an academic style of painting, not the accidental modernism that

107 Murdoch Pemberton, “Catalogue Essay,” in Memorial Exhibition of Selected Paintings by 
108 Cahill and Gauthier, Masters of Popular Painting, 98.
earned him the admiration of the avant-garde.\textsuperscript{109} Although Goldwater did not consider Rousseau a folk painter, and indeed there has been a considerable effort on the part of folklorists in recent decades to undo the fast and loose application of the folk label to 20\textsuperscript{th}-century artists working in individualistic modes, during this period, and even in some circles today, the terms folk, self-taught, naïve, etc. are used interchangeably, and one of their common denominators is this sense of “mechanical inadequacy.” As John Michael Vlach has explained, "In the paintings generally labeled as folk, the conventions of fine art are present but not fully deployed.”\textsuperscript{110} Kane, for instance, seemed to intuit the rules of one-point perspective, but never mastered the convergence of parallel lines, instead embedding his Pittsburgh landscapes in concentric curves—river bends, winding tracks, and the curving valleys they cut through—that never progress to a vanishing point. Therefore, whereas Sheeler’s philosophy of finish led to autochthonous-seeming victories, Kane’s paintings were a veritable graveyard of human attempts, which was in fact an important source of their vitality. Called upon to defend his awarding of honors to Kane and another self-taught painter at the AAP exhibition in 1933, Edward Hopper demurred: "In the vast sea of technically competent mediocrity


that makes up the work to be selected at most exhibitions, one grasps at anything with a sign of life and this is often found in the most unskillful things.”

Kane’s Pittsburgh paintings thus converged with contemporaneous trends in painting through their local and industrial subject matter but diverged in important ways. In his 1942 text, *The Emergence of An American Art*, Jerome Mellquist even went so far as to label Kane’s work a “rapprochement between painting and the industrial community such as the sweaty advocates of the ‘American scene’ have not even attempted.” In effect, his work engaged the content of contemporary painting, but abstained from the more divisive attributes of its ideologies and related styles. His Pittsburgh paintings presented an idealized American landscape without being motivated by the “in-bred nationalism” of the Regionalists that was famously mocked by members of the Stieglitz circle. And while Precisionism “was a little chilly,” Kane’s steel mills were touched with the warm body of the folk, whose outline was detected in his non-technical style. In a sense, Kane’s work benefited from the momentum of these movements, both of which importantly engaged the search for national character in art, but offered something more: for while he pictured subjects deemed authentically

113 As Erika Doss argues, “With industry shutdowns and a dramatic slump in urban construction (by 1932, steel plants operated at only twelve percent of capacity and industrial construction had dropped from $949 million to seventy-four million dollars), Precisionist images of smoking factories and towering skyscrapers were no longer viable American icons” (241).
American in that era, such as machines and regional landscapes, he did so as “one of the series of individual, quaint poetic folk painters who through the years of our history have come from the ranks of the people.” Yet how a Scottish immigrant came to be a representative of the American folk remains to be seen. “After all,” as his daughter put it, “He was born in the old country. He belonged to Europe before being adopted by America.”

### 2.3 The Naturalization of a Natural

As the former editor of *Vanity Fair* and the art editor of *Vogue*, Frank Crowninshield not only lent a certain imprimatur to *Sky Hooks* by contributing its foreword, he also brought—as McSwigan had before—a journalistic taste for melodrama to bear on his framing of Kane’s unlikely story. Shortly after opposing Kane’s rise to anything one would find in Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists*, Crowninshield wrote:

> During the twenty-five years that preceded his first exhibition of a picture, the inner circles of American art—our critics, collectors, dealers, and instructors—had been awaiting the arrival of a new master. They had sought him in the schools and academics, among the discoveries of the art critics and the protégés of the rich, among the young exquisites, the disciples of new techniques and the followers of new movements. They found him poor, unknown, unlettered; past sixty-seven; in broken health; without friends or influence; the votary of no school, and the pupil of no master.

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For Crowninshield, the fact that the American art world, engaged as it was in a quest for a messiah, would find it in such a humble figure was the central irony of Kane’s story, but it was deepened by a secondary irony: That this particular arrival of “The Great American Thing” was not even native born.117 “Kane, so American in his nature and message,” observed Crowninshield, “was not even an American by birth, having been born in Scotland of Irish parents, and not having emigrated to this country until he was nineteen.”118 This potential spoiler actually would not have come as a surprise to those familiar with Kane, whose immigrant origins were a highly visible part of his public persona. The press had long identified him by his ethnic roots, describing him as a “Grim Old Scotchman,” calling him, “an immigrant from Scotland like Andrew Carnegie” or commenting that he was “not a native of the United States.”119 For Kane’s love of Scotland was amply recorded in Sky Hooks, where he called it “as keen in my memory as it is dear to my heart,” and also apparent in the more than a dozen paintings he made of Scottish subjects.120 For while Kane devoted a few works to standard Americana fare—like Independence Day parades and the Gettysburg Address—he also painted Scottish castles and traditional performances. “One thing I cannot paint too often is the Scotch Highland dress. It brings back associations of my

120 Kane, Sky Hooks: The Autobiography of John Kane, 12.
childhood,” Kane said. “It is now fifty-five years since I left Scotland but my mind is clear and fresh of those scenes as if it were yesterday.”

Kane had the opportunity to refresh his memory by attending the Scottish festival held annually at Pittsburgh’s Kennywood Park, a picnic ground turned amusement park that was located about fifteen miles from downtown. The “magnificent paradox” of Kane, who struck some as the “most truly American artist” despite his foreign blood and persistent reference to it, cannot be understood without a critical analysis of whiteness and American racial formation during the interwar period.

In one of the first scenes of *The Great Gatsby*, narrator Nick Caraway joins his cousin Daisy and her husband Tom for dinner in West Egg. Tom, the archetypally Anglo-American alpha male, wastes little time before assailing his dinner guests with racial theory: “Civilization’s going to pieces,” he laments. “I’ve gotten to be a terrible

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121 Ibid., 99.

122 Kennywood was named for Anthony Kenny who let local residents picnic on his land—in the 1860s. It opened in 1898 when the Monongahela Street Railway company leased the land from Kenny to create a park that was linked with trolley service to Homestead and other mills.

pessimist about things. Have you read, ‘The Rise of the Colored Empires’ by this man Goddard?” As Matthew Jacobsen has noted, Tom is referring to *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* by Harvard professor and future Nazi sympathist Lothrop Stoddard, which "proceeded, paradoxically, from a delineation of superior and inferior whites." Through *The Rising Tide of Color* and other publications, Stoddard propagated the dubious racial science that gained popularity in the United States as immigration surged in the last quarter of the 20th century. In *Races of Europe* (1899), for instance, William Z. Ripley—Stoddard’s colleague at Harvard—used the dubious method of cephalic indexing to argue that descendants of Europe originated from one of three distinct races, the ideal Teutonic, the middling Alpine or the debased Mediterranean. By World War II, Jacobsen asserts, previously hierarchized whiteness would be consolidated into a “monolith of privilege,” but in the first decades of the 20th century, the sense that descendants of certain European nations were racially inferior was a dominant force. Eugenics emerged as a field that not only catalogued racial difference, but also developed policies to prevent the "Approaching Extinction of 'Mayflower' Descendants," as one chart from the 1921 International Congress on

Eugenics was titled.127 Prominent eugenicists like Madison Grant and Harry Laughlin entered into mainstream political discourse, providing Congressional testimony and serving on the committee that determined the new immigration quotas established by the 1924 Johnson Reed Act—the most restrictive immigration policy in United States history. By limiting the quantity of incoming immigrants to 2% of their country of origin’s representation in the 1892 census, the Johnson Reed Act effectively embargoed the entry of peoples associated with the “second wave” of immigration—namely Southern, Central and Eastern Europeans.

The American art world reflected and refracted this nativism through what Jacqueline Francis has called its discourse on “racial art.” Francis uses the work and reception of Malvin Gray Johnson, Yasuo Kuniyoshi and Max Weber—three “race” artists whose association with modernism owed both to their art and their racialized bodies—to demonstrate how "the work of artists who belonged to religious, ethnic, and racial minorities in the United States was contrasted with that of the national majority."128 For instance, when MoMA opened its first exhibition devoted to contemporary American art in 1930, critics complained that the Japanese American Kuniyoshi, the Bulgarian-born Jew Jules Pascin (1885-1930) and the German American Catholic Lyonel Feininger (1871-1956) “did not belong in the company of U.S.-born

127 Ibid., 197.
Even contemporary artists who were native born and white were not necessarily candidates for Americanness if their styles were deemed to be overly influenced by European academies or avant-gardes. As an artist who suffered from this accusation early in his career, Marsden Hartley turned to American Indian art, and later, New England subject matter, as a means for asserting his American identity. Other painters, including Sheeler and those like Kuniyoshi who summered at the Ogunquit Painting Colony after World War I, used pre-industrial American folk art to “de-Europeanize” their art. Despite the fact that Holger Cahill—a first generation immigrant himself—developed his own curatorial interest in folk art based on European museological practices, or that some of the most celebrated subcategories within the folk art canon that Cahill shaped—such as Pennsylvania German pottery and fraktur—were obviously drawn from European traditions, there developed a sense that folk art “was entirely out of the soil and out of the people and had very little to do with what was going on in Europe.”

Just as Americanness was policed in the sphere of contemporary art, so too was it tightly restricted within the newly institutionalized collecting fields of folk and decorative arts. Victoria Grieve has noted how R.T. Halsey, the stockbroker and

129 Ibid., 35.
Mayflower descendent whose collection of American furniture and decorative art formed the cornerstone of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1924 only acquired objects created prior to the second wave of 19th-century immigration. Whereas Halsey’s collection promoted an Anglo-Saxon ideal of Americanness through its chronological delimitation, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller’s important collection of folk art, which was partially sourced by Cahill, also upheld a largely white Protestant view of the national past due to geographic constraints. As I have argued elsewhere, Cahill attempted to diversify Rockefeller’s collection, which was drawn predominantly from New England and the Mid-Atlantic region, by traveling through the South in the spring of 1935. His search, which may have yielded important pieces by African American folk artists, instead led him to conclude that, when it came to folk art, the South was “not as rewarding as the North.” In his subsequent office as Federal Art Project director, Cahill undertook his most significant effort to catalogue a canon of American folk art with the Index of American Design, which was also lacking in diversity. As Erika Doss observes, “African American folk art and crafts were

133 Katherine Jentleson, “‘Not as Rewarding as the North:’ Holger Cahill’s Southern Folk Art Expedition,” Archives of American Art 2013 Graduate Student Essay Prize Winner, September 2013, http://www.aaa.si.edu/essay/katherine-jentleson.
included in the Index, but sparingly, perhaps because a number of Southern states (such as Georgia, Mississippi and Florida) were barely represented."\(^{134}\)

This is the backdrop against which Kane’s paintings highlighting the survivance of Scottish traditions on American soil curiously came into favor. As previously established, Kane’s scenes of Pittsburgh—his indisputably American subject matter—were his most popular, but his Scottish scenes also led to several career breakthroughs: *Scene from the Scottish Highlands* earned him his first entry to the Carnegie International in 1927, after all. And in the years surrounding his death, three different multi-figure scenes of Scottish celebrations at Kennywood were chosen for exhibitions at the AAP, MoMA and the Whitney. Moreover, his Scottish scenes were reproduced with frequency in the press, especially the painting, *The Lassie*, which was illustrated on the cover of *Art News* in December of 1937 and appeared in various studio photographs reproduced in newspapers like *The Pittsburgh Sentinel* (Fig. 26). In order to understand how these works might have been considered an acceptable display of Old World origins, I now turn to *Scotch Day at Kennywood* (1933), whose unique inclusion of an older man dancing a fling has long intrigued me (Fig. 27).

The painting, which has been part of MoMA’s permanent collection since 1953, offers a rare example of Kane’s ability to model light and shadow in the old dancer at

the right of the canvas. In this figure, Kane matches the talent for portraying the effects of age that he exhibited in his earlier *Self-Portrait*, expertly limning the deep eye sockets and worn mouth of the old man. Kane’s children, in *Scotch Day* and elsewhere are, by contrast, rarely naturalistic, instead appearing with round, flat faces often drawn into simpering sweet smiles. Kane’s youthful figures exhibited an uncharacteristic degree of realism in the ill-fated painting, *Dad’s Payday*, a work featuring three children sitting on their stoop, awaiting their father’s return that Kane exhibited in his 1931 show at the Junior League of Pittsburgh (Fig. 28). Milan Petrovits, a Viennese-born Pittsburgh painter who was a frequent AAP exhibitor and prizewinner, suspected that *Dad’s Payday* was painted over a photograph. Working in collaboration with *The Pittsburgh Press*, which was always game for a good Kane story, Petrovits purchased the work and removed its paint to find his suspicions were merited—a photograph lay beneath. On June 4, the paper ran a story with the exposed canvas and included this reprimand from Petrovits: “Painting over photographs is absolutely unethical. It isn’t fair that this man should be accepted for the Carnegie International while all the rest of the Pittsburgh artists are rejected. This isn’t art.” Kane responded by explaining that he had first begun overpainting photographs as a way to make money during lean years a decade

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135 Kane was criticized for his distortions of the human figure by one art writer: “Kane could not paint figures although he would not admit it, even to himself. The men, women and children in his works were stilted and stiff, awkward and ugly.” “Artist Kane Dies ‘Broke’ Despite Fame,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, n.d.

earlier, when he would collect photographs of family members from his neighbors, send them away to be enlarged, and then color them. He insisted that he did not realize the practice of overpainting was verboten in modern art circles, and reassured his enthusiasts that all of his paintings on canvas were originals—an argument that was repeated by art world pillars like Duncan Phillips who came to his defense. Kane followed up on this claim by agreeing to have one of his more significant works, Old Saint Patrick, x-rayed; a picture story of this exonerating trial ran in The Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph just three days after the original story broke (Fig. 29).

Although Scotch Day at Kennywood was finished post-scandal in 1933, by which time Kane had surely parted with the risky practice of overpainting, the face of the old man in this work is so well modeled, especially in comparison to the other figures in the picture, that it begs for an x-ray. At the very least, we can be sure that Kane based some of the dancers in this work on real attendees of the 1933 Scotch Day: A Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph story that reproduced the painting specified that the little girl at left center is

137 Kane also insisted that he was intending to pull the wool over anyone’s eyes: “If any one had thought to ask me, I’d have told them those few were photographs,” he told the press. “Prize Artist Admits Using Photos,” Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963), June 7, 1931, http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/docview/181232985/citation?accountid=10598.

138 The consensus among the press was that Kane’s career easily survived this crisis. One reporter summarized his resilience: “The Kane vogue went on and on—some buyers even sought the photograph paintings.” “Artist Kane Dies ‘Broke’ Despite Fame”; The New York Sun reported that Manfred Schwartz, the principal of Gallery 144, was "perturbed" that Kane had not told him about the overpainting scandal, which unfolded just as Schwartz was buying Kane's work with an eye toward becoming his representative in New York. But Kane’s show at Gallery 144—his first solo show in New York—went on, opening in March of 1932. Schwartz gave Kane another show in 1934, and when Kane died, Valentine Dudensing took over Kane's estate. “Kane Denies Forsaking Art,” New York Sun, n.d.
Jean Wood, an eight year old who had “returned from Dundee Scotland to participate in the entertainment program,” while the white haired man performing a traditional fling is George Keillor, 62, "an elderly Scottish gardener on one of Pittsburgh’s millionaire estates." Kane’s by then deceased older brother Patrick makes a cameo as the bagpipe player in the uniform of the Black Watch, a regiment of the British army that began wearing kilts in the late 18th-century and which Patrick joined during World War I. Patrick appears on the bagpipes throughout Kane’s Scottish scenes, and this constant insertion of a deceased blood relative can be read not only as an act of memorialization, but as an expression of the kinship that Kane felt with the Scottish descendants who gathered at Kennywood.

The combination of Jean, Patrick, George, and the unidentified lad to his right is also intergenerational, alluding to the maintenance and passing down of Scottish tradition on American soil. Yet this survival of non-American identity is occurring in an importantly staged manner—a spectacle observed by masses of parkgoers in and across the pond. By the 1920s, these kinds of performances of ethnic identity were familiar, as both immigrant pageants and exhibitions featuring pageant-like performances had proliferated since the turn of the century. For instance, in Allen Eaton’s Homelands exhibitions, which began in Buffalo in 1919 and traveled to other American cities.

thereafter, a central space was reserved for nightly music and dance performances of the European ethnic groups whose handicrafts were showcased in stalls curated as domestic displays.\textsuperscript{140} Writing on the impact of the Homelands exhibitions, Diana Greenwold explains their function: "Progressives argued that the cooperative process of practicing and performing pageants fostered tolerance among immigrant groups and between native-born and immigrant communities."\textsuperscript{141} In addition to traveling nationally, the Homelands exhibitions inspired other celebrations of immigrant traditions such as the America Now Exposition at the New York Armory in 1921, which included performances by Scottish-American children dressed in Highland dress who resembled Kane’s lads and lassies (Fig. 30). Aside from these interventions, which as Greenwold argues, offered a “palatable vision of ethnic diversity” Highland dress was already familiar to Americans, as it had been worn by militia companies comprised of Scottish immigrants in New York and South Carolina since the middle of the 19th century. Albany’s “sons of Scotia,” who were the among the first to wear the tartan uniform of the Black Watch in the United States, fought for the Union during the Civil War, and can be seen in this illustration by Winslow Homer for Harper’s in 1861 (Fig. 31) Woven plaid

\textsuperscript{140} Scholars such as Diane Tepfer and Eugene Metcalf Jr. have noted how Allen Eaton’s attention to a wide range of ethnic folk art contrasted with the folk art collecting happening with contemporary art circles. “Neither Halpert nor her immigrant artists who collected nineteenth century America [sic] folk art showed any interest in folk art which recalled their own native lands”

was even American enough for the Index, which included at least a dozen swatches of tartan fabric (Fig. 32).

Kennywood’s ethnic annuals—for the park also hosted designated days for Ukrainians, Poles and Czechs—were in a sense steam valves for ethnic tensions, providing a sanctioned time and space for ancestral traditions. The Old World performances at Kennywood were contained spectacles, not integrated quotidian practices, and the key presence of spectatorship in Scotch Day also attests to how they were amply surveilled. Stabilized by the element of pageantry, the display of foreign traditions in Scotch Day is further neutralized by the preponderance of whiteness throughout the scene. In the distance, the spectators’ faces appear as so many daubs of light flesh, while in the foreground, the pale complexions of the performers are accentuated by their salutary ruddy cheeks. Strong architectural white accents like the windmill panes and the railing buttress the flurry of white skin and clothing, which reaches its apogee in the figure of George, where it mounts from his socks to his hair, stretching from his akimbo right arm to his outstretched left. That the eldest figure is the whitest is important, signaling the longstanding place of the Scot in America. For around the time of Kane’s arrival in 1880, Scottish people were on the cusp of benefiting from what Nell Painter has termed “the second enlargement of whiteness.”

ostracized, Americans of Celtic decent saw their societal standing change in the 1880s when “millions of dark-eyed immigrants” arrived in the second wave of immigration that came to be reviled by nativists, the turn-of-the-century incarnation of the Know-Nothings who had vilified the Irish just decades earlier. The 13 million people who immigrated from Central and Eastern Europe between 1886 and 1916 saw, as H.G. Wells put it, the "older American population . . . being floated up.” The anti-Catholic, anti-Irish nativism that had flourished in American cities like Pittsburgh in the 1850s, and even received pictorial expression from local artists like David Gilmour Blythe, had receded. Moreover, Scottish immigrants had never been discriminated against as harshly as their Gaelic brethren, the Irish. Their privileged place began in the 18th century, for the Scottish enlightenment served as an important influence on early American political consciousness, and continued in the 19th, as high profile Scots reinforced American capitalism. Andrew Carnegie was the most famous “Star-spangled Scot,” consolidating steel production on the East Coast, while the Donahue brothers

143 Ibid., 205.
145 There are many striking similarities between Blythe and Kane. Although Blythe apprenticed with a decorative wood carver, he was largely self-taught and also spent time painting houses in the Allegheny region. However, he began approaching painting as a fulltime career much earlier than Kane, setting up various portrait studios and endeavoring, albeit unsuccessfully, to create a massive touring panorama of the Allegheny mountains. For more on Blythe, and especially his anti-immigration political agenda, see Corey S. Piper, “David Gilmour Blythe’s Street Urchins and American Nativism” (Masters Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006); Bruce W. Chambers, The World of David Gilmour Blythe (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980).
made a fortune through foundries, shipbuilding and railroads out West. As Carnegie put it himself, “America would have been a poor show had it not been for the Scotch.”

This privileged position of Scottish Americans within the hierarchy of whiteness, which was entrenched by the aforementioned pseudo-scientific studies of race theorists like Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant, was something that Kane experienced firsthand while working in the mines and steel mills of the Allegheny. In Thomas Bell’s historical novel Out of This Furnace (1941), Bell describes the experience of Czech immigrants working in Braddock during the same period that Kane was employed there:

Arrived in America they were thrust—peasants and shepherds that they were—into the blast furnaces and rolling mills, and many of them paid with their lives for the unfamiliarity with machinery and the English language. Even more bewildering were the hostility and contempt of their neighbors, the men they worked with.

That hostility, that contempt, epitomized in the epithet “Hunky,” was the most profound and lasting influence on their personal likes the Slovaks of the steel towns encountered in America. Kane remembered being benevolent to these “new immigrant” miners, saving them from a mine fire and inviting them to his house to box. But he still benefited from his Scotch ancestry in the mines, avoiding the most dangerous jobs, which were “too

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148 Thomas Bell, Out of This Furnace (Boston: Little Brown and Co, 1941), 123.
dam dirty and too damn hot for a 'white' man,” and invoking the epithet for recent Austro-Hungarian arrivals by nominating himself the “Mayor of Hunkeytown,” upon the success of his informal boxing club.149

Kane was a good immigrant, the kind “with a capacity for assimilation” that President Coolidge called for via a Good Housekeeping article in 1921.150 Furthermore, the specific tenor of Kane’s immigrant story enhanced his viability as an American. For without his unprepossessing beginnings in this country, the narrative of his rise would not have been nearly as rewarding. As his daughter, Margaret Kane Corbett commented in her brief, unpublished biography of her father, “It makes the story a little more interesting to be way down at the bottom of the ladder when an individual has ascended to fame.”151 In 1931, an article in Pittsburgh’s Bulletin Index identified the archetypal trajectory of Kane’s rise:

It is a success story worthy of Horatio Alger and proves the adage about truth and fiction. A Scotchman and his wife come to America to seek their fortune, they journey from city to city in search of work until he puts his facility with the brush to practical use painting houses, he daubs occasionally at a canvas, and one day his paintings are bought by Rockefellers, shown in international exhibits, and finally displayed in the clubrooms of the Junior League in an exhibition of their own.152

149 Roediger, Working toward Whiteness, 74; Kane, Sky Hooks: The Autobiography of John Kane, 55.
150 Painter, The History of White People, 323.
151 Corbett, “John Kane,” 1.
152 “A House Painter Turns Artist: John Kane Nears Pinnacle of Success With Acceptance by Pittsburgh Social Register,” The Bulletin Index, February 12, 1931.
As Jane Kallir has observed, “Kane could readily be perceived as a personification of the American Dream: an uneducated Scottish immigrant who finally made good amongst the cultural elite.”¹⁵³ Kane’s success was thus emblematic of a kind of mobility that had long been associated with the possibilities of life on American soil. At the same time, the climate of America had in the past been suspect, from Cornelius de Pauw’s 1768 finding that American soil was insufficient to support the normal health of mammals to a longstanding assumption that the frontier, which according to Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis was the defining element of 19th century America, was “hostile to the life of the mind.”¹⁵⁴ Discourse on the American environment in art surveys between the wars took a different tack: Conceived not just as physical terrain but also as a pattern of life that unfolded within national boundaries, the domestic environment was credited both as generative and as responsible for producing the distinctly national character of American art. Especially in Edward Alden Jewell’s writing on American race and art, there emerged a sense that admitting to one’s European origins did not have to be a liability—but could rather serve as a point of departure for demonstrating the power of American climes to change its citizens: “We are not aborigines,” Jewell

conceded. “If we were, how the whole business would seem to be simplified.” In his Euro-centric conception of American origins, Jewell insisted that “the voyagers who stepped ashore did not merely continue as they had in Europe, and went on to explain that “adaptation” was most effective when it occurred at a formative age: “Complete ‘Americanization,’ on the other hand, might not be achieved short of the second, or even the third generation, if the process of becoming ‘naturalized’ occurred after the formative years of a man’s life had yielded indelible attachment to, or if they served to keep vividly alive memories of, a previous environmental condition.” Once again, Kane met these criteria. Although he did not gain citizenship until 1896, he conceived of his true naturalization as abrupt and forged through his productive contributions to society: “I was nineteen when I came to America and then I at once became an American workman,” he said. Crowninshield, of course, waxed more poetically about the transformative effect that life in the United States had on Kane:

If he had stayed in Scotland, or Ireland, he would never have been caught up in the surge, the vortex of creation that was America—the frenzy of construction of growth, of building things and making things. He would never have seen so much sheer natural beauty and so much raw man-made ugliness jostling each other in the strange, the uniquely American pattern that formed the theme of so many of his paintings. It was America that made him paint.

155 Jewell, Have We An American Art?, 106.
156 Ibid., 173–4.
In Crowninshield’s estimation, the decisive factor in Kane’s success was not something ingrained—which would have risked being a Scottish trait—but rather America herself. Kane was thus a case study in the power of Americanization in years that were still marked by the lingering nativism of the 1920s but were also moving toward some of the multiculturalist shifts of the New Deal Era, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt would tell the conservative Daughters of the American Revolution, “We are all immigrants.” As an immigrant who “passed” as white and wholeheartedly embraced his adopted country, Kane could not have been a better representative of America if he had been a native son.

Kane’s identity was thus bifurcated in many different directions: He was an artist—accepted to the most elite art exhibitions of his day—but he was also a common laborer, whose art-making emerged from his practical endeavors and never overshadowed them. As an artist he was contemporary, in that he was alive and painting subject matter popular in the late 1920s and early 30s, but he was also a folk painter on account of his non-technical style and the nostalgic pathos of his works. He was an immigrant, but he was also an American because his ethnic group had been in the United States for generations and had risen to a particularly high level within the industrial capitalist framework of Pittsburgh, where Andrew Carnegie was king. The possibility for slippage between these identities made Kane highly versatile—able to satisfy a variety of art world yearnings that existed contemporaneously and often in
contradiction with each other. For Kane’s work upheld many of the values of different segments within the pluralistic interwar art world, but he was never ideologically aligned with any of them. Visually complementary to the contemporary but forever bounded by his unconventional art training, Kane’s work maintained its appeal as “a breath of fresh air in a soap factory.”\footnote{Henry McBride, “John Kane Memorial Exhibition,” The New York Sun, February 2, 1935.}

The archetype of the American artist that Kane offered—industrious, original and if not native, at least naturalized—not only functioned domestically but internationally as well. In addition to the Jeu de Paume show with which this chapter began, Kane was shown in London in a smaller survey of American art undertaken by Wildenstein galleries in 1936, where his Crossing the Junction—the last painting Kane completed before his death—was considered “in a category all by itself.” The taste for American self-taught artists abroad was related to Europe’s longstanding regard of the United States as primitive other, and while the American art world would use this to their advantage throughout the 20th century, there was also discomfort with how this harnessing of American naiveté became self-perpetuating, which will be explored in depth in Chapter Four in relation to Grandma Moses.

The art world would eventually exclude self-taught artists from its formulations of American modernism, but its gates were tellingly permeable for Kane for the reasons enumerated here. That modernist primitivism—the revolt against the civilized mores of
European culture that forever altered the course of 20th-century art—primed the success of Kane and Rousseau before him is clear, articulated explicitly in their classification as modern primitives. This deep reading of Kane’s work and reception history reframes his success, presenting it not as an outlying phenomenon, but as an instance of how the American exponent primitivism that was pervasive in the interwar art world thrived on the practice of indigenous othering. Whereas Europeans sought a radical alternative that was often from a distant time or place, alterity was at home in the United States and became an asset to the search for national character in art through a variety of manifestations that included the celebration of “modern primitives” like Kane but also the interest in Pueblo ghost dances among artists like John Sloan, Albert Barnes’s fascination with African American spirituals, and the material culture of ancient civilizations from farther South on the continent, which appeared at MoMA in the 1933 exhibition, “American Sources of Modern Art.” The art world’s recurring tendency to look not only inward but also to the outermost limits of its conception of national history and identity was a defining feature of the search for an authentically American modernism between the wars. As the art world thus reflected on viable forms of contemporary expression and cultural patrimony, Kane appeared in the mirror and held their gaze.
3. Both Negro and American: Horace Pippin’s Crossover Appeal

Exactly one decade after John Kane’s breakthrough at the 1927 Carnegie International, the self-taught African American painter Horace Pippin succeeded in placing two works in a prestigious local show, the Chester County Art Association’s sixth annual exhibition. The CCAA annual may not have been internationally sourced and juried in the manner of the Carnegie International, but it catered to a region of Southeastern Pennsylvania with a far richer artistic legacy than Pittsburgh. For Chester County encompasses the Brandywine River Valley, which attracted some of America’s most famous landscape painters beginning in the 19th century and later became an outpost for the country’s top illustrators, such as N.C. Wyeth and Howard Pyle. Pippin’s co-exhibitors at the CCAA in 1937 were far from unknowns, with Franz de Merlier, Andrew Wyeth, and Ralston Crawford taking home the jury’s top honors. Just as Kane’s Scotch Day at Kennywood had been treated as a “behind the door” painting at the Carnegie International, Pippin’s Cabin in the Cotton I, a rustic rural scene, and The Blue Tiger, a fantastical animal painting featuring a tiger brawling with a bear, were initially given an inauspicious placement (Figs. 33–34). But Pippin found an advocate in N.C. Wyeth’s son-in-law, the painter John McCoy, who prevailed upon CCAA president Christian Brinton to find a more prominent location for Pippin’s work. Both paintings went on to receive honorable mentions, and within two months, they reappeared at the
West Chester Community Center in Pippin’s first solo exhibition. Months later, they reached audiences in New York, as they were among the four Pippin paintings featured in the Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA) seminal survey of self-taught artists, “Masters of Popular Painting.”

Pippin was the only African American artist included in “Masters of Popular Painting,” whose American group was dominated by white painters like John Kane and the 19th-century Quaker sign painter Edward Hicks, another Pennsylvania native. Although Kane had five times as many works as Pippin in the show, it was not long before members of the art world were putting the two self-taught “masters” on par with each other. Upon the occasion of Pippin’s first solo exhibition at the dealer Robert Carlen’s Philadelphia gallery in 1940, the renowned art collect Albert C. Barnes proposed their kinship: “It is probably no too much to say that [Pippin] is the first important Negro painter to appear on the American scene and that his work shares with that of John Kane the distinction of being the most individual and unadulterated painting authentically expressive of the American spirit that has been produced during our generation.”\(^1\) Barnes included works by Pippin and Kane in his highly eclectic collection housed in Merion, Pennsylvania, where antique iron tools, African masks, and Pennsylvania German antiques hung alongside masterpieces of European modernism.

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He considered Pippin superior to Kane who was less “rugged” and inferior to Pippin in variety, as “no two of [Pippin’s] paintings are alike.” Barnes was specifically speaking to Pippin’s variety in “compositional arrangement,” but Pippin also captured a much wider array of subject matter than Kane, engaging the full gamut of traditional academic categories, from still lives to portraits to religious scenes to history paintings. In addition to outdoing Kane in terms of repertoire, Pippin bested his Pittsburgh predecessor by achieving nearly five times as many exhibitions during his lifetime. And while the work of African American painters and sculptors were rarely included in “American” art annuals of institutions such as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts before World War II, Pippin made regular appearances at these exhibitions beginning in 1943.

Despite the importance of Pippin’s anomalous breakthrough into the inner sanctum institutions of the mainstream white establishment, many scholars and artists have noted how his crashing of the color barrier represented a bittersweet victory for African American artists. Most recently, for instance, Kerry James Marshall suggested that the elevations of self-taught artists like Pippin "to modern status, represent both triumph and tragedy for Black American artists who were struggling to be noticed.” Marshall expresses doubt of Pippin’s “modern status,” asking "How do we, as Black artists, acknowledge the genuine accomplishments of self-taught artists like Horace Pippin, without surrendering to routine claims of their superiority over artists who are
fully engaged with the theories and practices of modern art making?”

Implied in Marshall’s question is the assumption that the modern appearance of Pippin’s work—his flat design, non-naturalistic color palette, and *de rigueur* subject matter—cannot be considered the product of what Griselda Pollock had conceptualized as the avant-garde gambit, a play that includes reference to contemporary trends, deference to leading practitioners and ultimately an assertion of difference. Doubt of Pippin’s consciousness of his engagement with modernism is exacerbated by awareness of the racially charged and stratified system of patronage in which his success was entrenched. For there is a prevailing perception that black self-taught artists like Pippin and his contemporary, the Nashville sculptor William Edmondson, who was the first black artist to have a solo show at MoMA in 1937, relied solely on white collectors, curators and dealers for support. In her essays on black self-taught artists, for instance, Lowery Stokes Sims has insisted that the African-American community received these artists with a “jaundiced eye” and that “their support system emanated from the white art establishment.”

At the conclusion of his essay, Marshall poses a question that addresses the issue of the black

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artist’s dependency, asking, “Must we always be passengers on the highways of progress, or can we drive ourselves toward tomorrow?”

While recent scholarship by Jacqueline Francis and Anne Monahan has questioned the degree of Pippin’s passenger status by parsing different dimensions of his artistic agency, this chapter questions prevailing perceptions about whom he was riding with. There is no denying that white people like Brinton, Barnes, and Carlen catalyzed Pippin’s appearances between 1937 and 1940 or that his work was primarily marketed and sold to white buyers throughout his career. Yet, after 1940, Pippin’s work appeared in more than a dozen shows at historically black colleges and institutions, from Philadelphia’s Pyramid Club to Atlanta University, as well as in groundbreaking surveys of “Negro Art” organized by museums such as the Newark Museum, the Institute of Modern Art and The Albany Institute of Fine Arts, not to mention the first major texts devoted to African American art written by black intellectuals like James Porter and Alain Locke. Locke’s proclamation that Pippin was “a real and rare genius, combining folk quality with artistic maturity so uniquely as almost to defy classification” has been embraced and acknowledged by many scholars from Cornel West to Lauren Kroiz. But until now, attempts to understand how leaders of the black art establishment received Pippin’s art have been limited. Through its comprehensive

6 I am using the period terminology “Negro Art,” which was often used interchangeably with “American Negro Art,” to refer to art done by black artists.
survey of Pippin’s reception history, this chapter debunks the myth that Pippin’s support was “no way connected to the African American intelligentsia of the time.”

This is an important intervention not only because it deepens our understanding of Pippin’s appeal to his contemporary audiences but also because it challenges broader conventions of interwar art history. Scholars such as Richard J. Powell and Mary Ann Calo, for instance, have criticized how foundational studies of the interwar period, such as Wanda Corn’s *Great American Thing*, tend to treat the advancement of black artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance, and later the New Negro Movement, as a story isolated from canonical American modernism. Of course, the art world was far from fully integrated in the 1930s and 40s, but the black and white establishments did have revealing points of conversion, and Pippin was one of them.

This first became clear to me when I was researching the positions of Pippin and Edmondson within the New Deal Art World, which led me to the visualization of their support networks seen in Figure 35. Network analysis was a compelling way to map their support systems because this method of visualization captures the expansiveness of their networks, which often get lost in narrative accounts of their “discovery” by a few. For, especially in the case of Pippin, volume—of supportive individuals and exhibition appearances—has been another obstacle to accurately interpreting his

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reception. Ironically the sheer multitude of the exhibitions Pippin experienced in the ten short years between his CCAA debut and his death in 1946 has served as an impediment to seeing the diversity of his art world accomplishments, which all too often is associated solely with milestones like his inclusion in “Masters of Popular Painting” or his receipt of PAFA’s J. Henry Schiedt prize in 1946. By proceeding from a macro view of his exhibition history, this chapter balances Pippin’s well-known appearances at the inner sanctum institutions of the white mainstream with his presence in the texts and shows that formed the emergent New Negro canon. This encompassing view is detailed in Appendix A, a table that includes Pippin’s group exhibition appearances from 1937–1947 in chronological order, specifying which works were shown where, when possible, and offering a categorization of the display context. For Pippin presented across a variety of categorical identities—such as American, Negro and Modern Primitive art—and painted an equally wide variety of subject matter—from hagiographical takes on Abe Lincoln and John Brown to memories of his service in World War I to interpretations of the South. By considering which works appealed to which members of his pluralistic constituencies, as well as how those constituencies were negotiating

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8 His solo exhibitions are listed in Appendix B. I separated these because there is no broader context for solo exhibitions as an artists’ work is not being shown alongside that of other artists. And the purpose of Appendix A was to allow me to analyze which of Pippin’s works were included in which broader contexts (i.e. American versus Negro Art vs. Modern Primitive vs. other Theme exhibitions) and which institutions were including him in those contexts.
spheres like the “folk,” I offer a new interpretation of how Pippin “defied classification”
through his broad appeal.

3.1 Beyond Barnes

Just as the paintbrush became a tool for coping with personal injury for John
Kane, disability proved to be a decisive turning point in the artistic odyssey of Horace
Pippin. Pippin was raised by his grandmother, Harriet, in Goshen, New York, but he
was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania and spent the last two and a half decades of his
life there. During his young adult life, Pippin held jobs as a mover, hotel porter and
brake shoe molder in other South East Corridor cities before enlisting with the 15th New
York regiment in spring 1917. Upon his arrival in in Europe at the end of that year,
Pippin was transferred to the all-black 369th Regiment of the U.S. Army, and while he
was far from the only artist who served in this detail—Malvin Gray Johnson and Palmer
Hayden were among his fellows soldiers—he uniquely maintained illustrated journals
during his time on the front that depict gas masked soldiers huddled in the trenches and
shells exploding in the night. In 1940 he recollected his war experience and other details
of his life in a brief manuscript entitled “My Life’s Story” that was reprinted in the first
major monograph on Pippin, which Selden Rodman, an art critic who championed
Pippin and other artists of the African diaspora, published the year after the artist’s
death. “My Life’s Story” opens with his early artistic exploits, which included his victory
in a drawing contest that awarded him his first set of art supplies while he was a boy.
But the memoir is dominated by Pippin’s recollections of the war, and in particular his memories of the Champagne-Marne campaign in which the 369th joined with other regiments to prevent further German advances on the Western front. It was during this decisive campaign that Pippin incurred a sniper’s bullet in his right arm that put an end to his career as a soldier but reaffirmed the importance of art in his life. After his discharge from the army in December of 1918, Pippin moved back to West Chester, marrying Jennie Ora Pippin, a widowed single mother, and settling there for good. Living on his disability pension and his wife’s income as a laundress, Pippin began using a red-hot poker to burn images in wood panels in the 1920s, handling the poker in his right hand, which he supported with his left in a process that he found therapeutic. Soon, in a return to the love of coloring surfaces he experienced as a child, he began painting these panels, and although he would continue the practice of burning wood throughout his career, by the mid 1930s, he favored oil paint as the primary means for rendering his increasingly complex and colorful compositions.

There are different accounts of exactly how Pippin’s painting first became known to Chester County Art Association (CCAA) president Christian Brinton in 1937—whether Brinton encouraged Pippin to submit to the organization’s aforementioned sixth annual after seeing his work hanging in a shoe store or whether Pippin entered of his own accord. What is certain is that Brinton was the first link in what Anne Monahan has called the “daisy chain” of Pippin’s white art world supporters, which soon came to
include the dealer Robert Carlen, the “bad-tempered” collector Albert C. Barnes and eventually the influential New York dealer Edith Halpert.\textsuperscript{9} Barnes gamely lent credibility to Pippin’s debut show at the Carlen Galleries in 1940, penning the catalogue essay and letting slip to \textit{Time} magazine that he had acquired two works from the show before it opened, \textit{Abraham Lincoln and His Father Building Their Cabin on Pigeon Creek}, and \textit{Cabin in the Cotton I}, the latter on behalf of the actor Charles Laughton, who became the first of Pippin’s notable supporters from the entertainment and advertising industries. At that time, Laughton was depending on Barnes to lend him pictures for his new house overlooking a canyon in Brentwood. He promised Barnes that he did not need a Renoir or Cezanne, but that anything “downwards” of Matisse, Gauguin, Pascin, Dufy, and even Utrillo would do, so long as he could soon replace the “most offensive” post-Sargeant, pre-Harrison Fisher school portrait furnished by the house’s owner.\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Cabin in the Cotton} had already garnered significant attention, but Barnes may also have recommended it to Laughton based on its connection to the Hollywood film of the same name. Laughton was more than amenable to Barnes’s selections, which also included work by William Glackens, Luigi Settani, Maurice Vlaminck, and Charles Demuth. Upon receiving the shipment he flattered Barnes, writing, “I can only say I wish to

\textsuperscript{9} Anne Monahan, “‘When Does a Primitive Cease to Be a Primitive?’: Horace Pippin’s Paintings of Cotton” (Unpublished Draft, March 2015), 15–16.

\textsuperscript{10} “Letter from Charles Laughton to Albert C. Barnes,” February 22, 1940, Alfred C. Barnes Correspondence Files, Barnes Foundation.
Heaven I had an eye like yours.”

Barnes remained an active supporter of Pippin, welcoming him to study at his foundation, acquiring three more of his works and involving himself with a series of solo exhibitions that Pippin would receive between 1941 and 1942 at the Carlen Galleries, the Chicago Arts Club, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. As Judith Dolkart has recently explored in detail, Barnes’s interest in Pippin can be linked not only to his interest in African art, which he had been collecting and researching in collaboration with the influential dealer Paul Guillaume since the early 1920s, but also with his enthusiasm for the African American spiritual. Barnes had first encountered a performance of spirituals as an eight year old attending a camp meeting in Merchantville, New Jersey, and he celebrated this native art form through events at his foundation featuring the Bordentown singers. At the beginning of his 1940 Pippin essay, Barnes created an alignment between Pippin’s work and spirituals, writing, “Pippin’s art is distinctly American; its ruggedness, vivid drama, stark simplicity,
picturesqueness and accentuated rhythms have their musical counterparts in the Spirituals of the American Negro.”

No one was more insistent on Barnes’s role as a vital champion of Pippin than Barnes himself. In a 1946 letter to Robert Carlen, Barnes complained that Joseph Woods, who wrote a feature on Pippin for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s official publication, *The Crisis*, had given CCAA president Christian Brinton too much credit: “An uninformed reader would glean from Mr. Woods’ article that the late Dr. Christian Brinton was responsible for making Pippin’s work known to the public,” wrote Barnes. “The fact is that Brinton arranged an exhibition, not confined to Pippin’s work, but of some local artists, among whom Pippin was represented. Nothing in the records shows that Pippin was recognized as an outstanding artist as a result of the West Chester show.” Barnes considered his essays on Pippin—not to mention the high profile purchases he made on the eve of Pippin’s debut show—much more considerable contributions to establishing the artist’s stature. By emphasizing his key role in Pippin’s success, Barnes was establishing himself as a “reputational entrepreneur,” staking a claim on Pippin that reinforced his own cultural authority.

For while Barnes did not collect a financial return on his investment in Pippin, he used

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13 Barnes, “Horace Pippin.”
14 “Letter from Albert C. Barnes to Robert Carlen,” June 20, 1946, Alfred C. Barnes Correspondence Files, Barnes Foundation.
the narrative of his starring role in Pippin’s success to consolidate his power as a collector capable of scouting originality and upsetting traditional fine art hierarchies.

In addition to faulting Woods for failing to detail his role in launching Pippin’s career, Barnes also took issue with the writer’s assertion that Pippin had never seen the work of other painters, as he had in fact been invited to study at Barnes’ Foundation as early as 1939. Barnes’s objection to this factual inaccuracy may have been an important corrective of Pippin’s presumed total naiveté, but it was also a further assertion of Pippin’s debt to his benevolent patron. Barnes had already taken credit for the influence of his Foundation on Pippin his 1941 essay on the artist, in which he wrote, there is “only one explanation” for the change in the artist’s work, most notably the exuberant diversification of his color palette. Barnes attested, “Pippin has moved from his earlier limited world into a richer environment filled with the ideas and feelings of great painters of the past and present.”  

16 Although Pippin did admit to getting something out of his time at the Foundation, saying of Cézanne, for instance, ”I’m going to take colors out of that man’s painting and get them into mine,” he ended his residency early. His friend, the Philadelphia-based artist Claude Clarke recalls that there was some tension between Pippin and his white patron. “Sometimes Barnes would call [Pippin] to give him a suggestion and then Pippin would say to Barnes, ‘Do I tell you how to run your

foundation? Don't tell me how to paint.”

Even while Pippin was in the midst of his study at the Foundation in January of 1940, he was quoted in *Time* magazine as saying, "My opinion of art is that a man . . . paints from his heart and mind. To me it seems impossible for another to teach one of art.”

In addition to Barnes’s insistence on his role as supreme catalyst, the predominance of white Pennsylvanians in Pippin’s early portraiture has perhaps contributed to the overrepresentation of the white members of his support network in narratives of his success. Pippin painted African Americans from popular culture and local history, such as Marian Anderson, whom Pippin saw perform in July of 1940, and Zachariah Walker, an African American who was burned to death by a lynch mob in Chester County in 1911. Black bodies also appear in his work as generalized types, especially Southern agrarian figures, which I will discuss at the conclusion of this chapter. But apart from his two self-portraits and a portrait of his wife (Figs. 36–38), Pippin did not paint individualized black subjects with whom he was acquainted, even though he was active in the African American community of West Chester, attending St.

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Paul's Baptist Church and the black Elks Club.20 There are no known portraits of the community leaders with whom Pippin may have been acquainted through these organizations, whereas some of Pippin’s earliest portraits are of prominent whites he knew through his activities with the American Legion. The cover for the brochure of his 1940 show, for instance, showcased Pippin’s ghostly rendering of Paul B. Dague, the Deputy Sheriff of Chester County, whose diminutive gavel and block are a reference his position as commander of the Charles F. Moran Post of the American Legion (Fig. 39). Pippin, who was himself the commander of the Nathan Holmes Post for black veterans for some time, knew Dague personally before painting him, but he created his portrait of the Bernard Schlegel Post commander, Major-General Smedley D. Butler, from a newspaper photograph (Fig. 40). Linda Roscoe Hartigan has suggested that the cadaver like pallor of white subjects in portraits such as these are linked to Pippin’s use of pure pigment, noting that he “used white paint straight from the tube to depict Caucasian subjects throughout his career.”21 But his 1940 portrait of Christian Brinton, Chester County Art Critic, demonstrates a more nuanced treatment of whiteness (Fig. 41). Brinton, who appears as a flush, robust figure emanating power and discernment, stands nattily dressed before bookshelf—colorful in its abundance—his arms crossed, one hand disappearing under its well manicured match. If his delicate hand marks him

as feminine, his broad shoulders and furrowed brow offer a counterforce of strength. Brinton’s white pupils and blue irises are echoed by the curtain over his right shoulder—whose ocular polka dots are perhaps a stand in for the eyes of the white art world that had recently taken notice of the artist.

While Pippin’s 1940 Carlen Galleries debut was brimming with these and other images of locally prominent whites, just beyond the exhibition pamphlet’s Paul Dague-emblazoned cover laid a frontispiece that boasted the exhibition’s impressively large and notably diverse committee of sponsorship. Chaired by Holger Cahill, who reportedly first learned of Pippin in 1937 while he was traveling through Pennsylvania in his office of Federal Art Project Director, the committee counted Pippin’s local white support network, Butler, Brinton, Barnes, among them.\(^{22}\) But it also included pillars of the African American community in West Chester, such as Leslie Pinckney Hill, the African American president of the nearby State Teacher’s College, and Walter Livingston Wright, who was white but was the president at Lincoln University, the first university to offer higher education to black men in the United States. One Pittsburgh Courier reporter described the show’s opening as attracting, “an interesting group of people from all walks of life,” suggesting that Pippin’s show may have drawn an interracial audience. This would not have been surprising given that his previous solo

\(^{22}\) Evidence for Cahill’s initial encounter with Pippin is referenced in Monahan, “‘When Does a Primitive Cease to Be a Primitive?’: Horace Pippin’s Paintings of Cotton,” 15.
show in the summer of 1937—which drew a record crowd of 2,550—had been held at
the West Chester Community Center, an institution devoted to black culture that was
founded by the State Teacher's College of Cheyney, Pennsylvania, another important
local institution devoted to the education of African American students.²³ Importantly,
the committee also included Alain Locke, a Philadelphia-born Howard University
professor who was the godfather of the New Negro Movement. Locke had established
himself as a lightening rod for the appreciation of African and African American culture
in 1925, when he served as the editor of a special issue of Survey Graphic entitled Harlem:
*Mecca of the New Negro* and *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, key collections that
evidenced the richness and scope of black social and cultural achievement in the United
States.²⁴ By the late 1930s, Locke had turned his attention more fully to the visual arts,
publishing *Negro Art: Past and Present* in 1936 and *The Negro In Art: A Pictorial Record of
the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art*, the first major sourcebook on black visual
art, four years later.

It is unclear exactly how Locke came to lend his support to Pippin's 1940 show,
but it is likely that he learned of Pippin through Barnes or Carlen as the three men were
not only Philadelphia natives, they attended the same Central Philadelphia High School.

²³ Lynn Eye, “Horace Pippin Is Acclaimed By Critics At Art Exhibit,” *The Pittsburgh Courier
Moreover, Barnes and Locke had collaborated in the past, with Barnes contributing writing and reproductions of the African art in his collection to Locke’s 1920s publications. But a cache of correspondence between Locke and Barnes from 1924 suggests that while their relationship, burned brightly initially, it flamed out due to Barnes’s dissatisfaction with how black leaders, including Locke, were managing the interpretation of Negro art. While Barnes may have been the link between Locke and Carlen, the first dated correspondence between the two men in the Carlen Papers does not mention this potential connection, but instead regards *Christ*, a depiction of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns that Locke bought from Pippin’s 1940 show (Fig. 42). Locke apprises Carlen that *Christ*, which Carlen wished to include in Pippin’s upcoming solo exhibition at the Arts Club of Chicago, was already in the windy city, as Locke had lent it to the inaugural exhibition of the South Side Community Art Center. The following

25 The last document in seven folders worth of correspondences between Barnes and Locke includes a critique, presumably written by Barnes, of Locke’s “A Note on African Art,” an article that would appear in the May 2, 1924 issue of *Opportunity*. Barnes concludes with a rather offensive passage which privileges the perspective of Paul Guillaume, the French dealer who facilitated the African art collections of Barnes and other Americans, over that of African American intellectuals like Locke: “For that reason, negro leaders need to watch their steps. If they wish to do full justice to the cause of negro art, they should consent to accept no substitutes for genuine experience or genuine thinking. And the best way to avoid that is to refer all matters on negro art to the man who knows by experience most about it and who is striving to give it a setting in a place where it will be surrounded by psychological, ethical, intellectual and social values that no person or organization is big enough to trifle with. That man is Paul Guillaume and he has behind him unlimited money, and intellectual organization, collections of plastic art unequalled in the world, and a fine harmoniously working group of negroes and white people.” “Document Titled ‘Analysis of ’A Note on African Art” by Alain Locke”; Barbara Beaucar, the Barnes foundation archivist who is currently researching Barnes’s relationship with African American artists and community, suggests that their falling out came later but had to do with the issue of Guillaume and credit, as Barnes felt that Locke did not acknowledge he and Guillaume sufficiently in *The Negro in Art: Past and Present*. Beaucar, Conversation.
year, Locke and Pippin would meet courtesy of the intervention of Pippin’s 
aforementioned friend, Claude Clarke, who remembers that their conversation centered 
on religion, “one man dealing with science and the other man dealing with just plain belief. And they would come out about the same.”26

Pippin may have been far from topping the agenda of Locke, who was more actively engaged in promoting the careers and legacies of figures like elder statesman Henry Ossawa Tanner and newly emerging talent, Jacob Lawrence. Locke would not have agreed with Barnes that Pippin was “the first important Negro painter on the American scene,” — a statement which again, must be considered in relation to Barnes’s reinforcement of his own authority, as Pippin was the only African American artist whose work he collected — but Locke’s consistent inclusion of Pippin in the canon of Negro art he was developing during this period is nonetheless notable and significant. 27

Exhibitions of historic and contemporary art by African Americans, referred to here using the period terminology of American Negro or Negro Art, had been taking place since the 1920s with events like the Harmon Foundation’s annual exhibitions and prizes for black artists, but in the 1930s, exhibition opportunities for African Americans — though still greatly limited — had multiplied, as Howard University inaugurated its art galleries and the Federal Art Project funded several art centers in black communities like

27 Barnes, “Horace Pippin Today.”
Harlem and Chicago’s South Side. In addition to annuals and other group exhibitions at these venues, American museums that rarely showed the work of African Americans began hosting surveys of Negro Art. Pippin’s work was not included in early shows of this kind, which took place at the Dallas Museum, in conjunction with the Texas Centennial in 1936, or at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1939, but this is not surprising given that his national reputation was limited before 1940. His work was included in the next two major surveys of Negro Art, “The Exhibition of the Art of the American Negro (1851-1940)” at the Tanner Galleries in Chicago in 1940 and the aforementioned inaugural show of the South Side Community Arts Center in 1941. And Pippin’s work was a constant in the surveys of Negro Art held at institutions whose exhibitions skewed heavily white, appearing at Edith Halpert’s Downtown Gallery (1941), Smith College and the Institute of Modern Art (1943), the Newark Museum (1944) and the Albany Institute of History and Art (1945).

Although Locke did not curate these exhibitions, he had a hand in many of them, chairing the committee of the South Side show and contributing forewords to exhibitions like Albany’s “The Negro Artist Comes of Age.” Halpert’s 1941 exhibition, “American Negro Art,” was also inspired by Locke’s 1940 publication, The Negro in Art, in which Pippin’s works featured prominently. Charles Russell has noted Locke’s inclusion of Pippin, as well as his self-taught contemporaries William Edmondson and Leslie Garland-Bolling in this text, but suggests that Locke “confined them to the terms
of the minor arts developed during the 1930s: modern primitives; self-taught; folk.”

Indeed, Locke does not take care to highlight Pippin among the artists he mentions in his introduction, but this text functions primarily as a sourcebook of images and includes little commentary on any single artist. In terms of devoted space, however, Pippin is one of the most prominent artists featured among the volume’s of 129 plates, for Locke included four works by Pippin across four pages, with full page reproductions given to Christ and Shell House: Champagne Sector, a war work that I will soon discuss in detail. Given that most artists received only one reproduction, and the book’s layout frequently pictures as many as four artworks on a page, Pippin’s works were afforded ample real estate—the same amount of space, in fact, that Locke reserved for Jacob Lawrence, the young painter whose star was rising at the same moment as Pippin’s. In his essay for the 1944 Albany show, “The Negro Artist Comes of Age,” Locke even likened Pippin to Jacob Lawrence, characterizing them as powerful social commentators in their respective series on John Brown, the insurgent painted by Lawrence in 1941 and Pippin two year later. By then, and thanks in part to the interventions of Locke, Halpert represented both artists in New York. Pippin and Lawrence’s works had both been included in her “American Negro Art” show, and while Pippin attended that exhibition, he was never recorded as saying anything about Lawrence’s work or influence.

Lawrence, on the other hand, remembers being influenced by Pippin: “The more I think, I’m sure that ... [Pippin’s] content and his form must have made some impression on me,” he admitted.\textsuperscript{29} James Porter, Locke’s colleague at Howard, also connected the two artists in his 1943 survey, 	extit{Modern Negro Art}, by including them both in Chapter IX on “Naïve and Popular Artists.” Porter, a practicing artist who privileged the academy, was clearly ambivalent about the work of Pippin, Lawrence, and the artists he grouped into this category. He diminished Lawrence’s compositions as “more like children’s illustrations than conventional adult paintings” and famously characterized the stone sculptures of Edmondson, who also appeared in this chapter, as “half-articulated meanings familiar to the race-mind.”\textsuperscript{30} Porter’s comments on Pippin did not include such explicit swipes, but he does seem skeptical of Pippin’s famous assertion that art is unteachable and calls the artist’s works “almost the painted analogues of these rustic figures by Edmondson,” which could be perceived as diminution by association.

Pippin and Edmondson were by no means the only African American self-taught artists to receive recognition in this era. Leslie Garland-Bolling, a Richmond, Virginia-based wood carver who was the first black artist to exhibit at the then-segregated Richmond Academy of Arts (now Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) and John T. Hailstalk, a Harlem laundry owner who had a show at Ferargil galleries in 1928, were both

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{29} Stein, “An American Original,” 35.
\end{thebibliography}
featured in *Modern Negro Art*. The Montgomery, Alabama artist Bill Traylor also had his first solo show in 1940, but his work—which is today more widely collected than either Edmondson’s or Pippin’s—did not advance its arc toward international visibility until the 1980s.

Indeed, Edmondson and Pippin achieved more mainstream art world recognition than any other African American self-taught artists in this period, but the tendency to link their successes elides important distinctions in how they were oriented toward the art world. Their reception in the press and exhibition materials is comparable in that both artists were primitivized through constant reference to their race, which was noted in headlines and connoted through their quotations, with Edmondson’s words transcribed heavy dialect and Pippin’s comments in a less extreme but nonetheless vernacular speech. The degree to which their embodiments of the “negro primitive”

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31 Interestingly, both Garland-Bolling and Hailstalk showed their work with the Harmon Foundation, which never supported Edmondson or Pippin. This is probably an issue of timing, as Garland-Bolling and Hailstalk were building their reputations in the late 1920s, while Pippin and Edmondson emerged a decade later, by which time the Harmon Foundation had a diminished presence.

32 The Montgomery-based artist Charles Shannon gave Traylor his first exhibition, “Bill Traylor: People's Artist,” at New South, a center that Shannon had co-founded with other local artists, in 1940. Shannon succeeded in getting the attention of MoMA’s director of education Victor D’Amico, the following year, but Traylor would not successfully gatecrash that institution for decades to come. D’Amico worked with Shannon on a show for Traylor, “Bill Traylor, American Primitive (Work of an Old Negro)” at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in Riverdale, New York in 1941. He also helped Shannon get the attention of Alfred Barr, Jr., who attempted to acquire Traylor’s work, but for prices so low that Shannon ultimately rejected the deal and demanded the return of the works. Josef Helfenstein, “From the Sidewalk to the Marketplace,” in *Bill Traylor, William Edmondson and the Modernist Impulse*, ed. Josef Helfenstein (Champaign, IL: Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, 2005), 53. Fifty-four years later, Shannon’s widow gifted MoMA its first Traylor drawing, *Figures on Blue Construction.*
varied, however, can be easily observed in the photographs of the two artists that circulated in their lifetimes, which offered two very different portraits of the black artist as structured by the white photographer. Until Edward Weston and other modernist photographers made their pilgrimages to Edmondson’s stone-sculpture filled yard in the heart of Nashville, the account of the artist produced by Harper’s Bazaar photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe was the dominant mode of his visualization (Figs. 43–44). As Bridget Cooks has noted, by installing Edmondson among the ancient-looking stone carvings that sensationally populated his eccentric yard, these photographs depict “him an his sculptures as primitive” and reinforce “his status as racially, economically and geographically outside of the modern art world.”

Pippin also posed before the lens of white photographers, most notably Carl Van Vechten, who photographed the artist in 1940 on the grounds of the Barnes Foundation (Figs. 45–46). Van Vechten’s capturing of Pippin in profile before a tree such that the contours of his posture and dress resonate with the highly textured bark in one photograph and standing before a moss covered fountain in another may still be read as primitivizing, insofar as they link Pippin with the natural and the ancient. But clad in his double-breasted suit with necktie before the fountain, his overcoat and scarf before the tree, Pippin is undeniably refined and self-possessed. The duality of Pippin’s

appearance here makes him not merely the embodiment of the modern man, but of the New Negro in particular, who was conceptualized during this period by Alain Locke and others as making the transition from dormancy to action, the past to the present, the primitive to the modern.\(^\text{34}\)

Other photographs that circulated of Pippin in the press showed him accepting awards and posing before acclaimed works, often in the company of white art world pillars. Even when two of Pippin’s works were included in the annual exhibition of the Pyramid Club, an organization founded for the advancement of black Philadelphians in 1937, Pippin was photographed not with one of the club’s member, but rather with Barnes, who was invited to give an address on Negro art at the event’s opening (Fig 47). The photographic evidence of Pippin shaking the hands of white art world Brahmin is surely another factor that has contributed to the perception that his success “emanated solely from the white art establishment.” At the same time, this picture also documents how Pippin benefited from the support of African Americans, and especially the institutions of Philadelphia’s black elite. Apart from the Pyramid Club, the West Chester

\(^\text{34}\) Richard J. Powell defines the transition represented by the New Negro as follows: “Apart from describing a modern, forward-thinking man or woman of African descent, the term the New Negro eventually came to express a mood or spirit of progressivism, of black people entering contemporary life with a sense of purpose, not just for personal or material gain but for black America's social, cultural, and political ascendancy after more than a century of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and existential unconsciousness.” See Richard J. Powell, “New Negros, Harlem, and Jazz (1900-1950),” in The Image of the Black in Western Art, ed. David Bindman, Henry Louis Gates, and Karen C. C. Dalton, vol. 5.2, Image of the Black in Western Art (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press : In collaboration with the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research ; Menil Collection, 2010), 61.
Community Center (WCCC) played an important role in establishing Pippin, hosting his first solo exhibition in the summer of 1937 and accepting his work in its later "Colored Artists of West Chester" show. As Judith Stein has noted, the WCCC was a hub for black culture founded by State Teacher's College, in Cheyney, Pennsylvania, a historically black institution where Laura Wheeler Waring taught art classes and whose president, Leslie Pinckney Hill, was one of the sponsors of Pippin’s 1940 show at Carlen Galleries.35

Moreover, these images also importantly establish the degree to which he participated in the art world that embraced him. The same cannot be said of Edmondson, who as far as we know, did not leave Nashville to attend any of his exhibitions. In fact, Pippin was the first American self-taught artist—black or white—to embody Henri Rousseau’s degree of participation in his own success, not only entering his works in competitions, but also attending his openings and engaging with other artists. For like Rousseau, Pippin did not see himself as existing in the shadows of modern masters. Just as Rousseau told Picasso in 1908, "We are the greatest painters of our time, you in the Egyptian style, I in the modern," Pippin famously felt galvanized, but not the least bit intimidated, by his favorites at the Barnes Foundation, saying of Renoir, “That guy Ren-oor, he was pretty good. And he left a little bit for me too.”36

Although allegedly given to episodes of depression, related in part to the trauma of

World War I, Pippin hardly lacked for confidence, and he did not balk at the Philadelphia, New York, or Chicago art worlds, all of which he experienced first hand.\textsuperscript{37} In the lead up to his first solo show in New York at the Bignou Gallery, he told \textit{Local News West Chester} that he had “a better assortment of paintings in this show,” and, “I look for some of them to go over big.”\textsuperscript{38} Covering his solo show at Chicago’s Arts Club that same year, \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} writer Edith Weigle noted Pippin’s “certainty of thought gives to his pictures a sureness, a repose that is also strength,” while Romare Bearden was likewise impressed by his self-possession upon meeting him at Halpert’s “American Negro Art” show.\textsuperscript{39}

Pippin knew how to navigate a fickle art world that was, as Joseph Woods, pointed out, chasing its own tail over his classification. In the 1946 \textit{Crisis} article that Barnes had taken such issue with, Woods wrote of Pippin,

\begin{quote}
It is interesting to note that while Pippin had success with Philadelphia’s black art establishment, neither he nor Edmondson were ever supported by the New York-based Harmon Foundation. The Harmon Foundation was not opposed to the inclusion of self-taught artists in its shows as John T. Hailstark and Leslie Garland-Bolling were both included in its annuals in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Timing may be the reason for the Harmon’s lack of support for Pippin and Edmondson as it was less active by the time of their breakthroughs in the late 1930s.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
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\begin{quote}
Weigle, “Three Exhibits at Arts Club Are of Interest”; Bearden recalled in his essay for a 1977 traveling exhibition of Pippin’s work, “I remember Pippin paid little attention to paintings of other artists hanging on the walls. Not that he was indifferent, but he seemed otherwise absorbed. When he spoke of disown work, however, he was quite animated and some of his comments were very humorous. What impressed me most though was how self-possessed Pippin was and especially how positive he was that his paintings were completely realistic.” Phillips Collection, \textit{Horace Pippin}.
\end{quote}
Later, after he had reached great stature, someone suggested that his work be called primitive because it reflected the drawings on the walls of pre-historic caves. Still later, his work was reclassified as neo-primitive. Even after this, its classification was reshuffled and found to be basically African. Finally someone, 1944, got around to calling it distinctly "American." While his style was being named and renamed, he was going ahead with successful showings in the major cities of his country.\(^{40}\) Contrast this with Edmondson, who was portrayed in the press as being indifferent to commercial success, quoted as saying things like, "I got to do these things for my Heavenly Daddy, whether folks buys them or not," and claiming innocence about his status as an artist—"I didn’t know that I was no artist till them folks come told me I was," he allegedly admitted.\(^{41}\) Of course, Edmondson was not a mere flash in the pan. In addition to his historic 1937 MoMA show, he was included alongside Pippin in Locke and Porter’s books as well as the Negro Art shows at the Downtown Gallery (1941) and the Newark Museum (1944). Moreover, he achieved some integration that Pippin did not: Edmondson’s *Mary and Martha* appeared alongside Kane’s acclaimed *Self-Portrait* as representative of American folk art in the 1938 Jeu De Paume survey, for instance, and he was employed by the WPA from 1939-1940.\(^ {42}\) But Edmondson’s work was nonetheless absent from the Negro Art shows put together at black institutions as well as the American art annuals of the white art establishment in the early 1940s, and

\(^{41}\) John Thompson, “Negro Stone Cutter Here Says Gift From Lord; Work Praised,” *Nashville Tennessean*, February 9, 1941.
\(^{42}\) Cooks is a bit harsher about his post 1937 fate, writing, “"When Edmondson’s use value as a pre-modern specimen was over, his art was again placed on the margins, outside of modernism, and outside of the modern art museum.” Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 29.
after his MoMA debut, he would not have another solo show outside of Nashville until 1964. Therefore, while the successes of Edmondson and Pippin are often considered together, their successes were truly of different magnitudes, and their profiles among both the white and black art establishments were distinct. The degree to which Pippin acted a bridge between the largely segregated white and black art world of this period only became clear to me, for instance, once I created a network visualization of the various supporters that Pippin and William Edmondson attracted in their lifetimes (Fig. 3). Whereas the individuals in Edmondson’s support network were largely Nashville-based, Pippin’s supporters spanned the country, including a significant West Coast contingent comprised of actors and producers like Charles Laughton and Sam Jaffe—patronage that was fueled by the intersections between Pippin’s work and contemporary film. As scholars such as Richard J. Powell, Judith Stein and Anne Monahan have noted, subjects from Pippin’s repertoire, such as John Brown and scenes of the rural South, reflected and overlapped with films such as *The Santa Fe Trial* (1940) and *Cabin in the Cotton* (1932), and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943). Moreover, while Edmondson’s work was rarely shown outside the context of the “modern primitive,” only 7% of the 34 group exhibitions in which Pippin appeared in his lifetime were devoted to self-taught artists while the rest were annuals or surveys dedicated to American or Negro Art. The degree to which Pippin’s work crossed freely between surveys and annuals of American and Negro Art suggests that his work managed to strike a delicate balance between
pleasing black and white audiences—a feat that was relatively rare for an African American artist at this time, but which was possible, we will see, due to the poignancy and versatility of his subject matter.

3.2 Heroism in Black and White

Just as Kane suffered several rejections before he was admitted to the Carnegie International, Pippin’s gatecrashing of American art annuals had a few false starts. In 1941, for instance, the jury of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts’ (PAFA) 136th annual turned away his submissions of the Amish Letter Writer, 1940 and Christ and the Woman of Samaria. Pippin’s work did not begin appearing in annuals of American art until 1943, when John Brown Going to His Hanging not only gained admittance to PAFA’s 138th annual, but also joined the venerable institution’s collection by winning the annual acquisition prize (Fig. 48). Pippin executed his prize-winning depiction of John Brown, the legendary rebel who stormed a federal arsenal in 1859 in an attempt to arm American slaves for revolt, as part of a series in 1942 that also includes John Brown Reading His Bible and The Trial of John Brown (Figs. 49–50). If Pippin submitted all three

43 “Rejection Letter Signed by Joseph T. Fraser, Jr., Secretary of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts”; Pippin was also rejected from a survey of American art being planned at the Carnegie Institute a year earlier. “Letter from Dorothy Glassburn to Horace Pippin.” PAFA’s rejections demonstrated the limits of Barnes’s influence, as he had thrown his weight behind both works, purchasing Woman of Samaria and highlighting Amish Letter Writer in his essay for the 1941 Carlen Galleries show.

44 The latter painting was selected for the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 1943 annual. Pippin would remain a fixture at the Whitney’s annuals for three years running: his Uncle Tom was chosen in 1944 while Barracks made the cut in 1945.
works for the PAFA jury’s consideration, it is not surprising that *John Brown Going to Hanging* was their selection, as it is the largest and most complex of the three paintings. Pippin’s often remarked talent as a colorist is evident in this high contrast composition, in which white takes on a punishing gleam in the courthouse, the fence, the horses hauling Brown to his death and the scarves tied noose-like around the necks of onlookers. Beneath a cool corner of sky, red—an augur of Brown’s impending execution—visits the composition in violent bursts. At the bottom right of the painting is the sole black figure in the aggressive mob, a stand in for Pippin’s grandmother Harriet, who was present in Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia on the day of Brown’s trial and relayed her memory of it to Pippin.

After paying $600 for the work—setting what appears to have been a record price for a Pippin painting at the time—PAFA lent the piece widely, to the Corcoran Gallery of Art’s 18th Biennial in 1943, the Albany Institute of History in Art’s “The Negro Artist Comes of Age” survey in 1945, and even to the “Exhibition of 200 Years of American Painting,” a survey exported by the National Gallery of Art to the Tate Gallery in 1946. Upon learning of Pippin’s death that summer, Tate director Sir John Rothenstein sent condolences to Robert Carlen, noting that *John Brown Going to His Hanging* “has aroused such interest and admiration in London.”45 The work and the

series from which it derives remain a star of Pippin’s oeuvre and have attracted many thorough interpretations from scholars in recent decades. In his 1994 essay, Richard J. Powell reads the Brown series in relation to the works that Pippin devoted to another “white savior,” Abe Lincoln, between 1934 and 1943, suggesting that Brown and Lincoln represent two ideological extremes of emancipation “with Lincoln as the “good cop” and Brown as the “bad cop” of the antislavery movement.” Powell goes on to situate Pippin’s history paintings within various contexts, including the popularity of American history as subject matter during the interwar period, the contemporaneous interest of African American artists like William H. Johnson and Jacob Lawrence in John Brown, and the “loosely consolidated historicizing movement” that took place throughout black populations during this period, through projects like Negro history pageants and exhibitions. Steve Conn added a new dimension to our understanding of how Pippin’s paintings fit into their historical moment several years later, linking them to the intensification of the Lincoln myth and the historical revisionism of John Brown that was taking place during the interwar years. Anne Monahan has intervened most recently, objecting to how Pippin’s paintings of history and war have been read as a “transparent record of his experience, an enduring trope that oversimplifies the relationship of history, memory, and authenticity that has been critical in establishing and maintaining

his place in the art world.” Demonstrating the compositional similarities between *John Brown Going to His Hanging* and several period accounts of the incident published in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* in 1859, Monahan upsets the assumption that Pippin relied on his grandmother’s supposedly eyewitness account and proposes that his interpretation of the event is instead a complex synthesis of multiple sources and motivations.

To these enlightening readings, I add an observation about how Pippin’s *John Brown* paintings were exhibited during his lifetime. Although both Alain Locke and Romare Bearden spoke favorably about the *John Brown* series, these works were rarely seen out of the context of exhibitions of white mainstream institutions like the Whitney, the Corcoran, and PAFA. The only time a work from the *John Brown* series was shown at a black institution was when Atlanta University exhibited *John Brown Reading His Bible*—by far the least violent of the series—at its “Third Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Prints by Negro Artists” in 1943. In fact, despite the aforementioned fascination among black artists with the rebel in the late 1930s and early 1940s, *John Brown* paintings are scarce in the Negro Art exhibitions of that era. This absence is perhaps an

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48 Monahan, “Witness: History, Memory and Authenticity in the Art of Horace Pippin,” 35; Jacqueline Francis regards the perception of transparency as a problem for African American artists as well, writing, “Too often, imagery by African American artists is regarded as being transparent. The work is, in effect, framed as a direct translation of cultural experience or an unmediated documentary of it.” Francis, “Modern Art, ‘Racial Art’: The Work of Malvin Gray Johnson and the Challenges of Painting 1928-1934,” 152. As a black self-taught artist, Pippin has suffered the burden of being perceived as doubly transparent.
index of the racial tensions of the period, which climaxed in 1943—the same year that

*John Brown Going to His Hanging* became a hit with white institutions—with race violence
erupting in 47 cities, most catastrophically in Detroit, which was inundated by rioters
that summer.\(^{49}\) Whereas a tribute to Brown by a black artist may have been
unthreatening in the context of an American art annual that was mediated and
dominated by a white majority, where Brown’s legacy of counter violence functioned as
proof of white empathy, it could have been more problematic in the context of a Negro
Art exhibition at a black institution, where Brown’s legacy of violent insurgency could
be perceived as threatening. It is worth noting that depictions of Lincoln, the “good cop”
to Brown’s “bad cop” were also missing from the Negro Art exhibitions of the late 1930s
and 40s. As far as portraits of historic figures were concerned, these exhibitions were
more likely to feature black leaders than “white saviors” like Brown or Lincoln.

Lawrence’s 42-panel series on the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture, for
instance, was shown in full in Baltimore’s 1939 “Contemporary Negro Art” and partially
reproduced in Locke’s *Negro In Art*. Paintings of more contemporary leaders, like Booker
T. Washington, were also included in Negro Art surveys like Newark’s “American
Negro Art” of 1944.

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No single work or genre of works in Pippin’s oeuvre dominated his 12 appearances in Negro Art exhibitions of the 1940s. Appendix A reveals the diversity of the Pippin works shown in this context, which ranged from religious works, flower paintings, genre scenes of African American life, and war paintings. While a singular work or theme does not emerge as the most popular Pippin in Negro art annuals, there is a pattern to which of his works had the most crossover appeal. Indeed, *End of the War: Starting Home* was the most widely exhibited of Pippin’s works during his lifetime, appearing in five group exhibitions between 1938 and 1945 and all of his solo exhibitions (Fig. 51). Part of the work’s popularity can be attributed to its early date—Pippin began it in 1930, completing it by 1933—as well as the important place it occupied in Pippin’s development as an artist. As noted previously, Pippin experimented with pyrography, or the burning of wood panels throughout the 1920s, but *End of The War*, is often credited as being his first finished painting. Moreover, it is unique among his works because Pippin carved the painting’s frame with a “medley of combat implements.”50 This characteristic added another dimension of authenticity to the work, insofar as it relates it to high relief woodcarving often associated with American folk art.

The work is also unique because of how it visualizes the black soldier and his contribution to the war effort. Whereas depictions of black World War I veterans that

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emerged in this period by Edwin A. Harleston and Malvin Gray Johnson (Figs. 52 & 53), show the black soldier as portrait subject, Pippin’s war works of the 1930s, which also include *Shell Holes and Observation Balloon: Champagne Sector, 1931, Outpost Raid: Champagne Sector, 1931, Gas Alarm Outpost: Argonne, 1931* and *Dogfight Over the Trenches, 1935* are documents of and tributes to the action that his all-black regiment actually saw, withstanding the advance of the Germans in the Ardennes region of France (Figs. 54–57). As Judith Wilson has noted, while many of Pippin’s World War I works depict the landscapes and technologies he himself experienced as a soldier, *End of the War* pictures a scene of German surrender that Pippin could not have witnessed, as he was wounded in October 1918 and recovering in a military hospital away from the front lines by the time of the Armistice that November. Nonetheless, Pippin captures the darkly triumphal atmosphere of Allied victory in this work, which is lit up by burning fuselage and starburst explosions that correspond to the fleeting visions of his memoir. “To see those shells bursting in the night was a pretty sight,” he wrote. “But the gas, dust and smoke was terrible.”51 Below the fiery and toxic sky of *End of the War*, three German soldiers who form a triangle at the center of the canvas succumb to a triumvirate of Allied soldiers, whose black bodies are nearly camouflaged by the dark bramble of the landscape. Pippin took care with the German soldier at right, whose wide-eyed

expression indexes the fear that the all-black regiment inspired in their Teutonic enemies, who dubbed them the “Harlem Hellfighters.”

The popularity of End of the War reveals how Pippin’s status as a former soldier mediated his rise, for his veteran status was promoted as part of his artist-identity from the outset of his career. The exhibition card for his 1940 debut show at the Carlen Galleries introduced him as “a disabled World War Veteran” and subsequent descriptions of the artist in the press and exhibition catalogues rarely appeared without some version of this characterization. The Time article published that January noted, “War memories motivate many a Pippin canvas,” while Art Digest’s review of his Bignou Gallery exhibition reproduced the work under the headline, “Negro Primitive Finds Peace After War,” opening with the fact that he spent “14 months in the front-line trenches of World War I” and reproducing End of the War. Catalogue entries in texts accompanying exhibitions that included this painting, such as “Masters of Popular Painting” (1938) and “They Taught Themselves” (1942), as well as surveys like the Negro in Art (1940) and Milestones in American Painting (1949) also emphasized his military service. While the fixation on Pippin’s war service corresponds to what Bernard L. Herman has theorized as the “connoisseurship of dysfunction” that often underlies the reception of self-taught artists, especially as his service was often linked to his resulting disability, given the patriotic atmosphere of the 1940s, it normalized him more than it marginalized him. For Pippin’s civic sacrifice facilitated the recognition of his national—
as opposed to solely racial—identity as an artist. After all, as Bridget Cooks has observed, a major objective of the exhibitions related to the New Negro movement was to establish “a larger definition of the role of Negroes in the national fabric.” Locke expressed this principle in the introduction to *The Negro in Art*, writing, “Our art has an equal right and obligation to be typically American at the same time that it strives to be typical and representative of the Negro.” Locke did not explicitly refer to how depictions of the black soldier’s sacrifice in World War I could serve as a means toward achieving this end, but he did include two of Pippin’s war paintings, *End of the War* and *Shell Holes* in his book, and a year earlier, he had cast the black artist’s fight for art world recognition in militaristic terms. “The recent advances in contemporary Negro art remind me of nothing so much as how a courageous calvary move over difficult ground in the face of obstacles worse than powder and shell—silence and uncertainty,” Locke wrote in his review of the 1939 Baltimore Museum survey.

In addition to Locke’s rhetoric, the notion of an “art front” was perpetuated by images of black artists in uniform during this period. In the catalogue for Albany’s “The Negro Artist Comes of Age,” Hughie Lee Smith, for instance, posed in his naval uniform with his 1944 *Portrait of a Sailor*. Perhaps most famously, Jacob Lawrence was photographed in uniform in 1944 at the opening of his exhibition at MoMA—the

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54 “Advance on the Art Front,” 132.
institution’s first show devoted to a black artist since its Edmondson show seven years earlier. The eight paintings that Lawrence had completed during his service in the National Guard were shown alongside panels from his Migration Series, which the museum had recently acquired jointly with Duncan Phillips. The Migration Series was not sanguine about the epochal movement of Southern blacks to urban centers, acknowledging that, “Although life in the North was better,” which Lawrence indicates in Panel 44 through a table with ample bread and meat, “it was not ideal.” Panels 49–51 are among those that illustrate how, “The migrants soon learned that segregation was not confined to the South. Many northern workers were angry because they had to compete with the migrants for housing and jobs. There were riots” (Fig. 58–61). And after the United States entered World War II, racially motivated clashes in Northern cities were increasingly related to discrimination in war industries. For while both Smith and Lawrence were among the African Americans who were eventually drafted into forces like the Navy and the Coastguard, African American enlistment was heavily restricted at the outset of the American war effort, provoking actions like the March on Washington Movement, which was led by union leader A. Phillip Randolph to protest discrimination in the armed forces and defense industries.\textsuperscript{55} In its bulletin, MoMA was explicit about its intention of offering Lawrence’s Coastguard paintings as a kind of

salve to racial tensions erupting on the domestic front, writing that Lawrence’s paintings of African American sailors “suggest the gradual beginnings of a solution to the problem so movingly portrayed in the Migration series.”\(^5\) Furthering the propagandistic tenor of MoMA’s exhibitions at this moment is that fact that concurrent with the Lawrence show, MoMA hosted “American Battle Painting, 1776–1918” an exhibition of war scenes organized by the National Gallery of Art that included none other than Pippin’s *End of the War*. As the only painting of the World War I selections to document the contribution of the black soldier—and the only work by a black artist included in the show overall—*End of the War* served as a kind of precursor to Lawrence’s tributes to the service of black soldiers in World War II.

Pippin’s first biographer Selden Rodman emphasized the degree to which the artist’s war works could be used to nationalistic ends when he wrote that *Shell Holes* and *Barracks*, 1945 (Fig. 62), the latter a example of Pippin’s later war paintings, “speak louder than any propaganda poster of bleeding bodies or desperate encounter.”\(^5\) Yet, as many scholars have pointed out—Rodman among them, for he frequently contradicted himself—Pippin’s paintings were hardly endorsements of war. The utter desolation of *Shell Holes* (Fig. 54) is something James Porter picked up on when he reproduced the work in *Modern Negro Art*, describing its powerful “suggestion of topographical ruin,

plastic space, and the sadness of a deserted world." The work shows the aftermath of
the shelling that Pippin’s regiment withstood during the Champagne Marne campaign
in July of 1918. Whereas End of the War is Pippin’s imagined war finale, Shell Holes
records what was likely to have been one of the last views of the frontlines Pippin
actually took in firsthand. In the final hours of his combat experience, Pippin recalled
ducking from shell hole to shell hole for cover: “I remember spotting a shell hole and
made a run for it. Just as I was within three feet and getting ready to dive in I were hit in
the shoulder.” Pippin tumbled into a hole where several of his fellow soldiers, already
taking cover there, were able to triage his wound. Pippin would eventually make it
safely above ground and to an army hospital in Brest, but not before seeing what could
have been his fate unfold before his very eyes:

“One [soldier] stopped at the shell hole where I was shot
and I beckoned him to get down and tried to explain that the
sniper was there and would get him. While I was trying to explain
to him a bullet passed through his head and it didn’t even knock
his helmet off. And he stood there for at least ten seconds before
he slipped down and when he did slid down on top of me I had
lost so much blood by this time I couldn’t even move him.”

The shell holes of Pippin’s painting are more than just physical scars of wartime
destruction; they are memorials to the perilous and traumatic last moments he spent on
the front line.

58 Porter, Modern Negro Art, 149.
If *Shell Holes*’ allusion to injury, survival and death are only fully comprehended when read against Pippin’s accounts of his war experience, he makes such themes more explicit in *Barracks* (Fig. 62), one of the war-related works that Pippin created after the onset of World War II. With its intimate view of soldiers taking subterranean shelter, *Barracks* illustrates not the landscape of war that Pippin captured in works like *Shell Holes* and *End of the War*—sublime in their broad vistas of above-ground devastation—but rather, as Monahan puts it, “the interstitial moments between violent engagements that comprise the bulk of a soldier’s experience.”60 Whereas *Barracks* was immediately popular upon its completion, included in two of the 1945 American art annuals, at the Corcoran and the Whitney, *Mr. Prejudice*, 1943 (Fig. 64), another late war work that had been even more patent about the ingloriousness of war, was not widely exhibited during his lifetime. Edward Puchner’s close reading of *Mr. Prejudice* demonstrates how with this work, Pippin explored the predicament of the black soldier, who was compelled to protect a country that did not protect his rights as an equal citizen at home. Past its brightly hued veneer, *Mr. Prejudice*, with its references to the Klu Klux Klan, sacrifices of black World War I vets and discrimination within the Armed Services and related war industries during World War II, harbored the same sense of bitter realism evident in John Woodrow Wilson’s *Black Soldier* of the same year. In Wilson’s painting, a mother confronts the viewer while protectively averting the gaze of her son, whose tiny toy

soldier signals his aspirations of becoming the soldier who stands just beyond them.\textsuperscript{61} Just as the soldier faces an uncertain future, looking over his shoulder in doubt of the faint Statue of Liberty occupying the horizon, the central “V for Victory” structure of Pippin’s \textit{Mr. Prejudice} is imperiled, cracking from a fissure driven by a sledgehammer wielding brute who stands between Lady Liberty and a hooded Klansmen. Yet while both works signal the impossible situation of the black soldier—compelled to fight abroad but discriminated against at home—neither work is a protest against black enlistment. Puchner aligns \textit{Mr. Prejudice} with the “Double V” campaign that was advanced by the black press and church organizations after 1942, which encouraged black citizens to strive, as they had in World War I, for victory on the front as an opportunity for equality at home.

Depictions of black service, including Pippin’s war paintings, could thus speak on multiple levels, both as tributes to the heroes of Pippin’s generation and as a salve to racial tensions at home, even as they acknowledged the trauma and injustice of black service in both World Wars. In this sense, Pippin’s most popular works—\textit{John Brown Going to His Hanging} and \textit{End of the War}—both presented paradigms of American heroism that were appropriately complex for the era. Moreover, while these works were about the past, the memories they recalled were particularly of the moment, given the

\textsuperscript{61} Powell describes how Wilson’s work “brought the inequities and shortcomings of American democracy into sharp focus.” Powell, “New Negros, Harlem, and Jazz (1900-1950),” 74.
onset of World War II and the resurgence of interest in John Brown, not only in the among artists but also within Hollywood. By reflecting on episodes of American history that had relevance to the present, these works thus had a kind of Janus-faced appeal, carrying with them the authority of history and the urgency of the now. But whereas the Brown works had limited visibility, appearing predominantly at American annuals and rarely in Negro Art surveys, Pippin’s war works were widely embraced across both contexts due to the versatility of their message. For at least on the surface, they fulfilled the nationalistic goals of the institutions of the white art world engaged in showcasing works relevant to the wartime atmosphere. But unlike the Brown series, they made the black soldier the hero of his own destiny and did not gloss the suffering of war or the struggle of the black soldier to be a part of it, which made them a crucial asset in the black artist’s “Advance on the Art Front,” and a staple in Negro Art shows and surveys.

3.3 Different Shades of Folk

In 1940, End of the War appeared in two exhibitions in Chicago, the city that was home to the first memorial to African American World War I veterans. When it returned to Pennsylvania, Carlen gifted it to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, making it the

62 Powell, “I Tell My Heart,” 76.
63 “Advance on the Art Front” was the title of Locke’s 1939 article for Opportunity, the official publication of the National Urban League, in which Locke discussed the Baltimore Museum’s Negro Art survey in militaristic terms. See “Advance on the Art Front.”
second Pippin work to enter a museum collection. The first was *The Buffalo Hunt* of 1933 (Fig. 63), which Carlen had sold to the Whitney Museum of American Art earlier that year. Whereas Pippin would eventually become known for his bright and original color palette, a mastery that Albert C. Barnes liked to attribute to the time he spent studying modern art at his eponymous foundation, early works like *End of the War* and *The Buffalo Hunt* are typically worked from a limited palette of dark and hazy colors. Emerging from *The Buffalo Hunt*’s starkly contrasting white and black color scheme is a theme of indigeneity, which, as I explored in the last chapter, was a major concern of American artists between the wars. A shadowy figure crouches behind a snow covered ridge, his profile rendered indistinctly in silhouette but marked as Native American by the feather that rises at a right angle from his head and the practice of buffalo hunting in which he is engaged. By the 1930s, Native Americans were widely popular as subject matter with a national or indigenous valence by American painters, sculptors and photographers hailing from many different schools and generations. Lynda Roscoe Hartigan has suggested that Pippin might have based *The Buffalo Hunt* on images by painters of the Brandywine River Valley, like Arthur Tait and N.C. Wyeth, who painted fantastical

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64 In a 1940 review of his solo exhibition at the Bignou Gallery, *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell describes this change: "Whereas in his first oil, upon which he says he spent three years, the forms are actually and laboriously built up in low relief by means of layer upon layer of thick, dark, enamel-like paint; in subsequent work the paint is smoothly, more thinly applied and the palette is wont to be a great deal brighter." Edward Alden Jewell, “Pippin Has Display at Bignou Gallery,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1940, sec. Society, http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/docview/105466047/abstract/DD6303FFE28E4EB2PQ/1?accountid=10598.
scenes of the Old West. But the Whitney’s warm reception of this piece probably had more to do with how it related to the work of American modernists like Marsden Hartley, who had been exploring Native American themes since the teens.

While living abroad in Berlin just before the outbreak of World War I, Hartley met the challenge of absorbing the lessons of European modernism without losing his bearings as an American national with his Amerika series of 1912–14, which appropriated objects and design motifs from Native American material culture he observed in the collections of the Museum für Völkerkunde. Although there are many other American artists who devoted larger parts of their oeuvre to depictions of Native Americans, like George Catlin or Edward Curtis, Hartley is an excellent example of this strain of Indian-targeting American primitivism because he was so explicit about the degree to which he sought self-reinvention through the other—the quintessential gambit of the modernist primitivist—writing to Alfred Stieglitz in 1914, “I find myself wanting to be an Indian—to paint my face with the symbols of that race I adore go to the west and face the sun forever.” Hartley is also worth dwelling on here because he put into words a distinction between what Native Americans and African Americans could offer

66 Hartley wrote this several weeks after complaining that he had to stop painting his Amerika series. He made this statement in the context of decrying the harsh realities of war; playing Indian was positioned as a way of taking solace. James Timothy Voorhies, ed., My Dear Stieglitz: Letters of Marsden Hartley and Alfred Stieglitz, 1912-1915 (University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 172.
European American. While some white artists of Hartley’s generation like Charles Sheeler (1883–1965) took an interest in African or African American subjects, in general Native American or early European American utilitarian and decorative arts, which became codified as American folk art between the wars, were far more apparent as instruments of primitivist transformation in the work of American modernists who came of age just before World War I. Hartley famously put this prejudice into words when he advised American artists to leverage "redman esthetics" in order to be original, rather than derivative of the European avant-garde, and demurred that for African Americans to have been considered bearers of American authenticity, they would have needed to be a “a shade nearer our own.” Whereas Hartley considered that there was “nothing more native” than the “redman,” the “black man,” was not only “remote,” but also already colonized by European modernists, who had “long since accepted Congo originality.”

Pippin was probably unaware of Hartley’s exclusion, but his choice to paint the Indian in The Buffalo Hunt black nonetheless suggests a black claim on nativeness that the white art world more easily associated with American Indians. In this sense The Buffalo Hunt both played to the white art world’s “Indian Craze” while also asserting blackness as a source of American authenticity—a concept that, as we will see, increasingly gained traction in the 1930s.

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Pippin’s self-taught status, his origins in the Quaker state, and the penchant he would develop after 1940 for vernacular subjects like log cabins and old plantations, made him part of a larger challenge to the whiteness of the folk art canon emerging in this period. That canon, which coalesced around the collections conceived by figures such as Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, R.T. Halsey and Henry Ford, which began opening to the public in the 1920s in Williamsburg, Dearborn, and New York, was further entrenched by the Federal Art Project’s (FAP) massive folio, the Index of American Design. Drawing from these collections and others in which white American makers from the Northern and Mid-Atlantic United States were overrepresented, the Index included only rare examples of African American folk traditions, such as face jugs from Edgefield, South Carolina and Harriet Power’s Bible quilt. The key architects of the white American folk art canon, such as FAP director and “Masters of Popular Painting” curator, Holger Cahill, were not the only ones hesitant about how African American utilitarian and decorative arts fit into the larger, romantically nationalist landscape of American folk art. Mary Ann Calo has insightfully characterized how black intellectuals grappled with the potential for African American folk art to have an enriching impact on concepts of cultural patrimony. Whereas American folk art gave white intellectuals “access to indigenous traditions that might subvert foreign influences threatening to undermine the integrity of the nation’s art” the symbolic potential of black folk art was “more complicated” for black artists and intellectuals. For, as Calo explains, “Black folk
traditions emergent from a slave past ran counter to New Negro pride and the emphasis on entering modern civilization through participation in an elite culture.”

Therefore, the violence and injustice of slavery not only meant limited the survival of African American material culture, it also tainted the potential for objects that did make it into the 20th century to be embraced as symbols of national or racial pride.

Although previous decades had witnessed efforts by African Americans to record and promote their folk culture, such as John Wesley Work’s publication of Folk Song of the American Negro in 1915, debates over the value of black folk traditions came to a head in the decade of Pippin’s rise, which coincided with Zora Neale Hurston’s increasing cultural stature. With a 1931 essay on the syncretic culture of hoodoo, Hurston, who studied with Locke at Howard University and the cultural relativist Franz Boas at Barnard College, became one of the first African Americans to publish in the Journal of American Folklore. Five years later, she published Mules and Men a seminal contribution to the study of African American folk culture that became a locus for the debate around the difficulty of recording and representing black folk traditions. In December of 1936, the white radical folklorist Harold Preece published perhaps one of the sharpest and most enduring criticisms of Hurston in The Crisis. His essay, entitled “The Negro Folk Cult,” argued that far from empowering African Americans, the study

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68 Calo, Distinction and Denial, 192.
69 Check
of their folk culture had to that point largely been exploitative and retentive of dominant power structures. He accused Hurston of being yet another folklorist who failed to “cast their lot with the folk,” further perpetuating the tendency of folklorists to exhibit a “definite superiority complex” over their subjects.  

Although Locke’s relationship with his former student would grow strained when he published a criticism of her next book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, he did not weigh in publicly on the debate over *Mules and Men*. Locke’s publications of the late 1930s, however, contain traces of his stance on how the folk could contribute to historic and contemporary conceptions of Negro Art. Beginning in the 1920s, Locke had aggressively promoted a doctrine of Ancestralism that urged black artists to take up African art as inspiration for their contemporary painting. Although he continued to stress the important legacy of “ancestral arts” in his publications of the late 1930s and 1940s, including sections on African art in both *Negro Art* and *The Negro in Art*, these works also present the African American craftsman as an important predecessor to the New Negro artist. In *Negro Art*, for instance, he includes “The Artist Craftsmen” in his chapter on “Early Negro Artists.” Locke echoes Cahill’s rhetoric about how folk art “gives a living quality to the story of American beginnings in the arts, and is a chapter, intimate and quaint, in the social history of this country,” suggesting that the Negro

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Artist Craftsman demonstrated “the artistic capacity of the group too be more broadly rooted than just an occasional flowering talent of formal art at the top.”

He even promotes the Negro Artist Craftsman as engaged in Ancestralism by praising “the famous Negro blacksmiths of New Orleans,” noting that, “they were working in an original African skill without knowing it, for metal forging is one of Africa’s oldest and greatest arts.” Black ironworkers are credited again in Locke’s *Negro in Art*, but the author’s major endorsement of the folk in this publication is of course his inclusion of Pippin, William Edmondson, and Leslie Garland-Bolling among his selection of esteemed black artists.

Just as Locke had urged African American artists to engage and outdo the interpretation of African art undertaken by white modernists, the recognition of black craftsman and contemporary self-taught artists—the peers of the white American folk artists in Cahill’s canon—was another means for leveling the playing field. In his foreword to the catalogue essay for the Baltimore Museum’s 1939 show, “Contemporary Negro Artists,” Locke wrote,

> It may be impossible under modern American conditions to revive folk art effectively, but surely a people’s art is possible. In this drive toward democracy in art, the Negro artist and the Negro people have an unusual stake, for the very term “Negro

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“art” implies in addition to a blossoming of Negro arts the
flowering of an art of folk expression and interpretation.\(^{73}\)
Porter, who had disagreed with Locke over the role of the ancestral arts, seems to
have agreed that the recognition of the black folk artist was another way into the
American art family. In the conclusion of his chapter, “Naïve and Folk Artists,” he
writes, “In American art the tradition of naïve intuition has been responsible for many
excellent achievements. It is inspiring to note that there are Negro artists whose natural
gifts privilege them to further this tradition.”\(^{74}\)

Pippin’s success was not merely coincident with the black establishment’s
reappraisal of folk art and the strategies for integration it represented, but rather central
to it. Upon Pippin’s death in 1947, Locke explicitly proposed Pippin as a conduit
between the canonical or white conception of the folk and the distinctive contribution of
the black artist. He wrote, "In fact, two folk-strains converged in Pippin, the local rural,
with its strong Pennsylvania Dutch flair for genre and patterned decorativeness and the
naïve Negro folk feeling for pure color and imaginative symbolism."\(^{75}\) In Locke’s
assessment, Pippin’s folk identity derived from his regional and racial affiliations. As a
resident of Chester County, Pippin lived in a part of Eastern Pennsylvania that was
considered a cradle of Americana with its wealth of “Pennsylvania Dutch flair”, as well

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as association as the home of Edward Hicks, the Quaker sign painter who was by the late 1930s widely regarded as one of the masters of American folk art. Scholars like Judith Stein and Judith Zilczer have explored how Pippin likely drew inspiration from Hicks, who was another of Carlen’s best-selling artists, for Pippin’s *Holy Mountain* series of the mid 1940s echoes Hicks’ biblically inspired *Peaceable Kingdoms* (Fig. 65). In addition to reimagining the iconic scene’s shepherd as black—an act of re-racing which, as in *The Buffalo Hunt*, establishes blackness as a normative folk baseline—Pippin’s *Holy Mountain* series functioned as a social protest decrying violence at home and abroad.

According to Locke, Pippin’s other folk strain was evident in his naïve mastery of “pure color and imaginative symbolism”—formal traits that Locke and others attributed to black artists in this period, but which were also associated with historic and contemporary folk painters—from Hicks to Kane.

Locke’s summary of Pippin’s folk embodiments is curiously devoid of any mention of the artist’s paintings of Southern agrarian blacks, which had become prime folk subject matter for many artists in this era. Pippin conceived his first work related to cotton in 1933, with *Cabin in the Cotton I* (Fig. 33), a work that pictures a hunched older woman minding a child on a plot of land enclosed by a dilapidated fence, which rises against a backdrop of plentiful cotton. The scene’s rustic scenery and rural way of life are in keeping with what Jacqueline Francis calls “an enduring clapboard iconology of the South” that emerged in this era, characterized by “plank floors and cabin walls,
agrarian laborers and their fields, dirt roads, and small town rituals such as fairs, picnics, and livestock sales.” This work was well received at the outset of Pippin’s career, showing in his 1937 Chester County Art Association debut, West Chester Community Center solo exhibition of the same year, “Masters of Popular Painting,” and his 1940 solo show at the Carlen Galleries, where it was famously presold—via Albert Barnes—to the Hollywood actor Charles Laughton. That same year, Pippin applied for a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation to “go down South, to Georgia, Alabama, North and South Carolina, to paint landscapes and the life of Negro people at work and at play, and all other things that happen in their everyday living.” For Pippin had only been to the South twice, briefly for his military training at Camp Wadsworth in South Carolina and later in the 1920s to visit his wife’s family in Durham, North Carolina. 

Cabin in the Cotton I’s high profile sale may have contributed to Pippin’s desire to paint more Southern scenes, but the practice of mining the South for content—highly prevalent among African American writers, artists and academics at this time—was surely another. As J. Martin Favor has documented, the South and its folk traditions functioned as an important source of racial identity for such writers as Jean Toomer and James Weldon Johnson during the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance in the second half of the 1920s, and by the end of that decade, black painters were following suite. Malvin

76 Francis, Making Race, 129.
78 Monahan, “‘When Does a Primitive Cease to Be a Primitive?’: Horace Pippin’s Paintings of Cotton,” 9.
Gray Johnson’s gospel-inspired Swing Low Sweet Chariot, for instance, won first prize at the Harmon Foundation’s second annual group exhibition in 1929, and just before his untimely death five years later, he endeavored upon a trip through the South to “paint Negro subjects.” Over the next decade, African Americans such as Charles Alston, Eldzier Cortor, Katherine Dunham, Zora Neale Hurston, William H. Johnson and others would travel south pursue their own Southern fieldwork with funding from the Guggenheim and Rosenwald foundations. If Pippin was not initially aware of this support, his dealer Carlen certainly was, for in addition to putting on exhibitions of contemporary black artists in his gallery, Carlen was active in promoting and selecting the Negro Art surveys of the late 1930s and early 1940s, which included much evidence of this Southern exposure.

Pippin’s application, however, was unsuccessful, and his interest in painting Southern subject matter did not revive until 1943, when he was commissioned to create a painting, Old Black Joe, for a Capehart Panamuse radio advertising campaign (Fig. 66).

Handled by N.W. Ayer and Sons, a Philadelphia advertising firm with a connection to Barnes, the campaign featured the original work of a variety of artists who were asked

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80 Barnes appears to have been the catalyst for this commission. On May 10, 1942, Gerold M. Lauck, the president of N.W. Ayer & Co, the Philadelphia advertising firm that handled the Capehart account, wrote to him thanking him for the visit (presumably to the foundation) and saying that he will reach out to Pippin immediately. Subsequent letters document details of the Pippin commission. “Various Letters from Gerold M. Lauck to Albert C. Barnes,” June 1943, Alfred C. Barnes Correspondence Files, Barnes Foundation.
to draw inspiration from specific musical sources, in Pippin’s case, the songbook of Stephen Foster. Pippin chose “Old Black Joe,” a song that Foster, who has been called “responsible for the soundtrack of minstrelsy,” wrote in 1860, basing its title character on a slave he knew in the household of a young woman he courted. Pippin may have favored this song because he recognized it as one of the few in Foster’s songbook that bore the influence of gospel music, or he may have been drawn to it because Al Jolson had recently performed it in the 1939 film Swanee River. The ebullience of Pippin’s color palette in this work seems to set the tone for the song’s romanticization of plantation life, but scholars like Judith Wilson and Anne Monahan have suggested that Pippin was in fact subverting the commission and its related song. Indeed the structuring presence of whiteness, in the cotton, the big house at left, the daisies throughout and the little girl tethered to Joe’s post, score the painting with the reality of Joe’s servitude. With his hair going white and his bag at his feet, Joe is ready for the next

82 Monahan, “When Does a Primitive Cease to Be a Primitive?: Horace Pippin’s Paintings of Cotton,” 20; This inspiration for the character of Joe is noted in the “Untitled Manuscript Detailing Facts about Old Black Joe, Compiled by Gwen Everett.”
84 See Wilson: “Yet, the artist has deftly sidestepped the written text's cloying sentimentality, presenting instead a subtle meditation on the moral economy of slavery--its reduction of grown men to the status of children, its production of wealth by trading human lives for bales of cotton, and its exchange of black labor for divine promissory notes;” Ibid.; and Monahan: “Despite the bucolic setting, Old Black Joe offers a bleak picture of African-American labor in the Southern economy that makes it an odd fit for a national advertising campaign, Monahan, “‘When Does a Primitive Cease to Be a Primitive?’: Horace Pippin’s Paintings of Cotton,” 23.
world, and his imminent passing is presaged by the creeping shade of the oak tree at left. In Foster’s song, Joe both laments and welcomes his mortality, mourning his departed loved ones and promising that he will soon heed their call from beyond.

As established by works such as Mr. Prejudice and the Holy Mountain series, Pippin was not an artist who shied away from social protest, but while his incarnation of Joe is indeed humanizing and empathetic, the political power of this work is diminished when considered against other depictions of black agrarian subjects done by African American artists in this era. Consider, for instance, a work like Earle Wilton Richardson’s Employment of Negroes in Agriculture of 1934, a Public Works of Art Project mural, which would have appeared on the walls of the 135th branch of the New York Public Library as part of the Negro Achievement mural Richardson and Malvin Gray Johnson were commissioned to paint had both artists not died in 1934 (Fig. 67). Taking a page from Mexican muralism, Richardson created figures who are dignified in their monumentality, their labor glorified by their full bales and the linear geometry of the well maintained cotton rows receding in the distance. Artists like Rex Goreleigh and Robert Neal used Regionalism, another style that was ascendant in that era, to idealize the black agrarian in another manner. Goreleigh’s Plowin’, 1940, and Neal’s Georgia Dwelling, 1939, (Figs. 68 & 69) are among the Regionalist scenes featured in Locke’s The Additional evidence of Pippin’s interest in using his art to comment on the position of blacks in the United States are two commissions, one for the cover of Angelo Herndon’s projected Negro Digest and another for a poster for a 1945 production of Deep Are the Roots.
Negro in Art, which also offered some less romantic evaluations of black labor. In Charles White’s 1940 crayon drawing, There Were No Crops This Year (Fig. 70), a couple mournfully swoons around a flaccid sack—the counterpoint to Richardson’s abundant bales. Their voluptuously modeled but stooped and pained bodies subsume the frame, leaving no room for picturesque rural vistas. Robert Blackburn’s 1938 drawing Toil also eschews a fertile landscape, centering its bent and faceless laborer amid a ground of shorn plants whose blooms now fill in his heavy, but not overflowing, sack (Fig. 71). What all of these images have in common is that they communicate the historic and ongoing contribution—and plight—of black laborers. These images could resonate either with the antebellum past or their Depression era present, and this elision of time offers room for meditating on the state of black farmers. By contrast, as an illustration of a distinctly antebellum black stereotype—the servile black slave—Pippin’s portrait of Old Black Joe, seems hopelessly rooted in the past. Of course, not all depictions of Southern blacks by African American artists were as obviously politically charged as White’s or dignifying as Richardson’s. The highly stylized paintings of Southern subjects that William H. Johnson conceived in the early 1940s, for instance, were highly reductive in their cartoonish portrayal of black folk. But while Johnson was consciously cultivating what Richard J. Powell has called a “notion of internalized primitivism” that was informed by both his racial self-concept and his training in European traditions, we can only guess as to whether Pippin applied such filters of self-consciousness to his
depictions of a primitive South. In this sense, Pippin occupies a position analogous to Hurston in his treatment of the folk. While he played an important role in making blackness a visible part of the American folk being defined between the wars, like Hurston he was not part of the radical tradition called for by figures like Harold Preece. Just as Hurston was satisfied with documenting black folk culture without necessarily examining it through the lens of the Great Depression and racial inequality, Pippin depicted the black agrarian life without the social agenda of an artist like Charles White or the explicitly articulated self-primitivization of William H. Johnson.

In his discussion of Locke’s outlook on the folk, Cornel West summarized the “essential forces” of the folk as “primitive, raw, coarse, and unrefined” and requiring “the skills of cultivated and educated artists to disclose them to the world.” Locke may have agreed with this, as he appeared to have been suspicious of Pippin’s ability to tangle with the complex content of black folk culture. For while Locke agreed to serve as a recommender for Pippin’s 1940 Guggenheim application, his endorsement was wary at best. Locke wrote,

Frankly I am puzzled for an opinion! Pippin is very original and in some canvases a startlingly original painter. What would come from him in terms of a Southern trip and exposure

for the first time to the South and the Negro in that locale is only to be guessed at; the result might range anywhere from something stupendously new to outright fizzle. It is a gamble, but probably a very worthwhile gamble.\textsuperscript{88}

Locke’s supportive yet somewhat hedging endorsement of Pippin’s trip South suggests a lack of confidence in Pippin’s ability to interpret the volatile Southern past.

For while many white artists also contributed to the pantheon of Southern agrarian imagery that proliferated in the 1930s and 1940s, Thomas Hart Benton, Edmund Archer, and Robert Gwathmey among them, black artists were as, Jacqueline Francis has argued, “burdened with ‘representativeness’ in a way that the larger set of white, regionalist imagery was not.”\textsuperscript{89} The way that Pippin suffered from this burden is evident in the criticism that \textit{Old Black Joe} received from John Kienitz, an art history professor at the University of Wisconsin, in his review of James Porter’s \textit{Modern Negro Art}. Although Porter did not include \textit{Old Black Joe} among his Pippin selections, Kienitz must have been aware of it from the Capehart ads, and called the work a "saccharine painting" that "perpetuate[s] exactly the interpretation of the Negro which is most offensive to such cultivated and alert Negroes as Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson, and, we presume, Mr. Porter." Kienitz continues, “Our American Negro has long since ceased to be an \textit{Old Black Joe} or robot hammered into submission by a heavy hand with good intentions.”\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{88} Stein, “An American Original,” 22.
\textsuperscript{90} Quoted in Monahan, “‘When Does a Primitive Cease to Be a Primitive?’: Horace Pippin’s Paintings of Cotton,” 20.
The black art establishment did not publically echo Kienitz’s criticism of *Old Black Joe*, but neither did it embrace the painting, or any of Pippin’s other cotton works, for that matter (Figs. 72-76). *Old Black Joe* did not appear in any of the half a dozen Negro Art shows in which Pippin participated between 1943 and his death. The five cotton scenes Pippin conceived the following year were likewise passed over for the Negro Art shows of 1944-5, although *Cabin in the Cotton III*, which is a more romantic version of his original *Cabin in the Cotton I*, was selected for the Carnegie’s 1944 annual and shown the following year at the Phillips Collection’s “Three Negro Artists: Horace Pippin, Jacob Lawrence, Richmond Barthé.” Pippin’s *Uncle Tom*, 1944, was also popular with the white art establishment, as it was selected for the annual exhibitions of the Whitney in 1944 and PAFA the following year. The success of Pippin’s cotton paintings among his supporters from the entertainment and advertising industries, which was first established by Charles Laughton’s much publicized purchase of *Cabin in the Cotton I*, continued as *Old King Cotton* sold to theater manager Ludwig Charell then to actor Sam Jaffe, while *Cotton Plantation* was purchased by the celebrity milliner Fred Fredericks, and *Cabin in the Cotton II* sold to advertising executive Ted Sandler.91 Actor Edward G. Robinson and director Albert Lewin, meanwhile, each owned one of Pippin’s interior scenes of African American life in the South, *Sunday Morning Breakfast* of 1943 and *Christmas Morning Breakfast* of 1945.

91 Ibid., 29–33.
That Pippin’s cotton paintings were popular with white audiences and largely ignored by the black art establishment is further evidence of the complexity of Pippin’s reception. His art—which ranged from depictions of American heroism with universal appeal to atavistic depictions of the American South commissioned, purchased, and exhibited predominantly by white audiences—was neither monolithically rejected by the black art establishment nor was it wholly embraced. From Alain Locke’s half-hearted endorsement of Pippin’s Guggenheim application to James Porter’s far from effusive inclusion of naïve artists in *Modern Negro Art*, Pippin and other black self-taught artists were indeed included in the emergent canon of Negro Art but not without apprehension. Yet such ambivalence was typical of the art world’s approach to self-taught artists, regardless of color. Even Holger Cahill—the preeminent booster of modern primitives—was known to valorize and belittle self-taught artists in the same breath. In one of his first major publications on folk art Cahill reassures his readership, “we cannot value [folk art] as highly as the work of our best professional artists,” a warning that he reprises in his catalogue essay for “Masters of Popular Painting” six years later. Insistence that untrained artists should be celebrated but not as much as their trained peers allowed self-taught artists to become a new class of cultural producers within the matrix of American art—which had long been under fire for being inferior to European art and needed all the reinforcements it could get—without necessarily attracting the ire of artists who had paid their dues in academies and workshops. Given
that African American artists faced institutional racism and segregation that further reduced the already scarce opportunities available to American artists in this era, the ability of Pippin to attract widespread support would presumably have caused outrage among black artists. Although many scholars reference the professional jealousy that African American artists harbored toward Pippin, the only artist who has been identified by name as belonging to that camp is Allan R. Freelon. Freelon was also a fixture in the Negro Art exhibitions of the era, and his work was included in Porter’s *Modern Negro Art*, where it appeared, surely to his chagrin, next to the work of Edmondson. Freelon’s animosity notwithstanding, there is more anecdotal evidence of black artists who favored Pippin. While both Jacob Lawrence and William H. Johnson were interested in Pippin’s style, Romare Bearden, an artist who was an outspoken critic of the ways that black artists had been manipulated by white patronage systems praised Pippin in his famous article, “The Negro Artist’s Dilemma” and subsequent publications. And when Hale Woodruff painted his *Art of the Negro* mural for the Trevor Arnett Library at Atlanta University in 1951, he included a shout out to Pippin. In his *Muses* panel, which was a tribute to key African and African American artists throughout history, Pippin appears in the back row, in a profile that is reminiscent of his posture for Carl Van Vechten (Fig. 77).

The admiration of artists like Bearden and Woodruff may seem surprising given the scarcity of opportunities available to African American artists in this era, but that very scarcity also fueled a kinship that is all too often overlooked. As Mary Ann Calo has established, while the 1930s saw major advances for black artists, during this period they were nonetheless submitted to a “discourse of racial difference that functioned to isolate black artistic production from mainstream cultural practice.” This reality, which Calo schematizes as the persistent “denial” of the African American artist, even as he realized unprecedented recognition, or “distinction,” between the wars, contributed to self-awareness among black artists of the ways that they too remained outsiders. Pippin may have been an outsider twice removed, once by his race and twice by his frequent categorization as a modern primitive—although I will discuss how this label’s function during the interwar period should be considered more than just marginalizing in my conclusion—but that did not necessarily render him the enemy of the trained black artist, whose awareness of his perceived distance from the white mainstream made room for identification with, rather than loathing of, Pippin. There is no denying the persistence of the sense that the success of Pippin and other black self-taught artists has been bad for black artists, which is evidenced by the comments of Kerry James Marshall and others with which this chapter began. However, the support and admiration he received from African American scholars and artists during his lifetime that is examined

93 Calo, Distinction and Denial, viii.
here can no longer be a footnote in his legacy. Instead, Pippin must be remembered as an individual who transcended the period’s racial segregation and contributed an important black presence in contemporary art exhibitions and constructions of the American folk as conceived by both the black and white art establishments.
4. Goodwill Grandma: Anna Mary Robertson Moses & The Cold War Era

When Horace Pippin died in 1946, self-taught painter Anna Mary Robertson Moses was having a moment. Six years after her New York City debut, Moses reached new heights of public recognition when her dealer Otto Kallir published the first major book on the artist and arranged to license her paintings as greeting cards. Demand for both Moses products was fierce: Originally released by Dryden Press, *Grandma Moses: American Primitive* was re-editioned in an expanded version by the larger publisher Doubleday within a year. Brundage Greeting cards likewise could not keep up with orders, which were four times the anticipated press run, so Hallmark took over the license for Moses’s merry scenes of rural America in 1947.1 And although Moses had already appeared in national newspapers, especially after a very press friendly appearance at Gimbel’s department store in 1940, American audiences had their first encounter with Moses in another medium in May of 1946, when CBS featured her on its popular radio program *We The People*. By the end of the decade, Moses had become a public figure whose birthday received national coverage. Word of “the white-haired girl of the U.S.A.” had even made it as far as Australia.2 Just as her name became household, so too did her art, for her paintings of the rural homesteads and valleys she occupied in

2 “Clipping from Australia’s Junior Red Cross Record Featuring Grandma Moses,” October 1, 1948, Scrapbooks: Book One, Galerie St. Etienne Grandma Moses Archive.

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New York and Virginia were widely accessible, not only as affordable paper products but also as domestic consumables like wallpaper and lampshades (Fig. 78). On the November 18, 1950 cover of the Saturday Evening Post, for instance, Norman Rockwell depicted a young boy practicing his trumpet in front of an armchair upholstered in fabric patterned with Moses’s painting, *Childhood Home* (Fig. 79).³

Despite her ubiquity, Moses apparently did not qualify as the giant that American art world was desperately seeking in the immediate postwar period. As James Thrall Soby, a Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) curator who would ultimately become Moses’s harshest critic, wrote in 1947, “We have produced in painting and sculpture no figure big enough to hold the eyes of the world on himself and also, inevitably, on those of lesser stature around him.”⁴ The title of Soby’s article, “Does Our Art Impress Europe?” is emblematic of the self-consciousness that still plagued domestic art circles in the late 1940s. The 1938 American art survey at the Jeu de Paume discussed in Chapter Two had hardly settled the issue of whether or not the United States had a compelling national artistic tradition. The war had interrupted the export of American art abroad, and the few shows of American painting arranged in the immediate postwar period

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³ In addition to memorializing her *Williamstown* chair, Rockwell included a portrait of the artist in *Christmas Homecoming*, his cover for the December 25, 1948 *Saturday Evening Post*; Rockwell lived near Moses, and visited her on several occasions, including, most famously, her birthday parties. Karal Ann Marling, *Designs on the Heart: The Homemade Art of Grandma Moses* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 197, 188–9.

were generally not well received. Serge Guilbaut has argued that New York was regarded as unseating Paris’s leadership in modern art as early as 1948, but lamentations on the sorry state of American art are easily traceable well into the 1950s. In the spring of 1953, for instance, MoMA organized “Twelve Modern American Painters and Sculptors,” which opened at the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris. French critics were not enthusiastic about the show, which included work by Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Edward Hopper and Ben Shahn; one critic writing in *Les Lettres Françaises* commented, “It seems impossible that a big country and a great people cannot present something better.” Later that year, in an essay aggressively titled “Toward a New Definition of Chauvinism, *Art Digest* editor Belle Krasne complained of “the inability of the French to see anything except French art.” Krasne recounted her recent visit to the Musée d’Art Moderne, where Parisian “chauvinism” prevailed, with one highly lamentable exception. “Tucked away in the furthest corner of the museum, in a gallery almost too small to be noticed, I found a little cluster of works by non-Frenchmen,” she wrote. “And here, in this alien camp, I came across the one painting that represented the United

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5 In 1946, for instance, the State Department and the National Gallery of Art presented a survey of more than 200 American paintings that was poorly received. Michael L. Krenn, *Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 26.
6 Ibid., 85.
States: a small painting, its placard reading "Grandma Moses, Ecole Americain." I hurried away; I dislike practical jokes on an international scale.”

While Moses’s widespread popularity at home has been well documented and analyzed in books by the art dealer who first showed her work in 1940, Otto Kallir (1946, 1969, 1973), his granddaughter and successor at the Galerie St. Etienne, Jane Kallir (1982, 2001), and art historian Karal Ann Marling, who has extensively analyzed how Moses’s paintings were commercialized and sold as mass market goods (2006), the artist’s exposure to European audiences after 1950 is a little studied aspect of her career. After establishing how Moses came to domestic renown in the 1940s, this chapter offers an unprecedented look at “Grandma Moses,” the exhibition that introduced Moses to foreign audiences, traveling to five European cities between June of 1950 and January of 1951. Although this exhibition has never been discussed in the context of Cold War cultural diplomacy, the 1950-1 Moses tour was indeed part of a decades long effort on the part of the United States government to build goodwill toward America. In addition to presenting new archival findings that document the execution and reception of the show, I will offer readings of key works that demonstrate the Cold War utility of Moses’s imagery, ultimately leading to a reckoning with Moses’s place in grand narratives of postwar American painting. For while Moses’s paintings toured Europe in

7 Belle Krasne, “Toward a New Definition of Chauvinism,” Art Digest, October 15, 1953, 5. The Moses painting she encountered was The Dead Tree, which had been acquired by the museum earlier that year.
1950, that same year *The Rock*, a monumental painting by the magic realist Peter Blume won the people’s choice award at the Carnegie International, and the American pavilion at the Venice Biennale showcased not only Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, but also John Marin, elder statesman of the Stieglitz circle. I argue that Moses’s European tour and popularity more generally exemplify the eclecticism of American art at midcentury—a historical reality that is often elided in favor of monolithic narratives about the so-called “triump” of Abstract Expressionism after World War II.

After the Moses show hit its last stop at the American Embassy in Paris, influential art historian and critic Robert Goldwater shamed the event’s organizers in the pages of the *Magazine of Art*, writing: “If the Embassy’s devoted staff, who work with no funds at their disposal, can do no better than Grandma Moses, they should perhaps leave bad enough alone.” Goldwater went on to name de Kooning and Pollock as more worthy representatives of American art abroad. Perhaps as a result of such either/or approaches to postwar art, which began with contemporary art critics eager to promote the painters they deemed best represented American modernism, when Moses has been subsequently considered in relation to her contemporaries, she has often been cast as the “the anti-Jackson Pollock, the nativist choice for a laureate role that cosmopolitans assigned to Jack the Dripper.” Although not without its shortcomings, this paradigm

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acknowledges that Moses and Pollock were in a dead heat for top celebrity artist, depending on who you asked: To the general public, the winner was uncontestably Moses, but the ivory tower of avant-garde art critics held only Pollock aloft as America’s “giant.” Indeed there are many reasons to interpret Moses’s popular appeal as oppositional to rarefied Abstract Expressionism, from her friendship with President Harry Truman, a vocal skeptic of modern art, to the many voices in the mainstream media that cast Moses as a kind of antimodern shepherdess, who would, as one art writer put it, “lead us out of the lanes of abstraction and intellectualized distortion.”

Yet Moses’s popularity should not be understood solely in contradiction with the rise of the New York School. For one thing, her popularity both preceded and outlived it: She debuted more than half a decade before events such as “The Ideographic Picture” exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1947 that put that put the third generation of American abstract painters on the map. And four years after Life magazine ran the news of Pollock’s fatal car crash under the headline, “Rebel Artist’s Tragic Ending,” Grandma Moses appeared on the magazine’s cover, wreathed in roses and celebrating her 100th birthday. Ultimately, this chapter goes beyond the obvious pictorial polarities that


oppose Moses and Pollock to propose the common ground that supported their simultaneity.

4.1 Starting out in the Valley

Before Grandma Moses debuted her work to the New York art world at the Galerie St. Etienne in 1940, it was seen in a succession of non-traditional venues in the Cambridge Valley near the New York-Vermont Border. The first known public display of her art occurred in 1937 at the Cambridge County fair, where her strawberry preserves famously overshadowed her paintings. Along with other unsold goods from the fair, Moses’ paintings then made their way to the Hoosick Falls drugstore of W.D. Thomas. After hanging in Thomas’s window for nearly a year without event, Moses’s paintings caught the attention of Louis Caldor, a civil engineer and amateur collector from downstate, who was passing through and stopped at the store to treat a stomach ache in the Spring of 1938. Eager to move his dust-gathering Moses inventory, Thomas offered Caldor a 10 percent discount if he bought the entire lot—an enticement that was surely unnecessary given that Caldor not only purchased all of the pictures, he also insisted on directions to Moses’s house so he could inquire after more. Moses lived in Eagle Bridge, New York a hamlet on the border of Renseallar and Washington counties that was about midway between Cambridge to the North and Hoosick Falls to the

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12 Galerie St. Etienne is now operated by Otto’s granddaughter, Jane Kallir and Hildegard Bachert, who joined the gallery in 1940, just before Moses’s debut show there.
13 Not all were paintings, some probably worsted pictures
South. When Caldor called on Moses the same day, she was not home, but her daughter-in-law, Dorothy, advised him that yes, “Mother Moses” had more paintings, and that he should come back to see them the next day. Upon her return, Moses was excited by the news of Caldor’s visit but concerned that Dorothy had overpromised by indicating to Caldor that there were at least ten more. Worried that she was short one painting, she made two pictures out of one, cutting a very large landscape down the middle, creating two separate works, *Shenandoah Valley, South Branch*, and *Shenandoah Valley (1861, News of the Battle)* (Figs. 80–81).

This resulting Shenandoah diptych is uniquely representative and unrepresentative of Moses’s larger oeuvre, which included 1,542 paintings when Galerie St. Etienne founder Otto Kallir catalogued it in 1973, twelve years after the artist’s death at the age of 101. Technically speaking, the large, vertically oriented oils on cloth that resulted from Moses’s surgical solution are outliers: Moses used canvas only very early on in her career and then incidentally throughout; she greatly preferred to paint on the hard pressed cardboard surface of Masonite, which she primed with “linseed oil, then with three coats of flat white paint.” In fact, Moses had turned to painting in part because she was frustrated that the worsted pictures she embroidered were being eaten by moths; her preference for Masonite or hard wood “because it will last many years

16 Moses, *Grandma Moses*, 133.
longer than canvas” was the kind of practical choice that was characteristic of Moses’s background, for Moses’s art production had, from an early age, existed in tension with the hazards and demands of farm life. Encouraged to draw by her father, Russell King Robertson, himself an amateur painter, Moses was permitted to sketch on penny paper and even paint household objects like fireboards and slate scraps throughout her youth, but her mother, Margaret Shanahan Robertson, never saw it as a practical pursuit. Far more important was her contribution to the household, which included looking after her siblings, as Moses was one of ten and the oldest girl among them. At the age of 12 she was sent away to work for families on neighboring farms. At 27 she married Thomas Moses, and they set out to start their own. It was only after Thomas died in 1927, by which time Moses was in her seventies and unable to keep up with farm work, that she began spending more time creating images, first in wool, then in oil.

Measuring roughly 40 x 30 inches before it was halved, the Shenandoah diptych was exceptionally large for a Moses painting, which is more typically half that size. Moses did not paint on a traditional easel, but rather on an 18th-century family heirloom, the famed Moses “tip-up table” that now resides at the Bennington Museum, which is just over the Vermont border from Eagle Bridge. Large pieces of Masonite did not fit on her table, requiring her to paint them spread out on her bed—an exercise that became difficult to navigate as she progressed into her 80s and 90s, her most prolific painting

17 Ibid.
years. As a result, Moses was reluctant to paint larger, a suggestion made to her by supporters like Ala Story, the director of the American British Art Center who was, along with Kallir and Calдор, was one of Moses’s most passionate early advocates. She also largely resisted suggestions to paint vertical compositions, which would have translated more easily to the many magazine covers her works graced in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The vertical orientations of Shenandoah Valley, South Branch, and Shenandoah Valley (1861, News of the Battle) are thus relatively rare in her oeuvre, which is dominated by horizontal formats.

Lastly, Moses is typically cast as a “farm woman of that New York-New England country,” so the Shenandoah diptych sticks out because of its Southern subject matter. Moses was permanently living in Eagle Bridge by the time she came to public acclaim in 1940, and the majority of her works depict the Cambridge Valley homesteads where her Scotch Irish ancestors settled when they arrived in the 18th century. But this diptych is a memorial to the 20 years she “fought long against the Southern accent,” running various farms in Virginia with Thomas and their burgeoning family. Just after their nuptials in 1887, the newlyweds headed south with the intention of running a horse farm in North Carolina, but they did not make it farther than Staunton, Virginia. Stopped for the night

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19 Ibid., 88.
20 Ibid., 66. In the late 1940s alone, her work appeared on the covers of Art Digest, Town and Country, House and Garden, and Holiday.
21 Moses, Grandma Moses, 76.
in Staunton, Thomas dropped in to a local drugstore—a hub of networking that indeed proved crucial in Moses’s personal history—and was invited to consider taking over a local dairy farm. Over the next two decades, the Moseses tended a succession of five farms. Moses remembered her time in the South fondly both in her 1952 autobiography and the many paintings she devoted to the Shenandoah Valley. Moses described *Shenandoah South Branch* as picturing the point where the “Shanandoah River intersetcs [sic] the Blue Ridge mountains at the foot of Boliver Heights.” The mountains blaze on the horizon in such a hue of blue as to recall the color palette of an Expressionist like Franz Marc, while Boliver Heights, a plateau that stretched between the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers, rises up below them at right, a green mound above the last detailed forest line. Although Boliver Heights continues in the upper left third of *Shenandoah Valley* (1861, *News of the Battle*), when the paintings are placed side by side, the plateau is misaligned by several inches, and the ultramarine peak that arches behind it in the left panel is completely missing in the right panel. In the process of refashioning and reframing these canvases as a pair, a central strip of the original canvas appears to have been excised or at least folded over underneath the frame. The yellowish grey portion in the upper left corner of *Shenandoah Valley* (1861, *News of the Battle*) also suggests that

22 More than half a dozen of Moses’s works are named for locations in the Shenandoah Valley, and others, such as her many versions of “Apple-Butter Making” depict Southern locales without naming them. Jerome Hill, *Grandma Moses*, 16 mm color film, 1950.


Moses may have overpainted the other half of the iridescent blue mountain in haste to make two independent pictures, which indeed operate very differently once separated. *Shenandoah South Branch* is a more generalized Southern idyll, whose dairy cows graze undisturbed in their fenced in pasture that perhaps reference Moses’s own successful dairy enterprise down South, where she had a local grocer paying a premium for her “Yankee butter” at 20 cents a pound. As her title implies, *Shenandoah Valley (1861, News of the Battle)* is more specific, marking an important point in the history of the region that took place long before Moses moved there: the traveling party moving up the winding dirt road stops momentarily to spread word of the opening salvo of the Civil War at Fort Sumter, which took place in April of 1861, several months before Moses celebrated her first birthday.

Moses was filmed painting another Shenandoah scene for Jerome Hill’s 1950 23-minute color film, “Grandma Moses,” which was nominated for an academy-award and featured narration written and performed by poet and former Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish (Fig. 82). Toward the middle of the film, Moses appears painting a fence around the base of a Virginia farmstead, “as a good farmer should,” before the film transitions to its characteristic pans and zooms of Moses’s better known Cambridge Valley paintings, as MacLeish makes observations about Moses’s subject matter: “They

25 Moses, *Grandma Moses*, 64.
are paintings not so much of the valley, but of her memory of far back and long ago. The kind of memory her grandchildren and great grandchildren would understand and share.”  

MacLeish’s narrative is an important precursor to Moses’s later classification as a “memory painter,” a term that became especially popular for describing self-taught painters in the 1970s and 80s.  

Notwithstanding the fact that memory painting is a problematic concept, insofar as it could be stretched to encompass any kind of painting involving autobiography and the past, the fact that it became such a popular way to describe Moses and subsequent self-taught artists indicates how important the role of personal biography was in their reception. In Grandma Moses, American Primitive, the first major work to be published on the artist, literary luminary Lois Bromfield insisted that Moses’s many years on the farm equipped her with an authority that belied other painters taking up rural subjects, namely the Regionalists, who were, as we will see at the end of this chapter, falling out of favor. While a farmer might pass over the depictions of agrarian life in a painting by Thomas Hart Benton, according to Bromfield, in front of a Moses, “he would stop and chuckle and smile and sigh, for in it he would find not only every detail painted with satisfaction and understanding, but he would know at once that Grandma Moses understood his whole small world.”

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27 Hill, Grandma Moses.  
even been called a cultural preservationist in paint as she depicted many largely outmoded rituals of self-sufficiency once practiced by her kin, such as candle making and catching the Thanksgiving turkey. The documentary function of her paintings has always been an important part of her reception, but Moses did not paint from life. Rather than being perceived as a diluting mediator, however, the intervention of memory in her practice in effect doubled the authenticity of her work. In MacLeish’s words: “What she paints is what she knows, or rather what she once knew and now remembers and sees therefore in the true perspective with knowledge and memory make.” In other words, Moses knew the agricultural way of life she painted from decades of firsthand experience, but the many years that separated her work as a farm mistress from her record of that life gave her the added authority of an elder with mnemonic access to a now vanishing way of life. The pane of memory through which she perceived her scenes also had a beautifying effect: Reviewing the Hill film for the Magazine of Art in 1950, Helen Franc noted how: “Memory has been kind, for her reminiscences are happy ones, with nothing more menacing than a thunderstorm to disturb the orderly existence so nostalgically recalled.” Although other scholars have pointed out that Moses paintings are not idylls, as they depict the hard work of farming, they also stay clear of the tragic aspects of farm life, such as high infant mortality rates,

30 As Karl Ann Marling has written, “Like the curator of a historic site, she believed that the old-fashioned ways ought to be remembered”. Marling, Designs on the Heart, 71–2.
31 Hill, Grandma Moses.
which Moses herself suffered, leaving “five little graves [...] in that beautiful Shenandoah Valley.”

Moses insisted on painting what she knew, rejecting, for instance, suggestions to create biblical scenes which she characterized as “all guess work” during a 1955 interview with Edward R. Murrow on See It Now. Yet, as Shenandoah Valley (1861, News of the Battle), demonstrates, Moses did not shy away from painting episodes of local history the preceded her lifetime. The degree to which she drew from sources beyond her personal memory has been well documented by Jane Kallir, who now directs the Galerie St. Etienne with Hildegard Bachert. The horse drawn carriage and house in Shenandoah Valley (1861, News of the Battle), for instance, are based on illustrations from popular magazines, which, in addition to other mass-produced materials like greeting cards and Currier & Ives prints, were among Moses’s favored sources for her paintings, especially early in her career. Both Kallirs have observed that the direct correspondence between Moses’s sources and her painting decreased the longer she worked, with Moses eventually taking more license with her figures and anecdotal details, to the point of increasing abstract figures in her late paintings of the 1959-61. In their works of 1973 and 1982, respectively, Otto and Jane examined Moses’s treatments of the same subject across a number of years to demonstrate how Moses’s figures

33 Moses, Grandma Moses, 88–9.
become more schematic, increasingly enveloped by the environments they inhabit. For Jane, this change was evident across five scenes of sugaring off, the practice of tapping maple trees and boiling their syrups that Moses painted countless times over the course of her career (Fig. 83–84, for example).\(^{36}\) Indeed Moses’s *Sugaring Off* works were among the most popular of her “theme” paintings, which can be broadly defined as works featuring subjects for which Moses received recognition early on and was thereafter inveighed upon to version for the duration of her career.\(^ {37}\) As the method of drawing out Moses’s stylistic development using like works has already been amply applied by the Kallirs, I now offer an interpretation of two disparate but important works, the previously discussed Shenandoah diptych done before 1938 and *Black Horses*, a 1942 painting (Fig. 85) that Otto Kallir credits as being the work that fundamentally changed his outlook on Moses.

For months after Caldor purchased Moses’s inventory in the spring of 1938, he struggled to interest the New York art world. Things began to turn around in 1939, when he succeeded in getting three of Moses’s paintings into the Museum of Modern Art’s “Contemporary Unknown Painters,” a group show of living self-taught artists that


\(^{37}\) In addition to *Sugaring Off*, theme paintings included *The Old Oaken Bucket*, an illustration of a poem written by her great grand uncle and popularized by a more visible 19\(^{th}\)-century poet, Samuel T. Woodworth, or *The Checkered House*. Paintings featuring these subjects were highly decorated early in her career: In 1942, *The Old Oaken Bucket* won the purchase prize at the Syracuse Museum of Fine Art, and in 1944, *Old Checkered House* was one of 150 works selected from 5,000 submissions for the “Portrait of America” show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
was a modest follow-up to 1938’s much larger and more visible “Masters of Popular Painting,” discussed in previous chapters.\footnote{Curated by the dealer Sidney Janis, “Contemporary Unknown Painters” had a limited audience, as it was shown not in a public gallery but rather the member’s room. Furthermore, it did not have a catalogue.} Soon after his MoMA coup, Caldor approached Otto Kallir, a fellow Austro-Hungarian émigré and dealer showing so-called “degenerate” art from Europe who was rumored to be interested also in folk art. Caldor brought some works to Kallir’s 57th street gallery, and the two made plans to repair to a parking lot in Westchester as Caldor had the remainder of his Moses inventory in the backseat of his car.\footnote{Kallir, \textit{Grandma Moses}, 1973, 38.} Despite the less than ideal viewing conditions—the parking lot reveal took place after business hours by flashlight—Kallir agreed to give Moses her first one-woman show on the condition that he would be able to make the selection. On October 9th, 1940, Galerie St. Etienne previewed “What a Farm Wife Painted,” an exhibition that included the Shenandoah diptych among its 34 paintings. Only three works sold, and the press gave the show fairly standard coverage, which included a capsule review in \textit{The New York Herald Tribune} that anointed Anna Mary Robertson Moses “Grandma Moses” for the first time in public discourse.\footnote{Ibid., 41. The Galerie St. Etienne maintains eight oversize scrapbooks of Moses-related press clippings, in which I counted 18 reviews of “What a Farmwife Painted.” Although that is a significant volume, they were all capsule reviews, and Hildegard Bachert confirmed in a conversation with the author in November 2014 that the press gave the show coverage that was typical for a gallery show in that period. Based on the scrapbooks, I would characterize the media’s interest in Moses as consistent but not overwhelming until the second half of the 1940s.} Moses’s real explosion into public consciousness came a month later, when the show was reinstalled at
Gimbel’s, a retailer that was among the many department stores that had been incorporating fine art into its displays in this era. Promoted as part of the Gimbel’s Thanksgiving Festival, her paintings hung above a table spread with jams and breads that Moses herself brought to the highly publicized event. The paintings then moved from Gimbel’s to the Whyte Gallery, in Washington, D.C. where the only painting sold went to Duncan Phillips. The Phillips collection, which by then included work by John Kane and Horace Pippin, thus became the first museum to own a Moses. The Syracuse Museum was hot on its heels, however, awarding Moses a purchase prize for *The Old Oaken Bucket*—a work depicting a poem about lost childhood with origins in the Cambridge Valley—the following year. The director of the American British Art Center (ABAC), Ala Story attended the Syracuse show, buying her first Moses there and cultivating plans for a 1942 show of the artist’s work at ABAC.

It was at Story’s ABAC show that Kallir first saw the recently finished spring scene, *Black Horses*. In his many publications on Moses, Kallir positions this work as the

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42 Ala Story was, like Kallir and Caldor, of Austrian origin. Trained in Art history in Vienna Story ran several successful art galleries devoted to contemporary art in London during the 1930s, including the British Art Center. In 1940 she traveled to the United States to organize an exhibition of British art at the Phillips Collection. The blitz began during her time in the United States, so she decided to move her gallery to New York, renaming it the American British Art Center. See *The Ala Story Collection of International Modern Art*, 11–12. According to a conversation with Hildegard Bachert in February 2015, Kallir was excited when Story took an interest in Moses because she had access to many high society collectors. Indeed, Phillips and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller were members of ABAC. Bachert could not recall how or when Kallir first met Story, who was in fact a nobleman descended from the 12th century poet, Hartmann von der Aue, but their shared interest in promoting Austrian art was likely the source of their initial connection.
game changer that forever altered his outlook on Moses. "If up to that time I had looked upon Grandma Moses's work as interesting and appealing folk art, I suddenly realized that here was an outstanding painter," he recalled in 1973.\footnote{Kallir, \textit{Grandma Moses}, 1973, 50.} Just as \textit{Shenandoah Valley (1861, News of the Battle)}, depicts a historical event that Moses did not witness but nonetheless felt a personal connection to, \textit{Black Horses} records an episode of familial history involving Moses's great grandfather E. Robertson, who observed the British Army coming through the woods while working in his fields, unhitched his two black plow horses, and rode one off to warn the colonial army at Bennington "like a New York State Paul Revere."\footnote{Marling, \textit{Designs on the Heart}, 27.} For Kallir, it wasn't the subject matter that made this painting stand out so much as Moses's "instinctive mastery of coloring and composition, shown perhaps for the first time."\footnote{Otto Kallir, ed., \textit{Art and Life of Grandma Moses} (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1969), 26.} Kallir acted swiftly on his renewed interest in the artist: He traveled to Eagle Bridge for the first time, and within two years, he had an agreement with Moses that he and Story would represent her exclusively in New York.\footnote{Kallir, \textit{Grandma Moses}, 1982, 17.} Although Story fell out of Moses's network when she left New York for the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 1952, Kallir would remain a forceful arbiter of her work, facilitating countless shows, books and public appearances, and routing lucrative licensing deals through Grandma Moses Inc., a corporation he established in 1952.\footnote{Marling, \textit{Designs on the Heart}, 211.}
Despite its decisive impact in the course of Moses’s career, *Black Horses* is not without its shortcomings. The matte effect of the pastel patchworks in spring scenes like this one can be appealing, but in general her winter scenes are her most iconic works. One also has to get past the clunky, misshapen bodies of the horses that the work is meant to memorialize—as one died in the ensuing skirmish—in order to appreciate what Kallir saw in this work. They key is to recognize how the valley becomes the star in a painting like *Black Horses*. In a very early work like the Shenandoah diptych, Moses shows her talent for intuiting the rules of atmospheric perspective, pushing the foreground toward the viewer with warmer colors that clash with the cool mountains and sky in the distance. Yet the recession of space in her Shenandoah diptych is jarring. The trees and figure groupings occupying the landscape remain detailed until the upper third of the painting, when without warning, the distance becomes hazy. In *Black Horses*, by contrast, the view drops immediately from a shallow foreground framed by two trees into the expansive valley below. Comprised of abstract patches of farmland and uncultivated forest, the rolling farmland dips near a river toward the center of the picture then picks back up, climaxing with a hillside whose modest peak is echoed in the distance. Suddenly, in this work, Moses is capable of capturing miles and miles of vista, effecting an expansiveness that is one of the defining appeals of the landscape. And suddenly is the key word, as the Shenandoah diptych and *Black Horses* were created only about four years apart.
Moses’s rapid growth as a painter caught Kallir’s eye in 1942 and made her one of the most important artists at his gallery, which was otherwise known for its introduction of Austrian and German modernism to American audiences. Kallir’s representation of American artists was limited, and Moses was in fact his first, as he detected in her work an unlikely kinship with the European modernists who dominated his roster. In 1954, Kallir organized “American Primitive Paintings from the 17th-century to the Present,” a survey of historical and contemporary self-taught artists that was circulated by the Smithsonian Institution and the United States Information Agency to nine European cities. With 12 paintings in the show, Moses was the best represented of the 20th-century selection, which also included Pippin and Kane. In his catalogue essay, Kallir made a case for the American primitive’s candidacy as a modernist by emphasizing the expressive quality of their paintings: “Their disregard of naturalistic forms in favor of a dominating idea sometimes gives them an almost expressionistic quality, close to the interest and conception of a modern public,” he wrote. Reflecting on Moses in a story for Art in America ten years later, art critic John Canaday reinforced the idea that Moses had performed an important function for this “modern public.” Primitives, Canaday writes, were well known at midcentury and their work was regarded as “something that could be trusted as genuine art because the theorists said it

48 Kallir, Grandma Moses, 1982, 154. From 1954-5, the show traveled to Lucerne, Vienna, Munich, Dortmund, Stockholm, Oslo, Manchester, London, Trier
was, but something that could be understood directly, without bothersome estheticising, simply on the basis of surface allure." In other words, Moses was doubly appealing because her figurative, recognizable scenes were both accessible to the average viewer and sanctioned by the art world’s previous expansion of its matrix to include “modern primitive.”

Moses also resonated with the “modern public” through the wide array of mass produced goods bearing her imagery that were available to its ranks. Moses did not initiate her licensing deals, which were arranged by Otto Kallir, and she could not keep up with cashing her royalty checks. Yet her crowd-pleasing performances in public events like Gimbel’s 1940 Thanksgiving festival and on popular programs such as Edward R. Murrow’s See It Now, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter, are a testament to how Moses was more than just complicit with Kallir’s efforts to reach a broad audience with her work. Although Pippin was, as noted in the previous chapter, a savvy agent in his own success, the only 20th century artist to rival Moses’s aptitude for exposure through the moving image, sound recording, and rapidly reproducible imagery was perhaps Andy Warhol. Indeed, Moses prefigured Warhol’s famous prognostication that, “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes,” and

51 See my discussion of Arthur Danto’s conception of the category of Art as a matrix in the Conclusion.
52 Kallir made arrangements for Sylvester Scott, a lawyer in Hoosick Falls and friend of Moses, to handle all of her sales receipts and royalties within a year of the first licensing deal. Kallir, *Grandma Moses*, 1973, 104.
thanks to her longevity, her time in the limelight lasted a lot longer than that. Yet Moses’s mass popularity—at home and abroad—ultimately became a liability as far as the art world was concerned. Whereas Kane and Pippin flourished due to their ability to appeal to multiple constituencies, Moses had a more polarizing effect during the Cold War era, when the high priests of the American art world questioned the very existence of a “modern public.” Moses’s work became embroiled in a larger debate over modern art and its audience at midcentury, and the stakes of this debate were higher than ever as the government came to regard American painting as a tool in cultural diplomacy.

Although the State Department’s cultural diplomacy during the Cold War is more often associated with the promotion of Abstract Expression, as we will see in the next section, Moses’s work was also promoted as a symbol of American democracy and leadership.

### 4.2 Goodwill Grandma

On June 10, 1950, “Grandma Moses,” an exhibition of 50 paintings organized by Otto Kallir opened at the Neue Galerie in Vienna. The exhibition was presented “under the auspices of the Information Services Branch of the United States Forces in Austria,” attracting 5,000 visitors in four weeks, which was a new record for a show at private gallery in the city. From Vienna it went to Salzburg’s Kunstlerhaus where a senior representative of Information Services there declared the exhibition another “great

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53 “Grandma Moses in the Land of Strauss,” July 12, 1950, Moses European Exhibition Folder 1950-51, Galerie St. Etienne Grandma Moses Archive. In various letters included in this folder, Kallir refers to this unsigned, unpaginated document as the “Army Report.”
success,” suggesting that it “brought more good will for America than any other single effort we have made here.”

When the exhibition crossed the border into Switzerland, a Foreign Services official who helped organize the show at Bern’s Kunsthalle declared it “pure gold” as far as the interpretation of American culture was concerned. At its next stop, The Hague’s Gemeente Museum, the American ambassador to the Netherlands attended a special event for more 100 Dutch grandmothers, one of whom gave him a doll dressed in traditional Zeeland costume to send back to Moses. Opening next at the American embassy in Paris, the show’s vernissage drew 280 people including the chief curator of the Musée d’Art Moderne, who, the following year, would oversee the acquisition of Moses’s The Dead Tree—which marked the museum’s first addition of a contemporary American painting to its collection (Figs. 86–87).

Despite being supported by various government agencies, from the Information Services in occupied Austria to the Foreign Service in non-occupied countries like Switzerland and France, this Moses exhibition has never before been discussed in context of the Cold War cultural diplomacy. The reasons for this omission are multiple.

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54 “Letter from Otto Kallir to Coulter D. Huyler, Jr.,” November 17, 1950, Moses European Exhibition Folder 1950-51, Galerie St. Etienne Grandma Moses Archive.
55 “Letter from Donald C. Dunham to Otto Kallir,” October 2, 1950, Moses European Exhibition Folder 1950-51, Galerie St. Etienne Grandma Moses Archive.
58 There is very little in the exhibition file on how the show was funded. In early correspondence over the show, Darthea Speyer, Kallir’s co-organizer in Paris, warns him the Cultural Relations
For one thing, Moses’s tour lasted from June 1950 to January 1951, a period that marked a relative downswing in government efforts to promote American painting abroad caused by the catastrophic failure of the exhibition, “Advancing American Art” several years earlier. After nearly a decade of depending on partnerships with institutions like the National Gallery of Art (NGA), the State Department ventured a more direct effort in with “Advancing American Art,” purchasing 79 oil paintings using funds originally appropriated for the Office of War Information and the Office of Inter-American Affairs. Although the show debuted without incident at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in October 1946, congressional opposition to the supposedly Communist affiliations of the show’s artists reached a fever pitch during its stop in Prague the following summer. The exhibition was recalled by George Marshall, the Secretary of State under section has “absolutely no funds allotted for the art program. Therefore, under law we are obliged to say that we can pay no transportation costs for art exhibits. If the Army, or you, can in some manner arranged to send the exhibition to and from Paris, we shall be most happy to show it.” There is also correspondence about a potential sixth stop for the show in Belgium, which does not transpire in part because Kallir cannot bear the cost of a continued tour, so it is reasonable to assume that he was shouldering most, if not all, of the shipping costs, although the government organizations may have covered the costs of promotion associated with the exhibition’s catalogues and posters. “Letter from Darthea Speyer to Otto Kallir,” July 12, 1950, Moses European Exhibition Folder 1950-51, Galerie St. Etienne Grandma Moses Archive. The State Department had also purchased a collection of 35 watercolors selection by the American Federation of Arts earlier that spring. These works were originally shown together at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in October, but it was broken apart when it traveled internationally: Initially 49 paintings and all of the watercolors were sent to Europe while the remaining 30 paintings went to Cuba. After Paris, the 35 watercolors were sent to Guatemala, and the 49 oil paintings went on to Prague—the showing from which they were ultimately recalled. For an excellent account of the lead up to and fallout from “Advancing American Art,” see Chapter One in Krenn, Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit.
President Truman, the works promptly sold off in a fire sale. After this fiasco, the
government reverted back to its previous role as sponsor, operating in partnership with
institutions, especially the American Federation of Arts (AFA), the NGA, the
Smithsonian, and MoMA. The next major survey of American painting with government
sponsorship did not occur until 1951, when the 65 paintings selected by the AFA were
shown at the Berlin Cultural Festival.  

In addition to occurring during what is otherwise perceived as a more general
ebb in government efforts to promote American painting abroad at the turn of the
decade, the Moses show may also be overlooked in accounts of government-supported
efforts in the arts in this period because it was organized by Otto Kallir, founder of New
York’s Galerie St. Etienne, who does not register among the usual suspects of cold war
cultural diplomacy. Compared to museum personnel like Lloyd Goodrich of the
Whitney Museum of American Art and James Thrall Soby of MoMA, who served on
selection committees working with the State Department during this era, Kallir was
flying under the radar. He was an outsider to establishments like the AFA, which by
1952 had a man in Washington representing its art lobby. Jane Kallir, the current co-
director of Galerie St. Etienne, remembers her grandfather as a relative outsider: "When
he gave Moses her first show, he was almost as much of a newcomer to New York City

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60 Ibid., 63–4. The next major survey of American painting took place after the Moses show
closed in January 1951, at the Berlin Cultural Festival, where the AFA organized a selection of 65
American paintings.
61 Ibid., 77.
as she, and he barely knew English.” Yet as a recent European émigré, he was uniquely positioned to organize Moses’s European tour, which began at Vienna’s Neue Galerie, an establishment Kallir had founded in 1923 and entrusted to his longtime secretary when he was forced to flee Austria in 1938. Based on my recent research in the archives of Galerie St. Etienne, I offer new archival evidence that not only adds Moses and Kallir to the register of cold war cultural actors documented by such important scholars as Michael Krenn, Serge Guilbaut and Francis Stonor Saunders, but gives a sense of how Moses’s works functioned as goodwill ambassadors that promoted an idealized vision of America to war-torn Europe.

At all of its venues with the exception of Paris, “Grandma Moses” included 50 works done between 1941 and 1950. The show was accompanied by a small catalogue that reproduced about half a dozen works and offered two essays, translated into three languages, by Louis Bromfield, an American novelist who was well known abroad, and Kallir who did not hesitate to position Moses as the, “most famous and popular painter in America.” None of her paintings were singled out for pride of place on the cover of the catalogue, which is instead a simple design showing Moses’s signature against a spare white background, but several promotional posters featuring Moses’s works were made for the tour. *Hurricane at Home* was chosen for Vienna (Fig. 88), and by 1952, the Oesterreichische Staatsgalerie had acquired the work, becoming the first European

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museum to own a Moses. Hurricane at Home proved to be an apt choice as the show opened during a bout of extreme summer weather in the form of a heat wave that June. By the time the exhibition made its final stop in Paris in December, Kallir’s co-organizer there, Darthea Speyer thought a “snow scene” was a better fit. She deemed Here Comes Aunt Judith, a scene depicting the gathering of kin before a snow-covered farmstead, seasonally appropriate for the City of Lights at Christmastime (Fig. 89).

Here Comes Aunt Judith had previously appeared in the plates of Kallir’s 1946 publication, Grandma Moses: American Primitive, where it was accompanied by Moses’s reminiscence of holiday reverie (Fig. 90): “Oh with what joy, and pleasure as we get togeather, to go for the Christmars tree. What aircastles we build as we slide down the Hill/ oh who can rebuild what we see on that christmars [sic] tree,” Moses wrote. But Here Comes Aunt Judith offered European audiences more than just a holiday theme—it was a revelation of what art critic Ken Johnson many years later identified as Moses’s

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63 In 1952, Kallir began reaching out to museums in the cities that hosted the 1950-1 show, offering to sell them Moses works. In January of 1952, for instance, he wrote to K.E. Schurmann, curator at the Gemeente Museum: “We have decided to offer one painting by Grandma Moses to each museum which has held a Moses exhibition in 1950, at a price which the museum can fix, if it should be interested in a work by the artist. This plan is to express our gratitude for the interest and cooperation shown by you in connection with the exhibition.” While the Gemeente Museum politely declined Kallir’s offer, Vienna’s Oesterreichische Staatsgalerie and Paris’s Musée d’Art Moderne accepted; I have not pursued whether there are also Moses works in the collections of Berne’s Kunsthau or Salzburg’s Kunstlerhaus as a result of Kallir’s 1952 effort. “Letter from Otto Kallir to K.E. Schurmann,” January 26, 1952, Moses European Exhibition Folder 1950-51, Galerie St. Etienne Grandma Moses Archive.
65 Kallir, Grandma Moses: American Primitive. The painting is identified in this publication as “Bringing in the Christmas Tree.”
vision of an “American Golden Age of peace and agricultural prosperity.” In the background of the work, a matriarch steps out of her trim farmhouse to chat with the postman, a significant figure in Moses’s memories of art making as one of her earliest works was a gift for her local postmaster at Christmastime. Around her, horses, outfitted with seasonal bells arrive four female relatives, among them Aunt Judith, a fictional character who is perhaps a stand in for one of Moses’s many aunts. In the foreground, one young man pulls a felled Christmas tree before two carolers, while another engages with several figures in eyeing a fine coniferous specimen that is still standing. Inside the cattle pen at left, the everyday activity of farm life—the chopping of wood, the feeding and slaughtering of livestock—maintains. Notably, travel and labor commence without the aid of automobiles or the latest in farming equipment, and there is no trace of modern amenities like electricity or telecommunications. Although Moses’s hometown of Eagle Bridge was a relatively remote hamlet, her daily life was hardly devoid of technology; as Karal Ann Marling attests, “she listened to the radio, sewed by the light of electric lamps and enjoyed all the benefits that modern commerce brought to Eagle Bridge.” Just as Paul Gauguin made the landscape and inhabitants of Brittany more primitive than they were when he painted them in the 1880s, in Here Comes Aunt Judith and the majority of her other works, Moses rendered the Cambridge Valley less modern

67 Marling, Designs on the Heart, 71–1.
than it actually was, foregoing details like the two interstates or railway that ran through the region by the first half of the 20th century. Moses may not have subscribed to the radical antimodernism that led Gauguin to embellish the French countryside and later Tahiti as premodern paradise, but her painting was nonetheless connected to a worldview that privileged an earlier way of life. On her 95th birthday, Moses reflected, "In this age I don't think people are as happy, they don't take time to be happy, they are worried. [...] I do think in a way they have too much now. We did with much less."

As the Moses works moved through Europe, drawing record crowds and ample coverage from the European press, American critics hardly touched her triumph. A notable exception is a New York Times piece by Aline B. Louchheim that is often referenced but whose context is often neglected. Louchheim’s article was not a review of the Moses show, but rather the final piece in a series she was devoting to the Venice Biennale that opened just across the Alps from the Moses show, also in the summer of 1950, with an American pavilion sponsored not by the U.S. government, but rather by MoMA and the Cleveland Museum of Art. Moses comes up only in passing, in the midst of Louchheim’s larger lamentation about the tepid response to the American pavilion,

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69 Kallir, Art and Life of Grandma Moses, 41.
which included selections from de Kooning, Pollock and a large show of works by John Marin: She writes,

> Europeans like to think of Grandma Moses rather than Marin as representative of American art. They praise our naïveté and integrity (especially in rodeos and Westerns) but they begrudge us a full, sophisticated artistic expression. Grandma Moses represents both what they expect of us and what they are glad to grant us.  

In a “Letter from Paris” published in the Magazine of Art several months later, the influential art historian and critic Robert Goldwater also criticized how the Moses show reinforced the primitivization of America: “This kind of thing can only strengthen the Parisian’s tendency with which he nowadays understandably would like to comfort himself, to think of the United States as a land of auto- and tank-producing peasants,” Goldwater wrote.

Yet these dismissals of Moses fail to acknowledge the complexity of her reception abroad. Perhaps anticipating that American critics would assume the worst, Kallir collected press clippings and visitor book testimonials from the European tour, clipping them for his scrapbooks and publishing many responses in several titles devoted to

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70 Aline B. Louchheim, “Americans in Italy: Venice Sees a Marin Show,” New York Times, September 10, 1950, sec. Arts & Leisure; Art critic James Thrall Soby wrote something similar about Grant Wood’s reception in London in 1946: "Wood's "Daughters of the Revolution' was a hit in the London exhibition of American painting at the Tate Gallery in 1946, and I have heard his pictures praised by extremely critical authorities in Paris. For understandable reasons, Europeans occasionally like our art best when it looks least like their own, and "Daughters of the Revolution," with its ambivalent humor and crisp intensity, confirms Europe's deeply rooted frontier romanticism toward this country, whereas more urbane manifestations of our culture do not" Soby, “Does Our Art Impress Europe?,” 146.
71 Goldwater, “Letter from Paris.”
Moses after 1950. As Kallir’s excerpts evidence, European critics saw a wide variety of virtues in Moses’s work, comparing her to native sons like Brueghel and Pissarro and praising her as capable of evoking “the greatest realistic painters of all times.”

Moreover, to the extent that Moses did perpetuate certain European prejudices about the uncivilized Americans, so too did she break down prevailing stereotypes about them—precisely with the “We did with much less” credo offered by paintings like Here Comes Aunt Judith. In response to the Moses showing in Paris, one critic for Le Monde assessed the way the artists’ work offered Americans a new sense of self that would surprise Europeans. He remarks upon, “The serene sweetness of a daring old lady who makes the Americans of 1950 take pleasure in recognizing themselves in these simple and friendly images,” adding, “It will also astonish many Europeans to discover these same qualities.”

Several months later, a critic for Graphis put a finer point on the effect that Moses’s wood burning stoves and horse drawn carriages had in overturning European stereotypes about the United States: "The America Grandma Moses reveals to us is not yet Americanised. The popularity her art enjoys throughout the New World seemed to suggest that the American, even while borne forwards by the surge of progressive destiny, does not want to lose contact with this more meditative world.”

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73 Kallir, Grandma Moses Twenty-Five Masterpieces of Primitive Art, 16.
74 Kallir, Art and Life of Grandma Moses, 48.
By offering a characterization of national life as rural and traditional, works like *Here Comes Aunt Judith* thus fulfilled a major objective of Cold War Cultural diplomacy, which was the reimagining of “dollar-chasing” Americans.\(^6\) For in the postwar period the United States faced not only the longstanding European bias that American culture was an oxymoron, but also the onslaught of anti-Western Soviet propaganda. By 1947, US-Soviet relations had soured, with tensions worsening in 1948 as Czechoslovakia moved to the Soviet Bloc and Finland entered a mutual defense pact with the Soviet Union. While the Soviet Union could not rival the economic strength and nuclear capability of the United States in the immediate postwar period, Stalin's regime initiated a superior front in “the battle for men's minds,” with methods of cultural diplomacy that as Francis Stonor Saunders has put it, made the United States look like “a virgin in the practice of international *Kulturkampf*.\(^7\) As neither Austria nor Switzerland had signed with the newly founded North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the first three cities to host “Grandma Moses,” Vienna, Salzburg and Bern, were ground zero for the cultural front of the dueling superpowers. Donald C. Dunham, the Foreign Service officer who helped

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\(^6\) William Johnstone, the Director of the State Department’s Educational Exchange Program, characterized the aim of U.S. cultural diplomacy as a way to "demonstrate that we are not just a group of dollar-chasing Americans.” Quoted in Krenn, *Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit*, 62.

\(^7\) Frances Stonor Saunders has documented that in many ways, the revving up of American cultural diplomacy was a response to the Soviet Union’s domination in this realm. "Lacking the economic power of the United States and, above all, still without a nuclear capability, Stalin's regime concentrated on winning 'the battle for men's minds'. “Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York, NY: New Press, 2000), 17.
Kallir organize the Berne showing, acknowledged this in a letter to Kallir, in which he delineates his intention to use the “creative products of Grandma Moses as illustrations of the core of our national character which we are endeavoring to articulate in opposition to the efforts of the communists.”

A threat to be put down abroad, Communism was also an elusive cipher at home that repeatedly stymied the government’s support of visual art during the Cold War period. Because of the real but also invented or embellished leftist political allegiances of many living American artists, any government venture into the 20th-century art was a minefield. During Joseph McCarthy’s decade long tenure as a Wisconsin senator, Congress very publically tanked two major exhibitions of American art abroad by linking participating artists to the dreaded lists of the House on Un-American Activities Committee, first in 1947 with Advancing American Art, and again seven years later when the seemingly bombproof government-sponsored “Sport in Art” exhibition went down in flames. The State Department could not revert to simply supporting shows of historical American art that predated Communism either because Europeans clamored for 20th century American art not historical surveys. Moses’s work fit the narrow space that existed within the government’s double bind: Despite its pictorial allegiance to the

78 “Letter from Donald C. Dunham to Otto Kallir,” April 2, 1951, Moses European Exhibition Folder 1950-51, Galerie St. Etienne Grandma Moses Archive.
79 For more on the failed 1955-6 “Sport in Art” exhibition, see Krenn, Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit, 105–8.
80 Ibid., 81–3.
past outlined above, it also pleased Europeans because it was part of the 20th-century vogue for naïve painters that had originated with Henri Rousseau. Yet this modernist affiliation posed no threat from the government’s perspective, as Moses and her work were conservative to the extreme, depicting an America even more utopian and conflict-free than what Norman Rockwell had to offer. As Henry McBride, the New York Sun critic who was one of Kane’s greatest advocates but wrote sparingly of Moses in the 1940s, pointed out, Moses’s popularity owed to the fact that “she says a good word for America. There is no nonsense about the oppression of the poor. Nothing is said about extra pay for extra time. Nothing about hardships of women.”81 The content of the painting was so unthreatening, from its representative style to its depiction of America as ethnically white and Christian, that it would never spark the ire of such politicians with conservative taste as Harry Truman—a modern art skeptic who, as we will see in Section 4.3 of this chapter, was one of Moses’s biggest fans.82

Ironically, a U.S. Army report that documented the success of the Moses show in Vienna noted that at least one Communist newspaper, Volksstime, endorsed the Moses

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82 The proceedings of an early meeting on strategy for postwar cultural diplomacy convened by Archibald MacLeish, who was then the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Cultural Relations underscored the degree to which the image of America needed editing: “The picture of American life which is given to other countries should be adapted to a level of understanding of given cultures and should subordinate to some extent the worst elements of our culture.” Krenn, Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit, 20.
show, encouraging amateur painters to seek its lessons in simplicity and effect.\textsuperscript{83} And when Moses had her first show in Moscow in 1964, a counselor for Cultural Affairs of the United States Embassy in Moscow reported to Kallir that “there were lines of people waiting to see it on several occasions,” claiming a ballpark attendance figure of 100,000.\textsuperscript{84}

While Moses’s agrarian imagery and equalizing life story could be seen as harmonizing with Communist values and art doctrine, given the mass commercialization of her artwork, which required the establishment of Grandma Moses Inc. as a clearinghouse for all of her licensing deals after 1952, her career was more comfortably allied with capitalism. While the European tour included examples of Moses manufactures such as greeting cards and textiles, they do not appear to have caused reproach. Yet the Dutch response included an indictment of the show as an embodiment of hegemonic American greed for other reasons. After receiving overwhelmingly positive reviews from Vienna, Berne and Salzburg, Kallir was “astonished” to see the show become a focal point for attacks against America when it opened at The Hague’s Gemeente Museum. He warned his co-organizer in Paris, the show’s next stop, of the Dutch press’s unexpectedly negative response: “The line followed in almost all of the big write ups, is that America has the money to buy everything, including publicity, but that the American money will never be able to bribe Holland to accept the American "culture."” Culture, they maintain,

\textsuperscript{83} “Grandma Moses in the Land of Strauss.”
\textsuperscript{84} Kallir, \textit{Art and Life of Grandma Moses}, 56.
is in Europe, technical progress and money, in America.” 85 Although Kallir was mortified by what was passed on to him from the Dutch papers, his Dutch contacts tried to mollify him. An officer of the Information Service there reassured him that “the goodwill created by the Grandma Moses exhibit far outweighed minor criticisms which appeared in certain of the press” and went on to characterize the overall reaction to her work as “gezellig”, meaning "cozy, warm, friendly.” 86

As I conclude this section, I would like to focus on the “gezellig” quality of Moses’s paintings—another important dimension of their power at midcentury. For while reimagining America, especially with regard to counteracting Communist propaganda, was paramount, comfort was another important objective of Cold War cultural diplomacy. The notion that art could serve as palliative respite in the midst of global turmoil was longstanding and hardly an invention of the United States government. Just as London’s National Gallery of Art offered lunchtime piano concerts during the Blitz, so too were Moses’s paintings presented and received as a form of spiritual safehaven in European cities ravaged by World War II. A critic for Arts, Paris seized on this, writing “it is a great pleasure to walk through such an exhibition, where

85 Kallir chalks this up to the poor organization of the Dutch show: “I am writing you all this, because I think we must learn from such an experience as the exhibition in The Hague and try to avoid mistakes which evidently have been made there. So for instance, it certainly was not good for De la Faille to compare Grandma Moses to Brueghel, thereby insulting the national pride.” “Letter from Otto Kallir to Darthea Speyer,” November 11, 1950, Moses European Exhibition Folder 1950-51, Galerie St. Etienne Grandma Moses Archive.
the soul is devoted to the peaceful life in the quiet streets or in the warm interiors, in the midst of animals running loose or women working quietly. Thanks go to Grandma Moses for the happiness which she shows us.”

Of the forty works on display in Paris that winter, none better encompasses how Moses’s art could serve as what Lloyd Goodrich called a “fall-out shelter for the human spirit” than Over the River to Grandma’s House (Fig. 91). This placid winter scene follows a red sleigh as it travels a short but joyful distance between two inviting farmsteads. The point of departure is the house of the younger generation, larger and more handsome with its dark wood siding and high sloping roof, whereas the destination, Grandma’s house, is an older, more modest construction, but no less welcoming with its door ajar and chimney smoking. As in Here Comes Aunt Judith, Grandma is already outside, greeting the postman, with her back turned to the imminent arrival of her beloved offspring. Crossing over the river, the sleigh passes by a hunter who lays down his rifle to wave and a game of hockey on the frozen river below. Even though the scene is viewed from a great distance, the frame around it is tight, creating an insular feeling in

87 Kallir, Art and Life of Grandma Moses, 48; There are many records of how Moses’s paintings provided respite for American viewers as well. As Jane Kallir has noted, “It was almost was though Moses' art had the power to heal; it became the repository of dreams […] One man saw in Grandma's paintings nothing less than a panacea for the world's ills: ‘We are living in a pretty awful world, with war and disease and hunger and an atomic bomb,’ he commented. ‘The world that you show in your beautiful paintings . . . is the kind of world we must try to bring back.” Kallir, Grandma Moses, 1982, 18.

88 Lloyd Goodrich provided the concept of art as a “fall-out shelter for the human spirit” in a plea he made for government support in the arts to Congress in 1962. Krenn, Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit.
which the only road leads home in both directions. The painting is titled for the most well known series of verses from Lydia Maria Child’s 1844 poem, “The New England Boy’s Song About Thanksgiving Day,” and it is also a reference to Moses’s personal family tradition of going to her Grandmother King’s house every November. Despite its particularities—to Moses’s family ritual and an exclusively American holiday—the painting appeals to anyone who has ever joyfully anticipated the warmth of hearth and family on a cold winter’s day.

Indeed the universal quality of Moses’s work is something that came up again and again throughout her European reception. The ambassador to the Netherlands reported that “even though most Netherlanders are not familiar with our New England countryside” they found the paintings of Moses “homey.” Snow plays an important function in generalizing her landscapes, providing a blank canvas on which a viewer of a variety of nationalities could project memories of familiar topographies. Moses’s works were also capable of drawing such projections because of they offer leagues of miniaturized avatars in appealingly distant landscapes. Karal Ann Marling has noted the way that the aerial perspective of Moses’s works sends the viewer soaring over

89 Marling, Designs on the Heart, 146; Kallir, Art and Life of Grandma Moses, ?
90 “Letter from Selden Chapin to Grandma Moses.”
91 It is worth noting that in addition to her popularity with Americans beginning in the 1940s and Europeans a decade later; Moses was lionized by Japanese audiences beginning in the 1980s. Hildegard Bachert, who began working with Moses in 1940, credits the versatility of her landscapes which “could be anywhere” to the global appeal of her artwork, which began with Europe in 1950 and extended to Japan in the late 1980s.
rivers and valleys as though in an airplane. But Moses’s paintings allow the viewer to touch down in a way the air traveler cannot. Whereas the bird’s eye view seen through the window of a low-flying aircraft produces a sense of alienation that reinforces itself—a longing for the landscape that can never be satisfied because a breach of distance will ruin it, Moses’s landscapes offer both perfecting distance and the ability to transcend it.

Her figures, which were often targeted by critics as the weakest part of her artistic project, enable this process by serving as potential avatars. Jane Kallir has characterized Moses’s sphere as “a paper-doll world” which demands the “role of the imagination similar to that found in child’s play. Her viewers are invited to finish the story.” There are of course limits to who might find her figures to be welcoming symbolic self-representations given that Moses exclusively depicted white people. Yet they are so distant and nondescript—not to mention often cast from a historic past—that even for a modern white viewer they do not necessarily activate self-identification so much as an arbitrary vehicle for make believe. In her chapter on the miniature, literary theorist Susan Stewart analyzes the toy as a “device for fantasy,” which once it becomes animated, “initiates another world, the world of the daydream.” The miniature figures in Moses’s paintings thus trigger the imagining of one’s self in an alternate universe that is “protected from [the] contamination” of everyday reality, which at the time of their

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92 Marling, Designs on the Heart. See her prologue, “Flying Over Quilted Landscapes.”
93 Kallir, Grandma Moses, 1982, 23.
showing to European audiences, was traumatic and bleak. Still not recovered from the
destruction of World War II, the countries where Moses’s work was shown were already
bracing for the new conflicts of the nuclear era. One army official noted that the opening
of the Moses show in Vienna coincided with the escalation of the conflict in Korea, such
that “Austrians came bearing dark questions.” Works like *Over the River to Grandma’s
House* and *Here Comes Aunt Judith* denied the postwar aftermath of bombed out cities
and scorched bodies, offering the potential to escape, at least momentarily, into the
soothing fantasy of a pre-traumatic past. As we will see in the next section, however, the
propagandistic and therapeutic qualities of Moses’s works, which made them such
effective bearers of goodwill abroad, also caused many avant-garde critics at home to
banish them from their emergent canons of postwar American modernism.

### 4.3 Mind the Gap

Two years before Moses made her debut abroad, *Life* magazine devoted more
than a dozen pages of its October 11th issue to a roundtable that aimed to clarify “the
strange art of today.” MoMA hosted the panel of “fifteen distinguished critics and
connoisseurs” who gathered around a boardroom table where they were presented with
a dozen works of art in order to assess the overarching question, “Is modern art,

95 “Grandma Moses in the Land of Strauss.”

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considered as a whole, a good or bad development?" (Fig. 92). An unidentified Life writer summarized the proceedings, including many direct quotes from the panelists.

The representatively modern works which were discussed, such as Picasso’s Girl in a Mirror and Jackson Pollock’s Cathedral were reproduced along with the text. A week later, Life ran its first feature story on Grandma Moses on the occasion of her 88th birthday. The story begins with a full-page color photograph of Moses poised to blow out an impossible mass of candles on a birthday cake famously decorated and delivered by Norman Rockwell and paid for by Hallmark (Fig. 93). Clad in her signature Victorian black velvet outfit, her silver hair pulled into a trim bun, Moses stands amidst four of her pictures, all spring valley scenes. Two are propped up against the wall, suggesting they were added hastily for the photo op, and indeed their lush greenery presents a sense of vitality appropriate to the occasion that is further complemented by a teacup teeming with marigolds and a pile of Moses’s birthday greetings. In addition to the four paintings pictured in this portrait, the story includes reproductions of two winter scenes in black and white, which are identified as “best-selling Christmas cards, published by Hallmark.” For Life’s readers, the narrative, recognizable content of the

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96 “A Life Round Table on Modern Art: Fifteen Distinguished Critics and Connoisseurs Undertake to Clarify the Strange Art of Today,” Life Magazine, October 11, 1948, 56–70, 75–79.
97 Marling, Designs on the Heart, 185.
98 Bruce Bliven, Jr., “Grandma Moses Has a Birthday: At 88 the Little Old Lady of Eagle Bridge Is One of the Best-Known and Best-Paid Painters in America,” Life Magazine, October 25, 1948, 76–78.
Moses works provided a stark contrast with the modern selection that had appeared in the magazine two weeks earlier.

The modern art roundtable did not include any commentary on Moses, but the Moses story did conclude with a few choice words on modern art. In the final lines of his article, which told the story of Moses’s unlikely discovery and placed major emphasis on her commercial success, author Bruce Bliven, Jr. notes that Moses will not discuss her appeal; "She will only sidle up to the issue by explaining why she doesn’t think much of modern abstract art. ‘What’s the sense of making something to hang up on the wall,’ Grandma Moses asks, ‘if it isn’t pretty?’"99 Throughout the 1950s, as Moses repeated her skepticism about modern art, so too did her admirers—at home and abroad—hail her as an antidote to the increasingly confounding art of the 20th century. When her work made its London debut in 1956, as part of a second European tour that reached nine cities, a reviewer for the Art News and Review emphasized the salutary nature of her work in comments that echoed Nazi characterizations of degenerate art. “Set as it is amid the squalor and filth of modern materialism, the unashamed simplicity and bible-clean goodness of Grandma Moses’ art is more likely to endure than the misshapen and demented ravings of the second generation of psychological and abstract painters,” the critic wrote.100 Her work was praised not only as an alternative to the “intellectualized

99 Ibid.
100 Quoted in Kallir, Art and Life of Grandma Moses, 51.
distortion” of abstract art but also for its “sense of reality,” which was lacking in figurative modernism that flourished in this period among American painters associated with surrealism or lyrical realism. Her paintings of farm life were perhaps closest to the depictions of the “American Scene” that had climaxed in popularity during the previous decade. As we will see, however, the sense that a self-taught artist had a kinship with Regionalist painters like Thomas Hart Benton or Grant Wood—even outdoing them in the realm of authenticity since she was a true “farm wife” and they “had the smell of the studio about them”—was not as much as a boon for Moses in the 1950s as it had been for Kane in the 1930s.

Among the many high profile patrons of Moses’s work, which included American icons like Bob Hope and Irving Berlin, was Harry Truman, whose two terms as president (1945-1953) coincided with what was arguably the steepest surge in Moses’s postwar popularity. A vocal skeptic of modern art, Truman compelled the recall of the controversial “Advancing American Art” exhibition from Prague, describing its contents as “the vaporings of half-baked lazy people.” In addition to rejecting examples of figurative American modernism, like Yasuo Kuniyoshi’s Circus Girl Resting (Fig. 94), with remarks like, "If that's art, I'm a Hottentot," Truman could not countenance American abstraction, which he notoriously compared to a scrambled breakfast platter

101 For it was in these years that Moses products were first licensed, Moses first appeared on film, her birthdays became a nationally covered holiday, etc.
102 Krenn, Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit, 43.
by calling it “ham and eggs” art. While Truman was dismissive of most strains of contemporary painting, he became the first of Grandma Moses’s many presidential fans. The two met in 1949 when the president presented Moses with an award from the National Women’s Press Club for “Outstanding Accomplishment in Art.” Although the subsequent correspondence between Truman and Moses held by the Truman Presidential Library reveals no discussion of modern art, coverage of their meeting in the Christian Science Monitor reported that, “Handing her the certificate, Mr. Truman confided in the audience that he and Grandma Moses were in complete agreement on ham-and-egg art—that they had had a long talk about it.” In 1952, Arnold Newman photographed Truman’s daughter, Margaret, for a feature in which interior decorator William Pahlmann matched five socialites with backgrounds that “can reflect and set off the individual.” The interiors ranged from “Baroque Elegance” to “Provincial Comfort,” with Miss Truman seated between an antique pine clock and a modern Shaker chair, a Grandma Moses hanging in the background to conjure “The American Look” (Fig. 95). Two months later, Life ran a portfolio of photographs of White House interiors,

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104 “Achievement Award from Women’s National Press Club for Outstanding Accomplishment in Art, Signed by President Harry Truman,” May 14, 1949, Scrapbooks: Book One, Galerie St. Etienne Grandma Moses Archive.
redecorated by the Trumans in Georgian fashion, with sumptuous wallpapers, draperies and portraits of former presidents.\textsuperscript{107} Otto Kallir was attentive to the Trumans’ well-publicized White House makeover and he wrote to them offering to dedicate an original painting by Grandma Moses “to the American people.” The Trumans accepted Kallir’s gift of \textit{July 4\textsuperscript{th}}, a painting of an Independence Day Parade that Moses had recently completed (Fig. 96).\textsuperscript{108} This overtly patriotic work remained in the White House collection when Truman left office in 1953, but by that point he had also added a Moses to his personal collection that returned to Missouri with him. Until well after Truman’s death, Moses’s \textit{The Plantation}, hung above the family piano (Fig. 97)—a fitting place given that Moses famously entreated the president to play for her during a tea following the National Press Club Event in 1949.\textsuperscript{109}

When Dwight D. Eisenhower succeeded Truman, he maintained his predecessor’s connection with Moses. Initial correspondence between Moses and Eisenhower precedes his first oath of office, but he did not become a patron until the

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\textsuperscript{109} All of the newspaper accounts of their meeting feature this aspect of their encounter, which occurred at The Blair House, where the Trumans were living during the White House renovations, and where they hosted a tea for the award recipients. Some have it that Moses compelled him to play Chopin, others Paderewski. Special thanks to John Miller, the Museum Registrar at the Truman Presidential Library for making photographs of \textit{The Plantation} hanging above the former President’s piano available to me. Marling has also noted that an episode of Edward R. Murrow’s Person to Person featured a tour of the Truman home by Margaret Truman in which the Moses can be seen hanging above the piano along with a painting from another important mid-century autodidact—Winston Churchill.
occasion of his second inauguration, when his cabinet commissioned a picture of his Gettysburg farm from Moses; Eisenhower was taken with the gift writing, “Mamie and I are highly intrigued with Grandma Moses’ conception of our Gettysburg farm. The painting will be a valued heirloom of the Eisenhower family.” Later that year Congressman Dean P. Taylor suggested that the Eisenhower, an amateur painter himself, reciprocate by giving Moses one of his own works; it is unclear whether Eisenhower took this suggestion to heart, but when Massachusetts representative John W. Heselton visited Moses in 1960, he observed a framed letter from the president hanging in her home. The popularity that Moses enjoyed with U.S. politicians, who would later come to include John F. Kennedy and Nelson Rockefeller, among others, was widely publicized. At the Press Club award ceremony where Truman and Moses met, for instance, pictures of Moses and Truman monopolized the media coverage,

112 Kennedy wrote to Moses on her 100th birthday in 1960: "Your painting and your personal influence continue to play a large and valuable role in our national life," an accolade that was widely picked up by the press. Rockefeller, meanwhile, honored her birthday by declaring September 7, 1960 “Grandma Moses Day.” Ten years earlier, the governor of Vermont, Harold J. Arthur conferred upon Moses the title “Selected Grandmother of the Nation.” Kallir, Art and Life of Grandma Moses, 63; Grandma Moses: 1860 - 1961 (New York: Galerie St. Etienne, 1962); “News Clipping, ‘Selected Grandmother of the Nation,’ from the Buffalo New York Evening News,” October 4, 1950, Scrapbooks: Book One, Galerie St. Etienne Grandma Moses Archive.
despite the major achievements of her fellow awardees, who included former first lady
and chair of the United Nation’s first Council on Human Rights, Eleanor Roosevelt, as
well as Dorothy McCullough Lee, the first female mayor of a major American city with a
population of over 500,000 (Fig. 98). Although there is little direct evidence that
members of the American art world resented the support for Moses that emanated from
the Oval Office, there was palpable anxiety about government officials supporting only
figurative painting with propagandistic overtones. Moses’s July 4th, the work that
entered the White House Collection under Truman and was issued as a commemorative
stamp under Richard Nixon, fits this profile precisely. The work depicts an
Independence Day parade that pours out of a town hall into a landscape staked with
billing flags. While such overly nationalistic content was appropriate to the
Depression and wartime eras—and was indeed a seen as a strength for other self-taught
painters like John Kane and Horace Pippin who were praised for their depictions of
Abraham Lincoln and other national heroes—by the late 1940s it was suspect. Fear of
Nazi and Soviet art policies loomed large here, but so too did a critique of federally
supported art from the New Deal era.

Responses to a 1949 roundtable on the State of American Art convened by the
Magazine of Art resounded with such concerns. Lionel Trilling, for instance, warned
that all nationalistic theories of art are “exclusive and repressive” because they
dangerously promulgate “a belief in special moral virtue of the native point of view.””\textsuperscript{113}

Former Federal Art Project director Holger Cahill, meanwhile, found himself combatting the Project’s perceived bias toward such nationalist art. He wrote, ”I would like to correct a statement which I have heard repeated many times about the Federal Art Project, i.e., that we emphasized the painting of the American scene. This is not so.”\textsuperscript{114} Cahill went on to reiterate the Project’s explicit policy that no specific style or subject matter be selected for, but his defensiveness on the issue is a testament to how New Deal art had become synonymous with the American Scene—figurative canvas and mural painting that depicted recognizably American places.\textsuperscript{115} The role that a painting’s content played in expressing national character—the ever-elusive Holy Grail sought by American artists from the 19th-century onward—had always been a divisive issue in the art world. The most extreme exponents of the American Scene, the Regionalist triumvirate of Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood, who insisted that a native school depended on native subject matter, for instance, were championed by the nationalist art critic Thomas Craven but roundly criticized by figures like Alfred Barr, Jr. throughout the 1930s. By the late 1940s, art historians, critics and curators

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\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{115} Michael C. Hall, a descendent of the Hallmark family whose collection of folk art is now at the Milwaukee Museum, has pointed out the kinship between Moses’s work and Regionalism. If what defines a Regionalist is “realistic, indigenous art grounded in place and accessible to a wide audience” then there is no question that Moses’s depictions of the Cambridge and Shenandoah valleys were partook in a legible regional consciousness. But as Hall notes, Moses seemed to outlive Regionalism by a decade
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seemed nearly unanimous that there was something chauvinistic and “shadowy” about Regionalism.\textsuperscript{116} Art historian H.W. Janson has been credited with sounding the movement’s death knell in a May 1946 article in the \textit{Magazine of Art} that equated Regionalism with “deviant mass politics.”\textsuperscript{117} Born in Russia and trained in Hamburg before fleeing Germany in 1933, Janson was disturbed by the parallels not only between Regionalism and the state mandated art of totalitarian regimes, but also by the way those policies seemed to be justified by public opinion. “A vast majority of the American public, given a choice in the matter, would agree with the policies of the Reichskulturbkammer. Here as in Germany, the man in the street regards the modern artist as a crazy, morbid charlatan,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{118} Therefore, the danger lay not merely with the conservative tastes of the philistines in power, be they the Moses-loving Truman or a far more vocal enemy of modernism, senator George Dondero, but also with the public.

Janson was among the 15 participants invited to discuss modern art by \textit{Life} in the aforementioned 1948 roundtable, whose very conceit was the existence of an ahistorical “gap” between the general public and contemporary art. In their discussions of this roundtable, scholars like Serge Guilbaut and Karal Ann Marling throw the event in with \textit{Life}’s larger tendency to thumb its nose at modern art, but in fact the magazine was quite

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
conciliatory in this case, urging the layman “who might otherwise be disposed to throw all modern art in the ashcan” to instead “think twice” and reconsider. The panel drew a wide variety of voices, from the avant-garde critic Clement Greenberg to the notoriously conservative director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Francis Taylor, who faced off over the wisdom of the crowd in one particularly tense moment. As a means of describing art’s potential for “communicability,” Taylor brought up the 50,000 visitors who stormed the Met to see the 19th-century genre painting of William Sidney Mount several years earlier. In a reply that was a thinly veiled attack on the American Scene, to which Mount was accepted as an important predecessor, Greenberg said, “I think those people who came only because the pictures were concerned with locales they knew showed a reprehensible attitude toward art […] You can’t cater to that attitude.” When Taylor challenged Greenberg’s kneejerk disdain for the good opinion of 50,000 people, Greenberg shot back: "Are we going to judge truth by quantity and sheer mass?" Apart from this exchange and comments by the French writer, George Duthuit, that echoed Janson’s linking between the modern art-weary layman and totalitarian art policies, the tone of the roundtable was optimistic, suggesting that the layman might be

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120 “Life Modern Art Round Table,” 75.
capable of approaching modern art with goodwill rather than hostility. After all, *Life* was in no position to take an unremittingly negative stance toward the layman, given its mass audience. The *Magazine of Art*, which catered to a more rarefied set, had no such loyalty, so it is not surprising that its roundtable on *The State of American Art* a year later included more damning interpretations of mass taste from many of the same panelists who had appeared in *Life*. Greenberg in particular took the *Magazine of Art* roundtable as an opportunity to get characteristically combative, even naming *Life* as among the “vessels of expression” that enabled the public’s self-justification of ignorance. Of course Greenberg had been vilifying the effect of the middle class on art since his iconic essay published ten years earlier, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” and in his *Magazine of Art* response he emphasized the severity and ahistoric nature of the crisis he first outlined there:

> Public taste seems eclectic because it now contains strata of varying degrees of cultivation and because there has been a breakdown of cultural authority. Socially and culturally unified in former time, the art public since the nineteenth century has been expanded to receive a middle class that becomes less and less willing to abide by the judgment of connoisseurs. People are no longer so ashamed as they used to be of bad taste; rather, without going to the trouble to improve it, they now defend it aggressively [...]. Today the art public asks expressly not to be made conscious of its own inadequacy.footnote{121}

Moses’s audience, with their appetite for her pleasing public appearances and affordable reproductions—mass produced culture that fell easily into Greenberg’s category of

footnote{121 “A Symposium: The State of American Art,” 92.}
“kitsch”—represented precisely the self-assured middle class philistinism that Greenberg detested.\textsuperscript{122} The nature of her network and mechanisms of her market are also an illustration of the decentralization of cultural authority he decried. For unlike Kane and Pippin, who were championed by influential art critics and historians, the catalysts for Moses’s success, figures like Caldor, Kallir and Story, did not wield the kind of cultural authority that Alfred Barr did for Kane or Alain Locke did for Pippin. Her reputation was made instead by the new possibilities of midcentury mass media and commerce. There is no question that Moses successfully crashed the gates of the art world, appearing at inner sanctum institutions like MoMA and the Carnegie Museum of Art, but her presence inside the ivory tower was dwarfed by her ubiquity beyond it, her image and paintings entering American homes through the mail slot, the television, the radio, and the department store.

Despite the degree to which Moses fit the profile of the middle class art antichrist that Greenberg decried, he never mentions her in his many diatribes against mass taste. This is consistent with the larger trend of Moses’s absence from such contemporary debates about the status quo in modern and American art as those discussed here. Although the very realities on which her success hinged—middle class audiences and the forces that catered to it—were spoken about at length, Moses herself was the

\textsuperscript{122} Special thanks to Jane Kallir for speaking with me in November 2014. Her observation that Moses’s “art was dismissed because of its mass appeal” and that “being beloved by the people automatically discredits her for the elite” inspired me to pursue this consideration of art critical discourse on popular taste during this period.
elephant in the room, but in the form of a feeble old lady who nobody—not even
Greenberg—seemed to want to villainize. But in 1950, the same year as her European
debut, James Thrall Soby, the curator of painting at MoMA and a participant in both
panels addressed here, finally offered an exception to the critical negligence of Moses
with his essay for The Saturday Review entitled “A Bucolic Past and a Giddy Jungle.”
Soby had witnessed the trouble that the cult of the modern primitive could cause
firsthand, as he came on at MoMA in 1943 when Alfred Barr resigned in the aftermath of
a poorly received solo show for the painter Morris Hirshfield, so it is perhaps not
surprising that he opens the essay with a stark salvo:

We are in, I fear, for a period of unhealthy interest in
normalcy so far as the public’s acceptance of the arts is concerned.
By this I mean that more and more people, revolted that their
civilization should so soon again be in anguish, grow impatient
when artists propose something new, strange, or troubled instead
of familiar and happy. There could be no clearer indication of this
state of affairs than the fame of Grandma Moses.123

Soby thus calls into question the very propagandistic quality of Moses’s painting that
made them appealing sanctuaries of respite during the Cold War. Unlike Louchheim or
Goldwater, the critics whose frustrations with Moses were documented in the previous
section, Soby was not objecting to the way that Moses came to reinforce stereotypes
about American naïveté abroad, although he did publish this in November of 1950,
while the Moses show was in the Hague. To the contrary Soby was receptive to the

“lyric freshness and emotional intensity” of “great popular art,” whose most laudable practitioner he identified as Henri Rousseau, but he opposed Rousseau’s “giddy jungles” to Moses’s “bucolic past.” For Soby the danger of Moses was not in the works themselves, which he diminished as “crudely repetitive, pleasant but extremely mild,” but rather in how their popularity precluded the acceptance of less sanguine popular art. He wrote, “Grandma Moses’s fame has occurred at a time when the deeper manifestations of popular art are frequently condemned as decadent. We are asked to accept as proper material for painting joy but not sorrow, reflection but not discovery, confidence but not final confession, calm but not violence.”¹²⁴ For Soby, the fault is not so much with Grandma as with her adoring layman viewer whose “own nostalgia for an almost vanished bucolic simplicity” commands him to revel in Moses and revile those artists with less sunny outlooks. In effect, the capacity of Moses’s paintings for offering a kind of anti-anxiety therapy that made them so effective as “good Cold War tactics” rendered them, in Soby’s eyes, a menace to the proliferation of diverse artistic tastes at home.

In Jerome Hill’s 1950 Moses documentary, to which Soby’s essay is partially a response, narrator Archibald MacLeish dotingly contrasts Moses with those artists “who paint trouble.”¹²⁵ Unlike Greenberg, who advocated for artists who believed that the

¹²⁴ Ibid.
¹²⁵ Hill, Grandma Moses.
only way to paint the “trouble” of midcentury was through the extraction of all pictorial content, Soby backed painters associated with romantic or lyrical realism such as William Koerner and Peter Blume, both of whom took up the devastation of fascism and war in their painting. The same year that Soby condemned Moses, he gave a paper at the annual conference of the College Art Association celebrating Blume’s recently finished magnum opus, *The Rock* (Fig. 99).\(^{126}\) Blume described the painting to *Life* magazine as depicting “the continual process of man’s rebuilding out of a devastated world.”\(^ {127}\) Indeed, there is optimism in the industrious labors of its subjects and the surging of organic life around the decimated central structure that is the paintings namesake and focal point. Yet the monumental canvas is also a record of destruction and decay—a stark contrast to the undisrupted snowfalls and lush green pastures of Moses’s oeuvre.

Another obvious difference between Moses and Blume was their approach to art. Whereas Moses was the type to slice a canvas in half when the pressure was on, Blume’s preparations for *The Rock*, which took him nearly a decade and one nervous breakdown to finish, were epic and exhaustive. *Life* emphasized the arduousness of Blume’s process with its headline, “The Rock: Artist Worked on it for Seven Years.” Several months after that story ran, writer Eloise Barrangon published an amusing poem that contrasted the angsty and sluggish Blume with the plucky and efficient Moses in *The New Yorker*:

"It takes seven years for my art to bloom,"
   Said Peter Blume to Grandma Moses.
"Four pictures at once uses paint in large doses,"
   Said Grandma Moses to Peter Blume.

"I've symbols for sorrow and symbols for doom,"
   Said Peter Blume to Grandma Moses.
"Never heard of Freud--don't believe in neuroses,"
   Said Grandma Moses to Peter Blume.

"Man gropes toward the stars from the edge of the tomb,"
   Said Peter Blume to Grandma Moses.
"Man proposes but God disposes,"
   Said Grandma Moses to Peter Blume.128

A year later, The New Yorker presented Moses as foil to a more generalized sketch of the modern artist, this time in comic form (Fig. 100). Set in an apartment that appears to double as an artist studio, the scene revolves around a woman’s taking to task of her male partner, who appears before a blank canvas. She ribs his apparent state of ennui:

"Grandma Moses doesn’t get into a funk. Grandma Moses doesn’t have to wait for creative yeast. Grandma Moses isn't hamstrung by the tensions of her time. Grandma Moses knocks them out one after another. Grandma Moses..."129 Although the relation between Moses and her trained contemporaries could easily be reduced to a thesis/antithesis polarity for the sake of these amusing punch lines, I conclude this chapter by surveying the common ground that generated their simultaneity.

In order to return to the proposal with which this chapter began, that Moses

cannot be simply reduced to the anti-Jackson Pollock, we need look no further than the
criticism of Greenberg himself. Just eight months before Grandma Moses died at 101
years of age in a Hoosick Falls nursing home, Greenberg finally acknowledged her. In an
article for the New York Times Magazine that was more broadly devoted to the success of
Jackson Pollock, Greenberg wrote:

> Abroad, Grandma Moses' pictures used to stand for native
> American art, and one of her landscapes was the first American
> work acquired by the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. Now,
> however, European critics dwell on how unmistakably Pollock's
> 'untutored barbaric force'—which supposedly violates rules that
> Grandma Moses still observes—conveys the youthful energies
> and recklessness of a people still unschooled in the traditions and
> refinements of art.¹³⁰

The passage is notably consistent with Greenberg's all-roads-lead-to-Pollock
narratives, although here it is Moses rather than The School of Paris that abdicates the
throne. But what is really striking is Greenberg's admission that Pollock and Moses are
not opposites—that they both came to represent native American qualities abroad by
appealing to a Europe's primitivizing view of the United States. Due in large part to the
influence of critics like Greenberg, however, the mode of the primitive that Moses
represented (naiveté) was descendent while Pollock's ("barbaric force") was ascendant.

Serge Guilbaut has convincingly demonstrated how political shifts among the liberal
elite in Paris and New York primed the ascendency of Abstract Expressionism, a

¹³⁰ Clement Greenberg and John O'Brian, Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and
depoliticized movement that would ironically go on to harmonize with ideologies of Cold War containment and imperialism first promoted by the Truman administration.\footnote{Guilbaut, \textit{How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art}.} Guilbaut’s argument leans heavily not only on the writings of Greenberg, but also Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. who represented the deradicalization of liberal intellectuals in the 1940s, a new political culture that he outlined in his 1948 book, \textit{The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom}. In his chapter “The Challenge of Totalitarianism,” Schlesinger importantly declared, "Anxiety is the official emotion of our time." Drawing on Kierkegaard’s notion that “anxiety is the dizziness of freedom,” Schlesinger valorized this insecure state of being, noting how it was denied by totalitarianism, a system that “sets out to liquidate the tragic insights which gave man a sense of his limitations.”\footnote{Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., \textit{The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom} (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 52.} In Guilbaut’s estimation, New York School artists like Adolph Gottlieb and Jackson Pollock offered the most convincing artistic strategies for acknowledging rather than denying the anxiety of the period. In the postwar era he writes, being modern meant, “to be pessimistic, somber, and incapable of painting the visual reality of the atomic age.”\footnote{Guilbaut, \textit{How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art}, 112.}

Although Guilbaut recognizes that “by the end of 1948 a battle was shaping up between the middle class and an aggressive, internationalist, liberal elite” his analysis of how Abstract Expressionism became the premier midcentury art school to offer a coping mechanism for epochal anxiety draws heavily on elite art criticism, largely ignoring its
middle class challengers. The therapeutic effects of Moses’s works do not register for Guilbaut because they were not discussed in the pages of *The Partisan Review*, but rather disseminated by more popular means like Edward R. Murrow’s television series *See it Now* (Fig. 101). In 1955, Murrow debuted *See It Now’s* “first annual festival of art,” devoting the episode, which also marked the show’s first foray into color television, to two “American Originals,” Grandma Moses and Louis Armstrong. At the end of his interview with Moses, Murrow questions the 95-year-old about her plans for the next 20 years, and she answers that she will surely “go on up to heaven.” Stumbling over his words in an uncharacteristic manner, Murrow presses her on whether she is afraid to die, to which she easily answers, “No,” explaining that it will just be like falling asleep and waking up in the next world. As Jane Kallir has noted, "There was something almost miraculous, in these nervous time, about an old woman who could go on national television and say, in effect, 'I am not afraid to die.'"

Moses and her paintings resonated deeply with the anxiety of modern man, but they did so through golden age atavism that was a little too compatible with totalitarian escapism. For the critics’ vitriol against the middle class audiences that worshiped her was not purely classist disdain for the uncultivated layman, it was a much deeper fear of

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134 Otto Kallir has pointed to the impact that Grandma Moses had on Murrow: “When CBS arranged a program on April 30, 1965, in commemoration of Edward Murrow’s death, the last part of his interview with Grandma Moses was included among the most memorable moments of his broadcasting career. Kallir, *Grandma Moses*, 1973, 175.
135 Murrow, "American Originals."
how history would repeat itself should the layman’s taste in art be given free reign. For this reason, Moses never qualified in contemporary art criticism or the histories of the period such as Guilbaut’s as the “big figure” the American art world was still after at midcentury, despite her postwar ubiquity. In the above passage, for instance, Greenberg narrated the relationship between Moses and Pollock as one of succession, or rather, displacement. Yet Greenberg was too quick to declare that Moses’s popularity with foreign audiences was a thing of the past. In 1962, as Greenberg was making this pronouncement that Pollock was “in European eyes the first and only genuinely American culture hero since Walt Whitman,” another major Moses show opened in Europe, touring 18 cities. This was another thing Moses and Pollock had in common: In addition to their unprecedented capacities to attain artist celebrity domestically, they were the first American artists to have internationally traveling post-mortem retrospectives immediately following their deaths—Pollock in 1958 and Moses in 1962.

The exercise of chronicling and analyzing the Cold War utility of Moses’s work undertaken here is done in the spirit of scholars like Ann Gibson and Robert Cozzolino, who have diversified the monolithic narratives of the triumph of white, male abstract painters that began with the criticism of Greenberg and was perpetuated in subsequent decades by Irving Sandler, Michael Fried, and even Guilbaut, who despite his important

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137 Moses also enjoyed nine one-woman shows in Europe between 1955-6. Kallir, Art and Life of Grandma Moses, 44.
political reading of the period nonetheless reinforces the myth that Abstract Expressionism was a monolithic success story that wiped out everything that actually coexisted with it. When Moses is positioned in relation to trends in midcentury American painting, she tends to land in binary polarities that plague the classification of art in this period—figurative vs. abstract, atavistic vs. modern, popular vs. avant-garde. In addition to being overly simplistic, these binaries also imply that one is transcendent, when in fact the period of postwar American art is increasingly understood as one of plurality and simultaneity. Despite Moses’s near absence from mainstream art histories of this period, “Without regrets and without fear”—the credo that Murrow assigned Moses in his 1955 signoff—was highly resonant with both foreign and domestic audiences at midcentury. While other artists pressed codes of representation to their extreme, Moses painted what only she, a centenarian in 1960, could claim to know, producing an art that is no less linked to the mediation of midcentury anxiety than contemporaneous strains of American modern art.
5. Conclusion: Expanding the Matrix

The foregoing case studies on John Kane, Horace Pippin and Grandma Moses have highlighted how the interwar period was governed by pluralities: claims on modernism and national identity that competed, coexisted and intersected with one another. By focusing not only on the works and lives of these artists, but also on how the discourse around their art connected them to larger debates about authenticity and identity going on in the American art world, this dissertation demonstrates that the embrace of self-taught artists was not a marginal part of interwar American art history, but rather a vital constituent of the period’s pluralism. Moreover, the rise of the self-taught artist illuminates a surprising germ of nascent progressivism within the art world at that time, which requires consideration here to be followed by a brief reflection on the direction of the field of self-taught art after Grandma Moses.

While the “modern primitive” label that self-taught artists carried in this moment can be considered both groundbreaking and disenfranchising—in the same sense that “outsider artist” both makes room for the appreciation of nontraditional artists while simultaneously containing and marginalizing them today—its seemingly oxymoronic invocation of the “modern” and the “primitive” reflects how importantly intertwined these two slippery entities were in the decades leading up to midcentury. In his 1946 review of Otto Kallir’s *American Primitive: The Art of Grandma Moses* for the *Magazine of Art*, James Flexner noted that, “Readers of this magazine do not need to be reminded
how closely the cult of primitivism is allied with the doctrines of modern painting.”¹

Tastemakers such as Albert Barnes, Marius De Zayas, and Alfred Stieglitz were crucial in exposing and educating American audiences to the non-Western and non-academic art that fell under the aegis of the primitive in the first decades of the century, but by the 1930s, the Museum of Modern Art had become a key force in furthering the connection between the primitive and the modern. In addition to the exhibitions of folk and self-taught art discussed here, the museum hosted shows of Pre-Columbian artifacts, African art, cave painting, and Navajo sand painting after 1931. Apart from MoMA’s exhibitions on primitive arts, the 1930s also saw several publications that reflected and expanded upon the initial theorizing of the relationship between the modern and the primitive that had emerged from the European avant-garde in the first three decades of the 20th century. Robert Goldwater’s Primitivism and Modern Painting of 1938 is the most well-known publication of this nature, but a year before its publication, the artist and critic John Graham published System and Dialectics of Art, a highly idiosyncratic work in which Graham sought to resolve “the state of confusion” that existed around such “terms as art, work of art, form, style, method, etc.,” by posing and answering 129 questions.² Graham devoted a significant part of the book to addressing primitive art, defining it as “a highly developed art as a result of a great civilization based on principles different

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from those of the white man’s civilization.” Graham’s definition of the primitive reflected how anthropologists like Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict had been moving their field toward a model of cultural relativism and away from the hierarchy of races that was the mainstay of 19th-century pseudoscientific evolutionary science.

While many in the art world were not as enlightened as Graham in their discussions of the primitive—racial essentialism was still rampant in classifications of 20th-century African American artists, trained and untrained, as inherently primitive, for instance—by the late 1930s there was an increasing awareness of the constructed, variable nature of the category of the primitive. MoMA director Alfred Barr, Jr. addressed the term’s eclectic sprawl in his Foreword to They Taught Themselves, Sidney Janis’s 1942 survey of 30 American self-taught artists, Kane, Moses and Pippin among them:

Primitive is a term which has been stretched to include a great variety of art from Paleolithic sculpture to Alaskan totem poles, and from Italian "primitives" of the 13th century to the modern "primitives," the "popular" or "self-taught" painters, which are the subject of this study. All this immense range of art has one extraordinary thing in common: it has been discovered esthetically and revalued within the past hundred years and mostly in the last fifty, Barr observed. Barr’s comments admit to the imprecision, elasticity and subjective nature of the

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3 Ibid., 33.
primitive and demonstrate a self-awareness of the role that he and his milieu had played in constructing it that was arguably ahead of its time. While this passage also includes an admission of how little arts classified as primitive had in common—evidently only their recent reappraisal vis-à-vis the art world—the sheer diversity of the expressions enumerated encourage us to consider how the primitive served as more than just a catchall category for arts that challenged traditional Western values. The primitive could also be considered a continuum that functioned as a dynamic portal, allowing previously neglected cultural expressions to enter the realm of Art. In 1969, responding not to African or ancient art, but rather to Andy Warhol’s Brillo boxes, the philosopher Arthur Danto theorized that Art was not a category of objects joined by some essential characteristic, but rather an ever changing matrix mediated by sociological forces like art theory. “An artistic breakthrough consists, I suppose, in adding the possibility of a column to the matrix,” Danto wrote. With this in mind, we might consider how in the first half of the century, the primitive was a column that allowed for the annexation of many previously unrecognized forms of art—a Trojan Horse that sheltered passage for all manner of gatecrashers, the first generation of self-taught artists included.

At the same time that the matrix of Art was expanding, so too was the matrix of the American, at least as it was defined by the cultural elite. Whereas in 1929 MoMA’s first-ever American art exhibition, “Paintings by Nineteen Living Americans,” provoked

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the critical backlash that several exhibitors, including the Japanese American Yasuo Kuniyoshi “did not belong in the company of U.S.-born exhibitors,” within a decade many in the art world were sounding a more multicultural note. In his best selling *Modern American Painting* of 1939, for instance, Peyton Boswell insisted that, “America is not a race, but a people,” and that a native school of painting had emerged through “the mingling of the bloods of many races.” Kuniyoshi himself echoed this sentiment a year later in a lecture at MoMA: "American art today is the product of a conglomeration of customs and traditions of many peoples. . . . a culmination not only of native but [also of] foreign forces,” he insisted. Even as Kuniyoshi’s civil liberties were violated along with the thousands of Japanese Americans who were persecuted by the United States government during World War II, his American identity was upheld by many in the art world. Kuniyoshi would ultimately become the first living artist to have a retrospective at the Whitney in 1948, and in 1944, less than two months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Kuniyoshi won first prize at the Carnegie Annual, “Painting in the United States.” In her review of the exhibition, critic Dorothy Grafly emphasized the diverse roster of the annual, which also included Horace Pippin, whose *Cabin in the Cotton III* won fourth honorable mention. “At least three negro painters are included in this exhibition which, by choosing the work of a Japanese-American for top honor upholds

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the democratic base of art, and provides a common meeting ground, even in time of
war, for black and white; Oriental and Occidental; New World and Old,” Grafly wrote.10

Although white male artists maintained a gross disproportion of opportunities
for exhibitions at mainstream museums and representation from leading galleries,
through its support of artists like Kuniyoshi and Pippin, the art world had begun
venturing toward a multicultural conception of American art by the late 1930s. The
“democratic base of art” that Grafly identified was the result of many developments,
from the Works Progress Administration’s policy of non-discrimination when hiring
artists to the New Negro movement’s push for the integration of black artists, and the
emergence of the “modern primitive” also played an important role in this regard.
Holger Cahill explicitly positioned the self-taught artist within the context of the
democratization of art that was unfolding during the 1930s in his essay for “Masters of
Popular Painting,” which was importantly titled, “Artists of the People.” He contrasted
the historical moment of the show with attitudes that had prevailed in the 1920s, when
“the phrase ”art for the people” seemed to most critics almost a contradiction in terms.”
Cahill wrote, “The work of these folk and popular artists has special significance for our
generation because we have discovered that we can take seriously, once more, the

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10 Dorothy Grafly, “Clipping from Art Outlook,” October 25, 1944, Alfred C. Barnes
Correspondence Files, Robert Carlen 1944 Folder, Barnes Foundation.
idea of art for the people.”\(^{11}\) Although Cahill’s sense of democratization relied on class rather than ethnicity or race—self-taught artists being “popular painters” and “of the people” versus of the elite—it is significant that that the artists in this show demonstrated multicultural diversity. Pippin was the only black painter in “Masters of Popular Painting,” but the show also included Pedro Cervantez, a Mexican American, as well as Lawrence Lebduska and Vincent Canadé, who were part of the wave of turn-of-the-century immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe that had stoked backlash from American xenophobes just a decade earlier.\(^ {12}\) The interest in self-taught artists that began in the 1920s thus mirrored the same change that was observable in the art world at large. Pippin, Cervantez, Lebduska and Canadé would not have been an eligible “Artists of the People” in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the conception of Americanness was still narrowly conceived around Anglo-Saxon whiteness. As I argued in Chapter Two, John Kane managed to pass as representatively American in this period because Celtic peoples who arrived in the second half of the 19th century had been effectively naturalized as Americans by the 1920s, but other self-taught artists working in this moment, including John T. Hailstark and Leslie Garland-Bolling, who were both African American, were too soon for the more inclusive conception of the “modern primitive” that came in the 1930s, just in time for the breakthroughs of Pippin and


\(^{12}\) See my discussion of nativism in Chapter Two.
Although the self-taught artists who received recognition in the first half of the 20th century were predominantly male, women artists like Grandma Moses also made an impact under the aegis of the “modern primitive.” The American section of “Masters of Popular Painting” was all male, but “Contemporary Unknowns,” the much smaller follow up show curated by Sidney Janis that went on view for MoMA’s members in 1939, featured four paintings by Moses. Janis also included Moses in They Taught Themselves, his aforementioned book and exhibition of 1942. In the book’s table of contents, where all artists were identified by their occupation, Moses appeared as a “Farm wife” along with four “House wives,” Ella Southworth, Flora Lewis, Jessie Predmore, and Josephine Joy, and one female “Laborer (Negro),” Cleo Crawford. The same year that They Taught Themselves was published, Joy, a painter primarily of landscapes and still lives, was featured in “Josephine Joy: Romantic Painter” at MoMA. Just as Edmondson was the first African American artist to have a solo exhibition at MoMA, Joy was the first woman artist to achieve that honor. Although their exhibitions were both small, the fact that two self-taught artists broke through race and gender barriers at the country’s leading modern art institution is significant, underscoring how self-taught artists gave the art world an opportunity to expand the reaches of its inclusiveness. Indeed, the degree to which the modern primitive exhibitions like “Masters of Popular Painting” and “They Taught Themselves” allowed for arguably the
most diverse cross-section of American art in this period commands us to reconsider this movement as an early predecessor of the multicultural canons that emerged much later. Debates about identity politics, especially within the art world, are generally associated with the last quarter of the 20th century, but the rise of the self-taught artist between the wars allowed opportunities for the public and critics to plumb notions of how race, gender and class were reflected in definitions of the American artist.

Yet the potential that the modern primitive category showed as a site for progressive negotiations of American identity lost momentum in the immediate postwar period. As we saw through Chapter Four’s discussion of Grandma Moses’s relationship to contemporary critics, the populism of the art world in the 1930s gave way in the next decade to a retrenchment of critical authority led by individuals like Clement Greenberg and James Thrall Soby, who were in different camps about what constituted great American art, but who nonetheless agreed that the critic, not the people, should decide. Although Greenberg is perhaps most remembered as calling for the re-stratification between art and the public that Holger Cahill and others had tried to eliminate in the New Deal era, Soby’s criticism of the cult of the modern primitive was also notable, especially considering that Soby moved into a major leadership role at MoMA after the board lost confidence in Barr in 1943, on the heels of a poorly received solo exhibition for the self-taught artist Morris Hirshfield.
There has been a tendency to overstate the link between Barr’s change of roles in 1943—when he went from Director to Director of Exhibitions, with Soby stepping in as Assistant Director immediately and Rene D’Harnancourt coming on as Director the following year—to the critical failure of the Hirshfield show. Indeed, the art press, especially *Art Digest*, humiliated MoMA, chastising it for hosting such a large show for an artist who, as Peyton Boswell put it was “A Master of Two Left Feet.”

“While serious, professional artists fight for the recognition that means life to them, the Modern fiddles away its resources building a precious cult around amateurism,” complained Boswell. The interpretive tools that its curator, Sidney Janis, provided the audience also drew the ire of critics like Howard Devree, who characterized the heavy handed presentation, which included superficial comparisons to artists like Lucas Cranach and apparently overbearing visual analysis, as “the hunting down of butterflies with the aid of caterpillar tractors.” Less than a month after the show opened, Barr wrote the outgoing chairman of the board, A. Conger Goodyear, a mea culpa in which he took responsibility for the show, admitting that it had not been properly vetted, but defending some aspects of it: “I think Hirshfield is a highly original painter, of very

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13 Boswell, Peyton, “Master of the Two Left Feet,” *Art Digest*, 1943. Critics like Boswell seized on how the feet of Hirshfield’s figures always pointed in the same direction, a fact that was tied to his professional past as a slipper manufacturer, where he was exposed only to left footed prototypes.

considerable talent, whose work reduced to one half the number of the pictures and shown in two rooms would not have been at all discreditable. Janis’s labels are in some cases over elaborate, but his observations are often acute and interesting,” Barr wrote, also reminding Goodyear that when he had brought two Hirshfields before the museum’s acquisition committee two years earlier, Goodyear had supported them.  

Although the board was unhappy with the show, Goodyear’s response to Barr indicated nothing about his supposed firing. Indeed, Barr’s demotion must be put into a larger context of institutional politics as well as Barr’s scholarly disposition, which made him unsuited to continue the directorship as the museum continued to expand and reorganize. Barr had been struggling to balance his responsibilities as an administrator and his desire to curate quality shows, taking several sabbaticals in the 1930s, including the one in 1932, which gave Cahill the opportunity to step in as acting director and put on his big folk art show. Barr evidently did not get along well with the Goodyear’s replacement, Stephen C. Clark, but their acrimony was not likely to have centered on MoMA’s support for folk and self-taught artists. After all, Clark may be best remembered for his European art collection, which he left to his eponymously named institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, but he was also one of the leading folk art collectors of his generation. Clark not only bought pieces by living artists like Kane, but

15. “Letter from Barr to Goodyear,” July 7, 1943, Morris Hirshfield General File, Museum of Modern Art. The same file contains Goodyear’s response, in which he amicably agreed the show was a failure but indicating nothing about Barr’s firing.
also acquired entire collections of historical folk art from individuals like Elie Nadelman. Eventually, Clark’s folk art collection became core of what is today the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York whose board he joined as chairman in 1945.16

Clark’s depositing of his collection in Cooperstown, as well as the flow of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller’s folk art collection to the Ludwell-Paradise House at Williamsburg between 1935 and 1939, rather than MoMA, is a more meaningful harbinger of what would happen to folk and self-taught art in the second half of the 20th century than the fallout from the Hirshfield show. For the placements of these collections prefigure the schism that unfolded in subsequent decades, as more specialized institutions, such as the Museum of Early American Folk Art (now the American Folk Art Museum), the International Museum of Folk Art, and later, Intuit and the American Visionary Art Museum became major institutional stewards of this art. Nonetheless, general and modern art museums continued to support self-taught artists in the second half of the 20th century, engaging with them especially in moments when definitions of the American artist were particularly in flux.17 This dissertation has focused on the earliest of those moments, a period when the self-taught artist provided one answer to urgent questions about the existence of native talent in the United States. With the development of a historiography of the field of folk and self-taught art in mind, this study has been

16 Stillinger, A Kind of Archeology: Collecting Folk Art in America, 1876-1976, 333.
devoted to how and why self-taught artists first obtained cultural cache in this country, but the next step is to consider their inimitable presence over the rest of the century.

Although the interest of the mainstream art world in self-taught artists has indeed ebbed and flowed, between John Kane’s appearance at the Carnegie International in 1927 and the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s recent acquisition of African American vernacular art from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, there is a continuous thread that wends between these efforts and must be woven into the larger history of 20th and 21st century art.
## Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Exhibition Title</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Work(s) Exhibited</th>
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<td>Sixth Annual Exhibition</td>
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<td>Masters of Popular Painting</td>
<td>Museum of Modern Art (traveled to multiple venues)</td>
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<td>End of the War; Shell Holes and Observation Balloon; Champagne Sector; Cabin in the Cotton I; The Blue Tiger</td>
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<td>Lilies (?)</td>
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<td>Phillips Collection</td>
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<td>DC</td>
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**Appendix B**

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Biography

Katherine Jentleson is the Merrie and Dan Boone Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. Jentleson has been the recipient of awards and fellowships from Duke University, where she earned her doctorate in Art History, The Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Evan Frankel Foundation, and the Douglass Foundation. In 2013, Jentleson was the recipient of the annual Graduate Student Research Prize awarded by the Archives of American Art and the Dedalus Foundation for her essay, “Not as rewarding as the North: Holger Cahill’s Southern Folk Art Expedition.” She has also contributed research and writing to exhibitions at the American Folk Art Museum, the Ackland Art Museum, the Nasher Museum of Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem and Prospect.3 New Orleans. Jentleson graduated magna cum laude from Cornell University with a degree in Comparative Literature in 2006. Before beginning graduate school at Duke in 2010, Jentleson worked in New York as a journalist and editor at Art+Auction Magazine.
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