

American Art: Foundations of American Identity and Character

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Abstract

In 1630, the future Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop left England with over a thousand Puritans, the largest venture ever attempted in the New World to create an experimental colony, “A City on a Hill.” The Puritan experiment would have profound implications for the newly formed colonies and America’s future identity and character. After the signing of the United States Constitution, a nation conceived on the principle of freedom, American artists moved away from the European tradition of art and started to paint in a nationalistic, democratic style which reflected our political values. From the Hudson River School which coincided with the “Age of Jackson”, Manifest Destiny, the Great Depression, to the present, artists identified with social values: self-reliance, order, and respect for heritage and tradition. Audiences, then and now hailed these images as much for the ideals of community and nationhood projected by them as for their aesthetic qualities as well. This essay will show how American artists have reflected the ideals of American identity and character in their works.

Introduction

Robert P. Jones in *The Collapse of American Identity*, writes

“...that a shared sense of national identity is unraveling, with two mutually exclusive narratives emerging along party lines. At the heart of the divide are opposing reactions to changing demographics and culture. The shock waves from these transformations—harnessed effectively by Donald Trump’s campaign—are reorienting the political parties from the more familiar liberal-versus-conservative alignment to new poles of cultural pluralism and monism.”

In research including student’s national self-identification Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies reports, “After several years of American high school, the primary institution tasked with imparting civic consciousness to young people, barely one-third still identified as American, with most adopting either a foreign national identity (Cuban or Filipino) or a pan-racial identity (Hispanic, Asian). Our educational system continues to do an abysmal job at civic education, not the least because of the influences of multiculturalism as a

pedagogical principle (WSJ, March 25-26,2017).” If we were to accept these opinions without further analysis we might conclude that indeed the social fabric of America is being torn apart. I will argue in this essay that American identity and character is indeed sound because it “...embraces a pluralism that spans racial, religious, and ethnic divides. It also encompasses a strong civic commitment to individual freedom and to representative government of limited and clearly defined powers that respects that freedom (Friedman, p.1).”

Political Foundations of Identity and Character

In an earlier essay, *A Thoughtful Patriotism* (2002), I wrote, The United States is a country based on ideas and ideals; its government was forged from ideas ranging from Plato’s *Republic* to Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*. Unlike totalitarian regimes that control by oppressive policies, our government functions by the consent of the people. Those ideas and ideals came to America in 1630 when the ship *Arabella* sailed from England with the future governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop. Over a thousand Puritans left England that year, the largest venture ever attempted in the English New World. Their purpose was clear Winthrop proclaimed: “We shall be as a city on a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” By the end of the 1630s, as part of the Great Migration of Puritans out of England, nearly 14,000 more Puritans settled in Massachusetts (ushistory.org). The Puritan experiment would have profound implications for the newly formed colonies and America’s future identity and character.

Several qualities distinguish the Puritans from other settlers to the New World. Nearly half of the early settlers came from East Anglia the most economically sophisticated part of the British Isles. “Its seven easternmost counties were the most densely settled, urbanized, and educated part of England, with a burgeoning middle class and a long history of rebellion against arbitrary rule (Woodward, p.58).” In addition, they came as families, unlike the settlers who did

not survive at Roanoke. Highly educated settlers, they established Harvard College in 1636 to train their clergy (Puritan/Congregational) and in 1642, “passed the first law in the New World requiring that children be taught to read and write. The English Puritans who founded Massachusetts believed that the well- being of individuals, along with the success of the colony, depended on a people literate enough to read both the Bible and laws of the land (Massachusetts, p. 9).”In 1647 wrote the *Satan and Deluder* law, the first colony to established requirements that all towns establish and maintain public schools. for public education. “These men possessed, in proportion to their number, a greater mass of intelligence than is to be found in any European nation of our own time,” observed Alexis de Tocqueville on his visit to America in 1835. In the same way their individual churches relied on local control, the education law also rested on local control, the attributes of a people who believed in self-government.

The Puritans were egalitarian, suspicious of authority and disdained aristocracy. From their humble beginnings in New England, unlike the colonies in the Tidewater and South, they provided town charters to approved groups of settlers. By local committees these original charters were subdivided and the location of schools, town common, and roads determined. The town meeting form of government still persists in many New England towns today. Though Puritans were intolerant of other religious groups, in fact they created their own theocracy their major contribution was their “...secular form of self-reliance and political localism, by the Age of Enlightenment, virtually the definition of Americanism (Deblanco, p.9).” The suspicion of aristocracy finds itself contained in the Constitution. Article I bars the government from granting any title of nobility. This is a political contribution that transcends religion, race, and ethnicity. While it is true we are a nation of immigrants that obviously creates diversity, American identity and character is based upon the ideal of freedom.

The desire to be free was so deeply ingrained in our nation's psyche that even after the Declaration of Independence (1776), the American Revolution (1776-1783) and the signing of the U.S. Constitution (1787), the Bill of Rights was amended to the Constitution to ensure that we were free of tyranny. Respect for the rule of law and tolerance for differing political beliefs define our identity. Every American knows that "...they can reverse policies by persuading their fellow citizens to vote to change at the next election (Friedman, p.2)." As a new nation conceived on the principle of freedom, American artists moved away from the European tradition of art and started to paint in a nationalistic, democratic style which reflected our political values.

Artistic inspirations to Identity and Character

Artists from the Hudson River School which coincided with "Age of Jackson" to the present did more than capture specific people or places. "They became identified with social values: self-reliance, order, and respect for heritage and tradition. Audiences hailed these images as much for the ideals of community and nationhood projected by them as for their aesthetic qualities. Thomas Cole, a preeminent painter of the Jacksonian period and founder of the Hudson River School, executed scenes which reflected his sense of national identity, most notably, *Sunny Morning on the Hudson River* (1827) and *The Oxbow* (1836). He believed that landscape or the wild parts of landscape revealed values essential to the life and well-being of a nation. In *The Falls of Kaaterskill* (1826), wild nature became the form Cole used to represent the nation's past, the "untouched" America against which future development was to be judged. In *Falls*, a lone Indian appears at the very center of the composition, the image of the archetypical America, unchanged since creation. Ironically, by this time the Indians had long since been removed.

In April 1859, Albert Bierstadt set off on his first trek westward, joining Colonel Frederick Landers's army expedition into Nebraska and Wyoming, along the Platte and Sweetwater Rivers. The West was big and he painted it as gigantic space. Among his most famous paintings are the *Rocky Mountains, Domes of Yosemite and Yosemite Valley* (1866). The West, westward expansion, and Manifest Destiny became a source of national identity. "Why should we go to Switzerland to see mountains, or to Iceland to see geysers...The Yo (sic) Semite, which the nation has made a park, the Rocky mountains and their singular parks, the canyons of the Colorado...form a series of attractions possessed by no other nation," spoke to pride of place and national identity posed as a question in a *New York Herald* article. (Rosenbaum, p.84)

The artists of the Hudson River School captured the beauty and grandeur of the North American continent and preserved the "sublime" nature of its wilderness and innocence for later generations to view with wonder and awe. Those American artists and the landscapes they painted teach us about the discovery, exploration, and settlement of our country. Their paintings not only enhance a more complete understanding of historical developments but contribute to national identity and character.

Two events coincided in 1893 which would have dramatic implications for our understanding of national identity and character: In May 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition (Chicago's World's Fair) opened in Chicago and Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his thesis, *The Significance of the American Frontier in American History*. Both addressed the concept of regionalism or what Turner described as "sectionalism". Turner attempted to delineate national qualities and reflect on the salient features of American culture. As he understood settlement patterns, he found:

The frontiers entered and crossed geographical provinces or regions which varied from the older colonizing regions; that these older regions themselves were unlike each other, and that in extension of the older sections differing men, societies, institutions and ideals were being carried forward. In other words that the frontier advance was an advance of rival sections, Northeastern, Middle, and Southern; that these sections themselves flowed into new geographic molds,(Jacobs 1965,p.49).”

Whereas Robert Frost in New England, an area of the country long settled, felt that “good fences make good neighbors,” Turner, a son of a pioneer, who grew up on the edge of the frontier, imagination allowed him to break fences. His concept of sectionalism which he observed can lead to fragmentation. “In this sense, his discussion spoke to the same late nineteenth-century concerns that charged the ambitious project of the 1893 Exposition: to delineate the contours of a newly defined American nation (Rosenbaum, p.16).”

That the concept of regionalism can lead to factionalism was not lost upon the promoters of the Fair. Though the Fair was conceived to create unity, it tried to create a balance between state and regional differences. They endeavored to channel local pride into a national spirit. For those of us who teach geography, the inherent problems of regionalism will come as no surprise. Joel Garreau’s, *The Nine Nations of North America* (1981) and Colin Woodard’s, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America* (2011) are similar in approach yet delineate different boundaries for their regions. They both describe the underlying antagonisms and differences between the regions. We are not a nation of one. As Garreau writes with respect to his nations,

“A few are allies, but many are adversaries. Several have readily acknowledged national poets, and many have characteristic dialects and mannerisms. Some are close to being raw frontiers; others have four centuries of history. Each has a peculiar economy; each commands a certain emotional allegiance from its citizens. These nations look different, feel different, and sound different from each other, and few of their boundaries match the political lines drawn on current maps. Most important, each nation has a prism through which it views the world (pp. 1-2).”

In spite of regional differences the Fair promoters used local differences to create a national identity. “Building an American national identity depended first on local loyalties, on citizens having a sense of belonging and where they fit into the larger whole. The state exhibits, especially in the Agricultural Building, helped visitors as well as organizers establish vivid, personal connections, (Rosenbaum, p. 21).” Americans seemed to be striving for a cohesive national vision. When Turner closed the frontier, in a manner of speaking, American values also began to shift. Bierstadt’s large panoramic paintings representative of Manifest Destiny were in decline. America wanted to go from majestic to domestic which also meant a geographic shift from west to east. Increasingly, artists like William Morris Hunt, Alexander Wyant, and Homer Dodge Martin painted settled landscapes, meadows, misty mornings whose brushstrokes also included scenes of human activity. George Innes who represented fifteen landscapes at the Fair said that the civilized landscape is more worthy of reproduction than that which is savage and untamed.

For the next several decades artists would flock to New England to paint in a historical setting replete with churches, settled villages, mature landscapes, rolling hills, and tumultuous seas to forge a sense of America’s identity and character. Artist colonies sprung up in Old Lyme, CT, Ogunquit and Prout’s Neck, ME, Gloucester, MA and Cornish, NH. With the passing of Theodore Robinson (1896), John Twachtman (1902) and Julian Weir (1919) the paintings of the New England landscape continued through the efforts of Childe Hassam and Willard Metcalf. “In their work, a distinctive New England identity emerged, one that offered an enduring vision of community and nationhood (Ibid. p.112).”

The paintings of both artists embody the values of Anglo-Saxon Protestant America harkening back to the earliest Puritan settlers. Hassam painted many Congregational churches

pursuant to these ideals. In *Church at Old Lyme, Connecticut* (1903) he creates a visual line straight to the entrance of the church. “Within lies the heart of the community, a community united by common social, political, and religious ideals (Ibid. p.123):” the same ideals that brought the Puritan community to New England on the *Arabella*: freedom, liberty, and self-government. Metcalf’s landscapes, village scenes, and churches, however idyllic all created a sense of order and balance. I find his paintings of winter most interesting. In *The White Veil* (1909) we might conclude that winter is just not a climatic condition, but an enlightened state of being, one distinctly associated with northern Anglo-Saxon attributes. Hassam and Metcalf, like those artists before them were able to create a harmony and balance between nature and human activity which provided a symbolic sense of unity. Another artist, Robert Strong Woodward, a regionalist who represented Massachusetts at the New York World’s Fair in 1939, painted the churches, farms, and landscapes of Western Massachusetts and Southern Vermont in the same impressionistic style (Robertstrongwoodward.com). “As the site for many of the original settlements of the country, the region was imagined to preserve the democratic ideals of the nation and as such appeared to possess a unique cultural purity (Ibid, p.143).” The theme of American identity and character would continue through the worst economic dislocation the nation ever witnessed, the Great Depression.

During the Great Depression, the federal government commissioned murals for hundreds of federal, state, and local buildings in what Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz “...describes as the most innovative and comprehensive program for government patronage in American History (Park and Markowitz, 1984, p. 5).”Of all the arts during the period of the Great Depression, perhaps the most prominent of all was painting in general, and mural painting in particular. The area of mural art itself was largely, although not exclusively administered by the Section of Fine

Art of the Treasury Department. “The Section saw its purpose as not only to put the proverbial ‘starving artists’ back to work, but also to use them as a means for the creation of a new American spirit. A new vision of the future, one that would transcend the broken down shacks and dying cattle and uprooted citizenry that characterized the hardships of the moment (Fogel and Stevens 1996, 287).” Regionalist painters during this period included, Grant Wood, *American Gothic* (1930) and Thomas Hart Benton, *A Social History of the State of Missouri* (1934) defended traditional values such as independence, self-determination, self-reliance, faith, the family and other principles of Jeffersonian democracy. Confronted by the hardships of the Depression an alternative school of art developed: Social Realism.

Social Realist artists painted breadlines, union activity, miners in Harlan County, the depressed and demoralized; America with all its warts. “The problem the government faced in its federally funded art projects of the 1930s was how to bridge this divide between Social Realists and Regionalists, those who saw labor unions and the triumph of the industrial worker and those who were devoted to family, faith, and farm. In its largest context, this debate was not so much about left and right politically or even artistically, but about the federal government versus local autonomy, a debate which remains with us today (Fogel and Stevens, 2016).” How was this division resolved? “The Section provided the patronage and in their negotiations with the artists and the public moved the art toward the center (Park and Markowitz, 176).” This “realist coalition” that Park and Markowitz described my colleague, Jared A. Fogel and I have termed American Idealism, a melding of farm and factory, of region and modernization by means of industry that allowed the federal government to enter small town America while artistically praising the unique local genius of the region. It was no mean feat. Yet the realist coalition that

produced American Idealist Art (although such a genre was not only confined to the Section) got “radicals and liberals” to work together in what they felt was a progressive cause (p. 179).”

What constituted American Idealism, as opposed to Regionalism and Social Realism? Simply stated it was the synthesis of the two. Two competing visions of America, if you will. When Julian Woeltz painted *Gang Plow* for Amarillo, Texas (1940), he combined the Regionalist theme of farming with modern machinery that made tilling the soil more efficient. Lee Allen created a similar composition in *Soil Erosion and Control* for Onawa, Iowa (1938), where the horse, hand-sewn seed and shovel are combined in the mural with a modern tractor. Jean Swiggett’s, *Local Industry* for Franklin, Indiana (1940), pictured a factory at the center that is flanked by two groups of local citizens including a boy carrying a calf. The groups serve as almost a theatrical curtain, as if what is Regionalist is being drawn back to reveal the shape of the future. The American Idealist unity of factory and farm is depicted also as a unity, a heroic equality, of those who worked both steel and the soil “The federal programs of the New Deal by engendering a sense of belonging all over the country, worked out a fundamentally new way of transmuting the regional into the national (Rosembaum, 173).”

In 1939, Betsy James brought her future husband, Andrew Wyeth to Cushing, Maine where Christina and Alvaro Olson had lived their entire lives. Wyeth was drawn to Christina and for the next 30 years visited every summer and produced over 300 works of art which depicted the Olson’s world. *Christina’s World* (1948) is considered a masterpiece of 20th century realism in the American Gothic tradition. It is reputed to be America’s most popular painting. “The image of the remote farmhouse and Christina’s fierce independence also evoked nostalgia and longing in an era where many Americans had left rural settings behind for cities and suburbs,” writes Beth Harpaz (2011).

Christina Barker Kline wrote the following of Christina Olson becoming Wyeth's muse, "Instinctively, I believe Wyeth managed to get at the core of Christina's self. In the painting she is paradoxically singular and representative, vibrant and vulnerable. She is solitary, but surrounded by the ghosts of her past. Like the house, like the landscape, she preserves. As an embodiment of the strength of the American character, she is vibrant, pulsating, immortal (Kline, 2017, p.304)." Following WWII, the art world changed. Abstract Expressionism, drip painting, the New York School, call it what you will forged a new consciousness in art.

Jasper Johns, an Abstract Expressionist named after his father, who in turned was named after the heroic rescuer of flags in the Revolutionary War, Sergeant William Jasper of the 2nd South Carolina infantry created over ninety flags in his career, using all sorts of media. Some are tiny monochrome graphite drawings, others made of brown paper bags and silk, still others in pastel hues. They come in all colors-blacks and greens; gray; and reds, white and blue- all representing John's interpretations of the flags. Using the American flag as a symbol, John's conveyed his vision of America and its values. Artists as products of their culture either reflect or react to its values.

A contemporary American Impressionist artist, Devin Michael Roberts (devinrobertsstudio.com/) paints in the style of George Inness and Willard Metcalf; whose palette reflects a regional American vernacular. In a time of cultural anxiety his paintings afford the viewer historic images of pastoral America: pristine cascading waterfalls, mature rolling hills, serene nocturnes, and old barns settled into autumn meadows. These 21st century paintings meld with images and values of 19th century rural America; perhaps a longing for freedom, liberty and independence, a renewal of the values on which our nation was founded. The ideals of American identity and character are reflected in American intellectual thought, dating to the

arrival of the *Arabella* in 1630, a tradition that will weather the storm of recent social and political discord.

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