

YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

Angles on Art

“Humanity in Art”

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Transcript of Web feature

Introduction

My name is Alice Lorch, and unlike most museum tour guides, I'm not a historian or artist. Here at Yale University, I am actually studying pre-med. The examination of art objects has sharpened my analytic skills, and taught me to break a problem into its smaller formal elements. I expect my experiences with art to improve my skills in diagnosing and sympathizing with patients when I become a physician.

With this tour, I hope to suggest a simple way to connect with a range of artworks from the Art Gallery's collection through the theme of “humanity in art.” By focusing on the way each artist depicts some aspect of human experience, we can think about how emotional elements in art tell us about history and the human condition.

Winslow Homer (American, 1836–1910)

The Old Mill (Morning Bell), 1871

In *Morning Bell*, Winslow Homer depicts a scene from Lowell, Massachusetts, in the years following the Civil War. The late nineteenth century in the United States was a period of transition from a largely agricultural and rural society to a more urban way of life. Mills were built in New England towns and many young people moved from farming to industrial work. The central female in this painting, positioned by Homer at a crossroads, personifies this aspect of contemporary American experience. The young woman also faces her own personal crossroads as she leaves behind her carefree youth for the world of adult responsibility. As the morning bell calls her to work, the artist suggests that her situation is precarious by placing her alone on a rickety bridge in stark contrast with the three other women who stand on firm stone. It is unclear what direction the girl will choose. Likewise, it was still uncertain in 1872 how quickly and to what extent the United States would become a major international power. Homer does, however, highlight the subtle heroism of human perseverance in the face of adversity so essential to building this nation.

Edward Hopper (American, 1882–1967)

Western Motel, 1957

I am drawn to this painting by the woman's eyes but can't tell what they express. Is she angry? Sad? For that matter, what is going on in this painting? Her bags are packed, but is she coming or

going? Maybe she's leaving her husband? Maybe she just arrived at the hotel to meet her lover? She is looking at someone, but is it her husband, lover... or you the viewer? There are no identifying landmarks or vegetation in the landscape outside. Similarly, the motel room itself is sterile and unrealistically bare. The ambiguity of the story depicted is in keeping with Hopper's own words: "If you could say it in words there would be no reason to paint...The whole answer is there on the canvas." The painting doesn't tell a story, but rather places the viewer in a realm where nothing seems real except for her gaze. Here with this woman, you are outside of time—there are no hands on the clock and the sun seems permanently fixed on a wall. This is a painting purely about a moment of human encounter, and Hopper brings us, the viewers, into that encounter.

Vacuum Cleaner, designed 1937

Lurelle Van Arsdale Guild

Electrolux Corporation

A vacuum cleaner may seem a bizarre choice for interpretation centered on understanding works of art in terms of the human condition. How can we connect emotionally to the metal and plastic of a household machine? Visually, the Electrolux vacuum cleaner is shiny and resembles a train, suggesting speed and efficiency. Tens of thousands of this model were produced between 1937 and 1954, an era of rampant American consumerism. Buying this vacuum cleaner might symbolize bringing speed and efficiency into the home. The careful design of certain household objects such as this vacuum cleaner blur the lines between art and functional objects. And as the vacuum cleaner celebrated its centenary in 2001, Electrolux was "keeping abreast of modern developments" according to BBC News. New designs continue to tailor to consumer demands and so we continue to experience functional art into the twenty-first century.

Joseph Stella (American, 1877–1946)

Brooklyn Bridge, 1919–20

In this painting, Joseph Stella celebrates the Brooklyn Bridge as a technological and architectural feat. His huge canvas echoes the immense dimensions of the bridge and the profusion of its angled lines recalls its cables. Stella also considered the bridge a spiritual masterpiece. He wrote, "It impressed me as the shrine containing all the efforts of a new civilization in America. I felt deeply moved, as if in the presence of a new divinity." Accordingly, the painting resembles a stained glass window, with a variety of shapes and at various intensities. In this painting, the bridge seems almost to be itself a living thing. The red at the center of the painting is like blood running through its artery-like subways. But was Stella fascinated by the grandeur of this bridge or frightened by its dehumanizing potential? This painting raises questions about the relationships between technology, God, and man that were current in the early twentieth century and continue to be relevant today.

Epa Helmet Mask

Yoruba Ekiti Culture, Nigeria, 20th century

This mask, created in an artists' workshop, was imbued with spiritual significance. It was repainted and smoothed many times as it passed through many hands. It illustrates the continuity of humankind in the face of change. The mask was danced at the annual Epa Festival, in a parade that defined the social roles of the community. The top portion of this mask depicts Olomoye, known as the spirit "owner of many children". This symbol of female fertility carries "ibeji," or twins on her back. Below her, the large head represents the ancestors who are constantly watching the earthly actions of the Yoruba Ekiti people. The division between Olomoye and the Yoruba ancestors on this mask represents the boundaries between human existence and a realm beyond. In illustrating life and death, this mask sends the reassuring message of the survival of the human spirit in the afterlife.