

Masterworks of American Art

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A nation's identity is expressed through its art. Great painters capture the essence of a culture's brightest hopes, deepest anxieties, and most profound aspirations. They provide an aesthetic road map to a nation's history, recording the lives of its citizens and reflecting the personality of an entire people.

But all too often, Americans themselves are unfamiliar with the great artistic legacy of their own country. Many of us study the great artists of Europe—Leonardo and Rubens, Degas and Monet—but neglect the remarkable painters of our own national tradition.

And yet the tradition of American art is filled with spectacular masterpieces that raise intriguing questions:

- How did the founding of this new nation find expression in art?
- Have our democratic ideals influenced the growth and development of American art?
- Did artists in this nascent culture follow time-honored aesthetic models, or did they pioneer new styles to communicate their burgeoning sense of national pride?
- Is there something uniquely "American" about American art?

These are the kinds of questions you explore in **Masterworks of American Art**. In this sweeping survey, you encounter the brilliant paintings of the homegrown masters who documented the birth of our nation from its colonial roots up to the brink of World War I and the birth of Modernism. As you examine this vital artistic tradition in its historical, cultural, and political contexts, you discover how appreciating the legacy of American art is crucial to fully understanding the story of our great nation.

A New Art for a New Nation

Your guide is Professor William Kloss. A noted scholar and art historian, Professor Kloss has taught more than 100 courses as an independent lecturer for the Smithsonian Institution's seminar and travel program. Through 24 engaging and informative lectures, he shares his deep passion for the art of this nation while offering

remarkable insights into the relationship between America's history and its art.

What you discover is a revolution in art. Sometimes borrowing from European models, just as often departing from them, American artists pioneered new attitudes and styles to express the aspirations of a new nation.

Professor Kloss highlights this uniquely American approach to art, examining some of the greatest paintings of the tradition within the larger context of our country's history and culture. The result is a grand survey of the American experience, in which some of the most critical eras of this nation's history are viewed through the lens of great art:

- **The American Revolution:** Great artists captured a new spirit of liberty through scenes of war and government. You examine key examples of their revolutionary approach to art, including *The Death of General Wolfe*, in which Benjamin West pioneered a new vision of democratic leadership by rendering the British general in contemporary dress.
- **The Civil War:** You see how this tumultuous period of American history found expression on memorable canvases, such as James Hamilton's symbolic representation of the battered ship of state in *Old Ironsides* and Winslow Homer's vivid reenactment of skirmishes on the front, *Inviting a Shot before Petersburg*.
- **The Reconstruction:** After the war, painters sought to create an image of the nation reunited, as in George P. A. Healy's portrait of *The Peacemakers*, while others reflected the readjust-



Detail of James McNeill Whistler's *Arrangement in Gray and Black, No. 1: The Artist's Mother*

ments of postwar life, as in Homer's *A Visit from the Old Mistress*.

- **The Westward Expansion:** Great masters such as Albert Bierstadt, in his monumental canvas *Valley of the Yosemite*, recorded the natural splendors of a nation pushing westward, while Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's allegorical mural *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* embodied the idea of Manifest Destiny.

At the same time, you witness the rise of the great artistic institutions that fostered the development of the nation's arts, such as New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Memorable Masterpieces

Along the way, you sample some of the finest works in the American tradition—memorable masterpieces that rival the great paintings of Europe. These masterworks represent a wide rich array of styles and subjects—from sweeping landscapes to intimate portraits to scenes of everyday life.

With Professor Kloss as your guide, you will appreciate the hallmark innova-

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tions and breathtaking artistry of American painting:

- An emphasis on linearity and weightlessness in the earliest works of the American tradition—qualities that sprang from generations of self-trained artists who cultivated a unique, homegrown aesthetic
- The remarkably lifelike trompe l'oeil paintings of William Hartnett and Charles Willson Peale, who created painstaking, dazzling reproductions of objects in real life
- James McNeill Whistler's simple but striking use of shape, line, and a muted color palette, as seen in his famous portrait of his mother
- The vivid portrayal of physical movement in art, as exemplified in remarkable compositions such as Thomas Eakins' *The Biglin Brothers Racing*

With each example, you not only gain a sense of the larger trajectory of the American tradition in painting, but you also develop your appreciation of the artistry represented in each work. With his insightful comments on style, composition, and color, Professor Kloss offers an enlightening guide to appreciating virtually any great work of art.

The American Experience— on the Canvas

With **Masterworks of American Art**, you view these great works as part of an ever-developing story, in which master artists capture the portrait of a nation as it grows and changes. As you savor Professor Kloss's enlightening commentary, you also enjoy a feast for the eyes, as each painting is shown in rich, full-color reproductions worthy of these great masterpieces.

If you've already studied the great art of Europe, **Masterworks of American Art** is an essential complement to your studies, and if you're new to the world of painting, this course offers an enlivening introduction to this remarkable body of work.

Join Professor Kloss as he reveals the vital and vibrant tradition of American art, and witness the birth, growth, and development of our great nation as it was painted by some of the greatest artists the world has known.

The Course Curriculum

1. Art in the New World

From its earliest days, the United States has been home to talented, often self-trained artists. In this first lecture, you preview the signature themes, modes, and styles employed by these homegrown geniuses and begin your trip through American art with some of the earliest examples of art of the colonial period.



Young Omahaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri, and Pawnees (1821) by Charles Bird King

2. 18th-Century Colonial Art

Continue our survey of art produced during the colonial period with a close examination of some of the great portraits by such talented painters as John Smibert, Robert Feke, and Joseph Blackburn. You see how portraiture reflected not only the character of its sitters, but also had much to say about this burgeoning society, its practices, and its values.

3. The Genius of Copley and C. W. Peale

This lecture examines the fascinating interplay between American and British schools of art during the second half of the 18th century, beginning with detailed, realistic portraits by John Singleton Copley and concluding with two highly symbolic portraits by Charles Willson Peale.

4. A Revolution in Art

Trace the development of history painting from its roots in classical subject matter to its role in military commemoration, starting with Benjamin West, whose unprecedented use of contemporary subjects created a sensation and revolutionized the genre. This consideration also includes the work of two artists—Charles Willson Peale and John Trumbull—Revolutionary War veterans who applied their talents to recording the birth of the nation.

5. Portraiture in Federal America

From Gilbert Stuart's famous "Lansdowne" portrait of George Washington to the witty, skillful *Staircase Group* by Charles Willson Peale, the art of portraiture flourished during the early days of the American Republic.

Throughout, these masterworks showcase the ability of these great painters to capture the intelligence, dignity, and character of the founding generation.

6. Early Historical and Landscape Painting

Historical subjects continued to have a hold on American painters, but many painters turned their skills to the project of documenting the beauties of the new country through landscape painting. Examine both genres and see how painters who traveled abroad incorporated the influence of Romanticism and Neoclassicism.

7. The 1820s—Art in the Era of Good Feelings

Following the tumultuous Revolutionary era, the country experienced a period of relative peace, which was echoed in the flourishing of still-life painting. Here, you examine examples from the masterful still-life painter Raphaelle Peale, as well as the historical portraits that commemorated the nation's first citizens.

8. Thomas Cole and the American Landscape

At the age of 25, with only a year of formal training, painter Thomas Cole became a founding member of the National Academy of Design. In this lecture, you explore the early works of Cole, the first great American landscape painter, including his *The Subsiding of the Waters of the Deluge* and *Distant View of Niagara Falls*, and examine how his innovative series, *The Course of Empire*, reveals a surprisingly pessimistic perspective on the fate of civilization.



About Your Professor

Professor William Kloss is an independent art historian and scholar who lectures and writes about a wide range of European and American art. He was educated at Oberlin College, where he earned a B.A. in English and an M.A. in Art History. He continued postgraduate work at the University of Michigan and was a Fulbright scholar in Rome. He has taught 17th- and 18th-century European art and 19th-century French art at the University of Virginia.

As an independent lecturer for the Smithsonian Institution's seminar and travel program, Professor Kloss has presented more than 100 courses in the United States and abroad on subjects ranging from ancient Greek art to Impressionism to the works of Winslow Homer. He has also been a featured lecturer for the National Trust for Historic Preservation and for The Art Institute of Chicago, and he has been a guest faculty lecturer for the American Arts Course at Sotheby's Institute.

Professor Kloss serves on the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, and he is a member of the Portrait Advisory Panel for the U.S. Senate Commission on Art. He is the author of several books, including *Art in the White House: A Nation's Pride*, and is the coauthor of *United States Senate Catalogue of Fine Art*.

9. Thomas Cole—The Late Years

You look at some of Cole's later paintings, which ranged from depictions of distinctly American subjects to works that reflected his time in Europe. The lecture concludes with a consideration of his unfinished religious cycle, *The Cross and the World*.

10. Other Views, Other Visions

Cole's legacy continued in the works of his peer, Asher B. Durand, who added his own Transcendentalist sensibilities and commitment to nature to the landscape art pioneered by Cole. This lecture also considers the work of Cole's student, Frederic Edwin Church, who contributed a new and daring perspective on the natural wonder of Niagara, and the luminous landscapes of Fitz Henry Lane.

11. American Genre Painting

In genre painting, the artist acts as storyteller, capturing implied narratives in scenes from everyday life. Here, you sample some masterful examples of this mode, and see how literature, landscape, and history painting interact on the canvas.

12. Native Americans and Westward Expansion

Next, turn your attention to the frontier and the depiction of Native Americans produced by some of the period's greatest painters, including Charles Bird King, George Catlin, and William Ranney. You see how these images combined a sympathy for the native people with a faith in the idea of Manifest Destiny.

13. The Civil War in Art

As the Civil War approached, artists turned to landscape painting and symbolic representations to interpret the rising conflict. You survey a range of these images, from the quiet, reassuring paintings of George Henry Durrie and John Frederick

Kensett to Winslow Homer's detailed and startling images from the front.

14. The Glow of Peace

At the end of the war, artists expressed a new hope, as seen in glowing images of peace and harvest captured by Winslow Homer and George Inness. The evocations of a "New Eden" are seen in the majestic western landscapes of Albert Bierstadt and George P. A. Healy's bittersweet evocation of the move from war to peace.

15. Art—The Mirror of Social Change

The paintings of Winslow Homer and others provide a remarkable perspective on the striking social changes after the Civil War, including shifts in gender roles, professions, national identity, and race relations. You also look at the cult of childhood that surfaced, as portrayed in Eastman Johnson's *Barn Swallows*.

16. 1876–1893—The Civic Revival of the Nation

The period 1876–1893 witnessed an increasing devotion to artistic endeavors as American cultural life began to emulate European models. Paintings reflected this greater interest in the arts, including images inspired by opera and literature.

17. 1885–1900—Contrasts of Dark and Light

You examine the striking dichotomy between light and dark through the dark, quiet tableaux of William Harnett and John F. Peto, with their beautiful trompe l'oeil illusions, and the vibrant paintings of plein air artists such as William Merritt Chase and Childe Hassam.

18. Americans Abroad—Expatriate Painters

In their search for the finest American artists, the organizers of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition considered painters

living in American cities as well as those in Europe. This lecture examines three famous American artists who, despite their expatriate status, are among America's greatest talents: James McNeill Whistler, Mary Cassatt, and John Singer Sargent.

19. Thomas Eakins—Innovation and Rejection

This lecture initiates a three-part consideration of one of the greatest and most controversial of American artists, Thomas Eakins. In this first lecture, you examine his early works, including his series of paintings of rowers and his masterpiece, *The Gross Clinic*.

20. Thomas Eakins—Success and Scandal

Eakins' interest in verisimilitude can be seen in some of his virtuoso representations of the human form based on his careful observations of the body in motion. This interest ultimately led to his downfall, as his studies of and professional fixation on the nude human body elicited outrage and led to scandal.

21. The Last Years—"And Who Is Eakins?"

This final lecture on Thomas Eakins examines the artist's later works, including his remarkable images of boxing scenes and his haunting portraits of women that seem to reflect the artist's own increasing sense of isolation and disappointment.

22. Winslow Homer in England and New England

Here, you return to the works of Winslow Homer. You start by viewing some of his powerful paintings of seascapes and nature scenes that reflect his time spent in England and New England. You also begin to explore Homer's remarkable sympathy for animals, as seen in his remarkable hunting scenes.

23. Winslow Homer—The Last Years

By his mid-50s, Homer was not so much a recluse as a man deeply immersed in the natural world—in the wilderness, the tropics, and the sea. You explore how he rendered these settings in some of his greatest paintings, including *Fox Hunt* and *The Gulf Stream*.

24. Ourselves and Our Posterity

In this final lecture, you take a fresh look at the trajectory of American art and reconsider some of these great paintings within the broader context of our rich artistic legacy, a legacy that endures and continues to inspire American artists to interpret our world.

Available Exclusively on DVD

This course features over 400 visual elements, including images of the masterpieces discussed and portraits of American artists.

