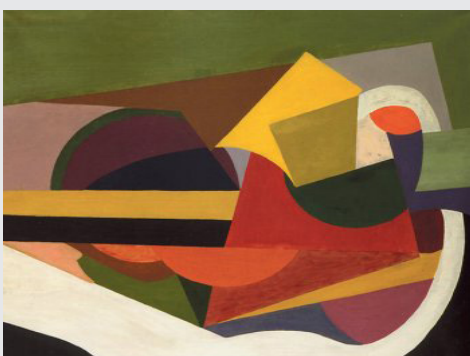


This exhibition has been organised by The Ashmolean Museum and the Terra Foundation for American Art. It focuses on how certain American artists in the 1920s and '30s grappled with the experience of modern life. They painted with a cool, controlled detachment, eliminating people from their pictures. For some, this approach reflected an anxiety about the modern world while for others it was an expression of confidence in machine- inspired efficiency.

The first gallery introduces abstracted pictures that distill and order the world into straight-edged blocks of colour and form. In the second gallery, precisely painted pictures focus on the industrial landscape of the new American city with its geometric, streamlined shapes. Factories without workers and streets without people could be seen to question the place of humans in an increasingly industrialised world. Artists also looked back to the simplicity of earlier American arts and architecture, and the final gallery includes representations of rural barns and Shaker furniture- art that could call itself both modern and 'American'.

In the early 20th century, several American painters experimented with simplified forms and abstraction. Extraneous details were eliminated in order to focus on shape and colour. They developed an ordered, detached style as they worked to reveal the universal or essential structures underlying their subjects. They responded energetically to machine technology- either by celebrating it in a contemporary streamlined style or by rejecting the city's innovations to work directly in nature. Photographers also invented a new method. Using sharp focus and extreme, un-manipulated close-ups, they extracted ordinary things like bowls and flowers from their surroundings and presented them as arrangements of light and shadow.

Sound, 1919, E.E. Cummings (1894-1962)
oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



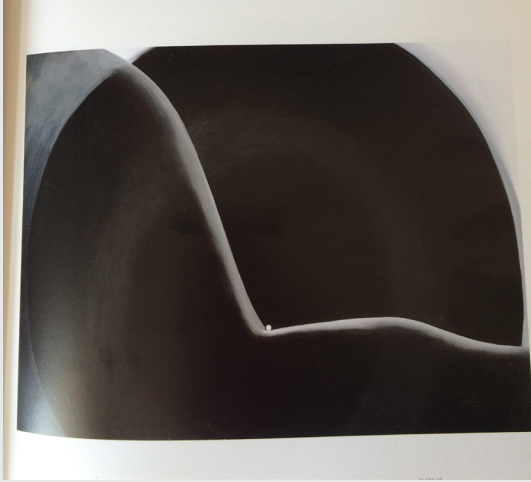
Poet and painter E.E. Cummings was interested in the theory of colour-music analogy, where each colour corresponds to a sound. The abstract arrangements of flat shapes are attempts to visually express the experience of hearing sounds, perhaps music, since the curved white form and yellow rectangle vaguely suggest the silhouette of a guitar. By representing sound with colour, Cummings sought to render the visible sensations that underlie human experience.

Abstraction, Porch Shadows, Twin Lakes, Connecticut, 1916, Paul Strand (1890-1976) Hand-pulled dust grain photogravure, printed 1976, Victoria and Albert Museum



A porch railing casts shadows on a tilted table creating an abstract image by using sharp focus and extreme close-up. Stripped of their utilitarian functions, the objects are transformed into a design of light and shadows. Inspired by Cubism and other avant-garde art, the photographer explores composition, shifting perspectives, and abstraction.

Black Abstraction, 1927, Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection



This stark black and white abstract painting was inspired by the artist's experience of losing consciousness under anaesthetic. She noticed how her field of vision got smaller and smaller as a 'skylight became a small white dot in a black room'. Later, she transformed the experience into a monochrome composition.

I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold, 1928, Charles Demuth (1883-1935) oil, graphite, ink and gold leaf on paperboard, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection



Demuth made a series of eight abstract portraits of artists and writers. Here, he has metaphorically represented one of his closest friends, the poet William Carlos Williams. The work is based on a poem by Williams that evokes the split second experience of seeing a red fire truck rushing through the streets of New York, entitled 'The Great Figure'.

Welcome to Our City, 1921, Charles Demuth (1883-1935) oil on canvas, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection



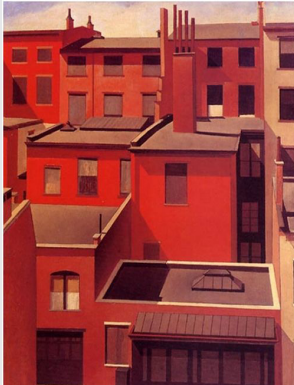
One of a series of paintings by Demuth of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he lived for most of his life. He juxtaposed a historic courthouse dome with a straight-edged, red-brick factory buildings. The architectural elements overlap in a Cubist manner, creating a dynamic composition. The white lettering in the corner reasserts the two-dimensionality of the canvas and references typography and billboards.

East River from the Shelton Hotel, 1928, Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), oil on canvas The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Bequest of Georgia O'Keeffe



O'Keeffe painted this scene from her 30th floor apartment in Manhattan which she shared with Alfred Stieglitz. Distancing herself from the bustle of the streets and river below, she pared down buildings to snow-covered, rectangular rooftops. Perfectly aligned, they reveal the grid-like, scientific organisation of the modern American city and emphasise both its grandeur and scale.

MacDougal Alley, 1924, oil on canvas,
Charles Sheeler (1883-1965) oil on canvas,
Davis on Art Center, Wesleyan University



In this view of New York, Sheeler reduced buildings to an arrangement of cubes and rectangles. The Precisionists celebrated the clean geometry of American cities, but the complete absence of people in these landscapes accentuated by the dark windows and cropped, claustrophobic composition here also suggests a certain ambivalence towards them.

Machinery (Abstract #2), 1933-34, Paul
Kelpé (1902-85), oil on canvas, Smithsonian Museum
of American Art



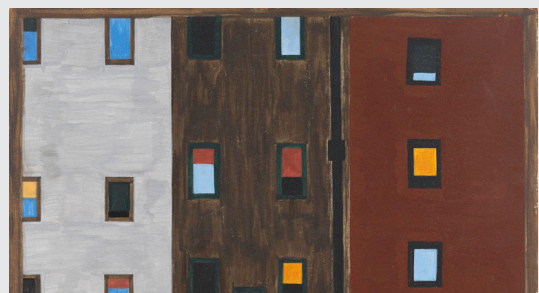
In the background a water tower and smokestacks provide a factory setting. A solitary figure operates an enormous machine. The gears and levers overwhelm him, perhaps to suggest the mechanisation of society. Design and composition seem as important as the subject depicted; machine parts create an abstracted design, flattening the pictorial space.

New York, 1925, Louis Lozowick (1892-
1973) lithograph on off-white woven paper, Terra
Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection



Lozowick was a champion of the machine aesthetic. Black and white shapes evoke the electric lights that illuminate the modern city at night. Crossing, curvilinear diagonals hint at the constant movement and dynamic energy that animate it. 'New York' is a clean depiction of the urban environment by an artist enamoured by the order and rationality of the machine age.

The Migration Series, panel No.31: the
migrants found improved housing when
they arrived North, 1940-41, Jacob
Lawrence (1917-2000) casein tempera on
hardboard, The Phillips Collection, Washington DC



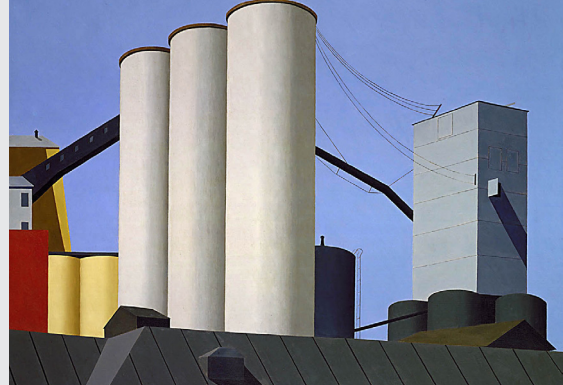
Tenement buildings in Harlem are reduced to simple, geometrical shapes punctuated by bright rectangles. The differently coloured windows evoke, in the artist's words, 'degrees of acclimatization to one's new home that individuate one migrant from another.'

Bucks County Barn, 1940, Charles Sheeler (1883-1965), oil on canvas, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection



The perfection of this painting is unsettling. The artist erased all trace of brushwork and presented an ordinary barn with ruler-straight wholeness. Only after close inspection do we notice a few downed fence rails and the slightly worn roof. These details add authenticity to an otherwise stilled, precise depiction.

Buffalo Grain Elevators, 1937, Ralston Crawford (1906-78) oil on canvas, Smithsonian Museum of American Art



Industrial grain elevators were an important part of the landscape in Buffalo, New York. Ralston Crawford, who grew up in the city, reduced these modern structures to stark, linear shapes. His machine-like aesthetic links him to the precise renderings of cities and factories in the previous room, while the agricultural subject matter points to his interest in rural America.

Dawn in Pennsylvania, 1942, Edward Hopper (1882-1967), oil on canvas, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection



This painting evokes a stage set where the viewer waits in the darkness for something to happen. Every aspect of the picture contributes to an endless suspense- a train station emptied of people and movement, an ambiguous light and the first moment of dawn. An abandoned carriage seems to reach towards a solitary train car across a wide, empty space.

Americana, 1931, Charles Sheeler (1883-1965), oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



In this depiction of his home's interior, Sheeler- an avid collector of folk art- combined his passion for vernacular objects with his precise, modernist style. The composition underscores the formal purity of Shaker furniture. Completely flattened and with a bold tipped-up perspective, the painting is resolutely modern, suggesting a lineage between traditional American workmanship and modern art.



Which Way, 1932, Martin Lewis (1881-1962), aquatint on pale blue paper

Key Themes:

- Explore the reduction in the visibility of brush strokes which were suppressed to create flattened surfaces. Compare the difference in approach between different artists in the exhibition such as O'Keeffe, Sheeler and Hopper
- Explore the role of art in portraying changes in society such as the change in cities as a result of industrial development and migration and immigration from the South.
- Printing was an important medium in democratising art and making art available to more people. The same process applied to the production of the production of very glossy magazines.
- Explore the role of women in the exhibition. There are several female artists in the exhibition including painters and three photographers.
- Explore 'straight' photography in the exhibition. Consider the way that everyday objects have been made abstract.
- Explore composition and viewpoint, the artists chose their viewpoint with great care. Sheeler's paintings were based on photographs.

Art & Design ideas

Sound by E.E. Cummings, suggests the silhouette of a guitar. Consider why artists wanted to represent music visually. Set up a still life using musical instruments to represent music and sound using visual elements such as colour, texture, form and shape.

Look for shadows cast by sunlight or create your own shadows using lamps and torches. Take photographs of shadows which do not show their source so that they become abstract. Create a series of black and white photographic studies or make drawings using charcoal or graphite to show contrast.

Look at city scenes without people. How do they make you feel? Take photographs or collect images of urban scenes. Then remove people digitally or paint them out. What is the impact when people are removed?

Artists adopt a view point when observing a landscape or cityscape. Look at your surroundings from different viewpoints: up, down, using a viewfinder to isolate features of the landscape or looking through a window.

Explore how images have been simplified to emphasise shape e.g. the buildings in Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series. Create your own studies where you focus on shape within composition.

Look at Demuth's abstract portrait of W.C. Williams featuring the number 5. Create your own abstract portrait or self-portrait which does not show the face or figure but uses another aspect of the subject's work or personality to portray them.

This is a charging exhibition but FREE for pre-booked UK school groups and for under 12s.

To book a group visit please contact the Education Department:

education.service@ashmus.ox.ac.uk

t: 01865 278015

Further resources

Ashmolean Western Art Print Collection
<http://www.ashmolean.org/ash/objects/?mu=236>

Ashmolean Education Learning Resources
www.ashmolean.org/learning-resources