

Art History II, Year 3 – Modern

Introduction

The images selected for our Art History Memory Work aim to introduce our students to iconic works of art and important artistic styles, but also to reflect and reinforce our studies of history and literature and provide illustrations of life during this period. These notes provide some relevant art historical or historical context, insights into the life of the artist, or observations about the paintings and their history.

Glossary of terms & styles

Renaissance – revival of classical art in Europe in the 14th-16th centuries

Old Master – European painters, 13th-17th century

Dutch Golden Age – period of high cultural achievement in Holland, 1588-1672

Mannerist – elongated, affected style of painting, 1520-1600

Baroque – dramatic, emotional style of painting, 1600-1750

Tenebrism – “darkness” dramatic contrasts of light and dark within a painting

Chiaroscuro – “light and dark”; use of lighter and darker tones to model 3 dimensions

Romantic – passionate, emotional 19th c. style depicting the sublime in nature or history

Paris Salon – the official annual art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris

Royal Academy – London equivalent of the Académie des Beaux-Arts

Pre-Raphaelite – 19th century British artists who preferred earlier, medieval styles

Impressionist – group of French 19th century artists experimenting with new painting styles

Pointillism – experimentation with color, placing tiny dots close together instead of blending

Post-Impressionist – more 19th century artists interested in form rather than light

Expressionist – a style that expresses the artist’s inner perception rather than what is seen

Abstract – art that does not aim to represent material reality

Cubist – depicting perceptions of three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface

Pop Art – “fun” art reflecting popular culture

**1. Caravaggio, *The Calling of St. Matthew*
1600, oil on canvas, 127” x 130”
San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome**

Michelangelo Caravaggio (1571-1610) trained as an artist in Milan, Italy and spent much of his working life in Rome. It was a time of great artistic patronage and production. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) had encouraged the use of art to explain and teach the faith, particularly after the Reformation writing that art should encourage the faithful to “order their own lives and manners in imitation of the saints, and may be excited to adore and love God, and to cultivate piety”. The Council also warned that irreverent art, or art that introduced “false doctrine and dangerous error to the uneducated” should be avoided.

The dramatic intensity of Caravaggio’s paintings won him a constant stream of successful commissions, but he sometimes ran into trouble when his works were considered too worldly, violent, or improper. Some paintings had to be repainted to suit the patron, or even sold to a new buyer. This tendency reflected the life of the artist himself. He was constantly in trouble with the police, for debt, drinking, and brawling. On one occasion, he was sued by a waiter after he threw a plate of artichokes in his face; on another, he was sued by his landlady for not paying rent and he retaliated by throwing stones through her windows in the middle of the night. He even killed a man in a fight and fled Rome to avoid a death sentence. This same dark tumultuousness appeared in his paintings - scenes of struggles, confrontations, and death.

The Calling of St. Matthew is one of three paintings by Caravaggio in the Contarelli chapel of the church of San Luigi dei Francesi, in Rome. A French cardinal, Matthieu Cointerel, had left an endowment (a sum of money for this purpose) for this chapel to be his memorial, and he wanted it to be decorated with scenes from the life of his patron saint. *The Calling* shows the moment when Christ calls Matthew to leave his life as a tax collector. Christ and St. Peter are on the right, standing, having just entered the room. Christ is barely visible; only part of his face, the faintest sliver of a halo, and his outstretched arm can be seen in the shadows. St Matthew sits with four companions dressed in wealthy 17th century costumes (like Swiss Guards’ uniforms). Christ and St. Peter, however, are wearing traditional biblical robes; this would have created a shocking contrast to viewers at the time; it shows Christ entering contemporary 17th century daily life. Mathew points at himself as though to ask, “Who, me?” The murky room is lit by a single ray of bright light, illuminating the moment of spiritual conversion. The light does not come from the window in the picture, but the location of the actual chapel window. Christ’s hand is very similar to the hand of Adam in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling; but while Michelangelo’s Adam is receiving life, here Christ is giving new life.

The dark gloom of the picture was characteristic of much of Baroque art, and Caravaggio was the master of this dramatic style. The intense black shadows and bright dramatic light of his works are known as tenebrism (from the Latin *tenebrosus*, darkness).

Pope Francis often went to San Luigi as a young man to contemplate this painting, reflecting, “This is me, a sinner, on whom the Lord has turned his gaze”.

**2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*
1659, oil on canvas, 31” x 26”
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York**

Rembrandt was a Dutch Golden Age painter, printmaker, and draughtsman. He painted a wide array of subjects – portraits, landscapes, animals, genres scenes, historical, mythological, allegorical, and religious subjects. He created over 300 paintings, 300 etchings, and 2000 drawings over the course of his career. One of his favorite subjects was himself! He painted over 40 self-portraits over the course of his life, showing his development from young student to established artist, to elderly man. The portraits are very varied; he would depict himself in unusual or foreign costumes, or even pulling faces at himself. At one point there were thought to be as many as 90 self-portraits, but during the late 20th century the Rembrandt Research Project did a careful and scientific analysis of all works attributed to Rembrandt and concluded that many of these were by other artists, often by his own students, copying his works.

Rembrandt always strove to paint his subjects accurately, showing a keen interest in physical detail as well as the nuances of human expression. In this example, which Rembrandt painted when he was fifty-four, he emphasized the aging in his own face; lined brow, bags under his eyes, and a double chin. He layered the paint on thickly to achieve this dramatic effect.

**3. Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*
1870, Oil on canvas, 59" x 84".
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa**

West was born in Pennsylvania, the 10th child of an innkeeper. He showed early interest in art, claiming that native Americans first showed him how to make paint by mixing clay from the riverbank with bear grease. He also remembered a time when he had found some pots of ink and drew his sister's portrait. When his mother saw it, she exclaimed, "Why, it's Sally!" and kissed him. He later recalled, "My mother's kiss made me a painter". He began work as a portraitist, then travelled to Italy to study art, and in 1763 he arrived in England. West had only planned to visit England, but he remained there for the rest of his life, never returning to America. He achieved great success in England and was heralded as "the American Raphael". In 1772, King George III appointed him Historical Painter to the Court and paid him 1000 pounds a year for the post.

The Death of General Wolfe shows the Battle of Quebec, also known as the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, a pivotal moment in the Seven Years War. The battle action only lasted about fifteen minutes. The British, under Major General James Wolfe, held the line under gunshot, winning the battle, but their general was hit and died of gunshot wounds. Wolfe is depicted dying, supported by mourners, in the manner of a martyr, or even Christ (remember Giotto's *Entombment*?). To the left is a tattooed Indigenous warrior, wearing a beaded bandolier bag, kneeling in a pose of deep thought (similar to the posture later used by Rodin for *The Thinker*). The inclusion of this figure firmly establishes the scene as being in the New World, and thus more intriguing to a British audience. On the extreme left of the painting a figure approaches, waving his arms to attract attention and carrying the French fleur-de-lys flag, indicating that the British had won. The sky is clearing to the left of the painting, heralding this good news, in contrast to the dark clouds above the dying General. Wolfe is attended by a man in tartan, Simon Fraser, Lieutenant General of the 78th Highland Frasers who was actually not present on the battlefield but was recovering from previous war wounds. In fact, in total, ten of the men depicted were not at the battle, an unusual departure from typical historical paintings. Dr. Thomas Hinde, in the blue coat, attempting to stem the flow of blood from Wolfe's wounds, was present, and Wolfe died in his arms.

The painting was unusual for depicting a scene from current events in the dramatic large-scale style usually reserved for biblical mythological scenes, and in depicting the participants in contemporary clothing rather than in classical garb. Sir Joshua Reynolds, President of the Royal Academy, had ordered West to paint the figures in togas in the conventional manner, believing that it was ignoble and undignified to paint them in contemporary costume, and King George III refused to buy the finished painting on the grounds that the "clothing compromised the dignity of the image". Despite this, the picture was praised when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy; the actor David Garrick was so moved by this painting that he enacted an impromptu interpretation of the dying Wolfe in front of the work when he saw it at the exhibition. The painting was presented to Canada in 1921 in recognition of Canada's part in fighting in World War I.

**4. Jacques Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*
1784, oil on canvas, 130” x 167”
The Louvre, Paris**

The Oath of the Horatii is a painting in the neo-classical style and tells a story from antiquity, as recorded by the Roman author Livy in his *Histories of Rome*. In the 7th Century BC, Rome which was still a kingdom and not yet a republic, was engaged in a dispute with the nearby town of Alba Longa. Rather than go to war, both cities agreed that each side should choose three men as champions to fight for their cause. Rome chose the three brothers of the Horatii family, and Alba Longa chose the three brothers of the Curatii family. The painting depicts the three Horatii brothers swearing a solemn oath to their father, shown holding their swords, to fight to the death for their country. They are watched by a group of resigned and weeping women; one is the wife of a Horatii brother, a woman of the Curatii family. Another is their sister Camilla, who is betrothed to one of the Curatii brothers. The brothers are oblivious to and unmoved by the hopeless despair of the women who know that, whatever the outcome, they will lose loved ones.

The fight went at first in favor of Alba Longa. The Curatii brothers killed first one and then a second of the Horatii. The final brother standing, Publius, took to his heels and ran, but stopped and turned to fight and overcome the Curatii one at a time, after they became separated from each other in the chase. On finally returning home victorious, the only man surviving of the six combatants, he saw his sister Camilla weeping for her betrothed and killed her for her disloyalty to her family and Rome.

The painting was commissioned by Charles-Claude de Flahaut de la Billarderie, who worked for King Charles Louis XVI as the head of the Bâtiments du Roi (King’s Household). The work was enthusiastically received at the Paris Salon in 1785. The grim tragedy appealed to its French 18th century audience who were turning away from the frivolity associated with a degenerate and self-indulgent aristocracy. Even the king approved of the work, understanding the loyalty of the Horatii brothers as loyalty to the crown. Growing factions, however, saw the scene as representing the need for loyalty to France against all threats, including the monarch, no matter what the cost.

The flat architectural background of three Roman arches suggests a stage set, and David is known to have seen the play *Horace*, written by Corneille in 1640, in Paris in 1782. There is no scene in this play that shows an oath-taking, but there is a moment when a messenger arrives on stage carrying the swords of the three defeated Curatii, which may have suggested this scene to the artist.

The painting was in the Neo-Classical style, rejecting the cupids, flowers and pastels of Rococo art. Instead of appealing to sentimentality and evoking pleasure, it recounts a story of virtue (*exemplum virtutis*). The figures are all pushed to the foreground, in the manner of a Roman relief (remember the Ara Pacis of Augustus?). The dynamic, straight lines and colors of the men to the left contrast with the undulating soft curves and tones of the group of women to the right.

**5. Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808 in Madrid*
1814, oil on canvas, 106” x 137”
Museo del Prado, Madrid**

The painting is considered a “ground-breaking, archetypal image of the horrors of war”. The art historian Kenneth Clarke declared it, “The first great picture which can be called revolutionary in every sense of the word, its style, its subject, its intention.”

This painting is one of a pair. It and its companion, “*The Second of 2nd May 1808: The Charge of the Mamluks*” commemorate Spanish resistance to Napoleon’s armies during the Peninsular War and the occupation of Spain in 1808. On the 2nd of May, the Spanish people had revolted against the French army but were violently defeated. On the 3rd of May, firing squads shot many of those who had taken part in the attempted uprisings.

French troops were in Spain because of an alliance between France and Spain with the goal of invading Portugal and sharing it between the two allied nations. Napoleon’s troops entered Spain in 1807; Napoleon promptly deposed the King of Spain and replaced him with his brother, Joseph Bonaparte. The French arrival had been encouraged by Spanish anti-monarchical liberals who sought a French-style popular rebellion, but who later resented the French occupation. The French were finally expelled in 1813 after a long and vicious guerilla war. King Ferdinand returned to power in 1814 and commissioned these works by Goya to record the traumatic events the nation had suffered.

Like Caravaggio and El Greco before him, Goya uses tenebrism, using the dramatic light cast by a lantern at night to reveal a rigid, disciplined firing squad. Their backs are facing the viewer and their heads bent in concentration over the macabre task. Their victims, past, current, and future fill the canvas. A pile of bloodied corpses sprawls in the foreground; the current group of victims include a tonsured friar, hands clasped in prayer and, most conspicuously, a man in a humble peasant’s white shirt, his arms thrown out wide as though crucified, in horror, resignation, or a plea for mercy. Both the corpses and the soldiers are dehumanized, their faces and identity obscured. Only a handful of the current victims, alone in this crowded scene, face the viewer. To the right, the future victims wait their turn, covering their faces in horror. Beyond them lies the church and town buildings.

The composition suggests a scene of martyrdom and scenes of war, but it is essentially unheroic. It records the terror of the moment; it does not celebrate the bravery or nobility of the participants, nor hint at glory that is to come in a martyr’s crown. Both victims and killers are anonymous, unlike the *Death of General West*. Although the pose of the central figure calls to mind centuries of Christian iconography, here it is being repurposed for a secular cause.

Although the painting was commissioned by the government, it lay in storage for thirty or forty years before it was publicly displayed. Despite the restoration of the Spanish Bourbon monarchy and the desire to record the iniquity of the French, the paintings did record a popular uprising and its aftermath. In those precarious times, any depiction of revolution was considered dangerous and potentially inflammatory.

**6. Thomas Cole, *The Oxbow, or View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm*
1836, oil on canvas, 51” x 76”
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York**

Cole was born in England and emigrated to America with his family when he was 17. He began working making wood engravings for his father’s wallpaper business and turned to painting portraits and landscapes. He became well-known after a bookseller agreed to display three of his views of the Catskill Mountains in his shop window. A keen art collector, Colonel John Trumbell, known for his paintings of the American Revolution, bought them and recommended the young Cole to his own patrons and collectors.

Cole is known as the founder of the Hudson River School, a group of artists who imbued landscapes with aspects of Romanticism, evoking not just the beauty of nature but also its sublime and even spiritual aspects. Cole introduced themes and narrative elements to his landscapes, becoming known for series such as “*The Course of Empire*”, a set of five paintings tracing the cycle of civilization from *The Savage State*, through *The Pastoral State*, *The Consummation of Empire*, *Destruction*, and finally *Desolation*. These can be seen at the New York Historical Society. Another series, *The Voyage of Life*, depicts the life of man in four stages from infant to old age as the progression of a boat down a river, accompanied by a guardian angel – in the boat with the infant, waving from the river bank as a youth, watching in concern on the tempestuous seas of adult life, and finally welcoming the soul to heaven in old age.

While Cole was at work on *The Course of Empire*, he felt discouraged and overwhelmed by the scale of the project. His patron, Luman Reed, suggested he pause and attempt a single, simpler composition. Cole made sketches of various views from Mount Holyoke and joined together two separate aspects to create *The Oxbow*, a view of an unusual loop in the Connecticut River, resembling the yoke worn by oxen to plough. The composition has been called a “union of the picturesque, the sublime, and the magnificent”. The view encompasses settled farmland, with smoke rising from cabin chimneys, haystacks, sheep and a shepherd, sailboats and a ferryboat on the river on the right. To the left is a wilder scene of untamed forests and rocky crags. This is reinforced by the storm passing through overhead, leaving broken tree branches, and a circling flock of birds. At the center foreground of the painting is a small self-portrait of the artist at his easel, looking directly toward the viewer. To the right is a small heap of his equipment, topped by a parasol.

On the far side of the river, marks in the forest, possibly scars made by logging, appear like Hebrew letters. These have been variously interpreted as reading “Noah”, or if viewed upside down, as though from God’s perspective, the word Shaddai – the Almighty. “Noah” might refer to the end of the rainstorm which is just passing over and to the concept of America as the New World, a gift of God for man to till and subdue.

7.

**Albert Bierstadt. *Rocky Mountains, Landers Peak*
1863, oil on canvas, 73” x 121”
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York**

Bierstadt was born in Germany but moved to the United States with his family when he was two. In 1859, aged 29, he joined the Honey Road Survey Party, a government survey party to Nebraska Territory, led by the then-Colonel Frederick Lander. They travelled as far as the Wyoming Range in the Rocky Mountains, with Bierstadt making numerous paintings along the way. He made as many as fifty preparatory sketches for just one painting, and he described the Rocky Mountains as “the best material for the artist in the world.”

Lander’s Peak was given its name at Bierstadt’s suggestion, in honor of Colonel Lander, after his death in the Civil War in 1862. The painting depicts an idealized version of the 10,456-foot peak, not an exact reproduction of how it looks. The artist intended to convey the majesty and sublimity of the wilderness. He included figures of the Shoshone peoples in the foreground, both to emphasize the scale and to indicate the untouched wilderness of its beauty. Bierstadt wrote in a letter from July 10, 1859, that, ‘The manners and customs of the Indians are still as they were hundreds of years ago, and now is the time to paint them, for they are rapidly passing away, and soon will be known only in history. I think that the artist ought to tell his portion of their history as well as the writer; a combination of both will assuredly render it more complete ...’

The painting was a great success, and sold for \$25,000, a record amount at the time for an American painting. It was bought by James McHenry, an American railway entrepreneur living in London. The artist later re-acquired it from the buyer. It passed from him to his brother and then to the Metropolitan Museum where it can be seen today. It is often compared to Frederick Church’s *The Heart of the Andes*; the two paintings together depict the great mountain ranges of North and South America, and they are displayed opposite each other at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

**8. James McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1*
1871, oil on canvas, 57” x 64”
Musee d’Orsay, Paris**

This painting was originally titled “Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1”, but it is variously known as “Whistler’s Mother”, or “Portrait of the Artist’s Mother”. It is currently in the Musee d’Orsay, in Paris. It is one of the most famous works by an American artist in a collection outside America, and has been called “an American icon”, and “the American Mona Lisa”.

Whistler was born in Massachusetts in 1834. He studied at West Point for a while, but was expelled, possibly for misbehavior in drawing class. Later he worked as a draftsman, mapping the coast of the United States for military and shipping purposes. He was dismissed from this position due to his tendency to imaginatively embellish the maps with sea serpents and mermaids. He moved to Paris to study art, where he lived a bohemian lifestyle and exploring the new artistic theories developing there. He rejected the typical Victorian interest in sentimental and moralistic stories in painting, but he was very interested in the idea that there were similarities between art and music. He gave many of his paintings titles such as “Arrangement”, “Nocturne” or “Movement”, borrowing from musical vocabulary.

In Paris he absorbed the idea that line is more important than color, and that black is the fundamental color of tonal harmony, ideas that would be rejected by the Impressionists within a couple of decades. They claimed instead that color mattered more than form, and preferred a light, bright palette, labelling black and brown as “the forbidden colors.”

Whistler’s mother joined him in Paris in 1864, and in 1866 the two relocated to London. Apparently, his mother sat for this painting when the expected model failed to show up. The intention had been to paint a standing figure, but his mother found the pose difficult to hold for the dozens of sittings that it took the artist to complete the work, so she posed sitting instead. Public reaction was mixed in London. Some felt that the painting was too simple and bleak, when the fashion was for ostentatious over-decoration, but others thought that the image captured an ideal view of decorous motherhood. Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist and philosopher requested that his portrait be painted in the same style, which became “Arrangement in Gray and Black, No. 2”. Whistler intended the work as a study of color and arrangement; the figure was simply one of several balanced shapes in the composition. The curves of the figure were intended to contrast with the straight lines of the curtain and the picture. Whistler was baffled and annoyed at the public desire to understand it as a portrait, but the image took on a life of its own as an image of motherhood and family values. The image was used for a stamp in 1934, “In memory and in honor of all the mothers of America,” and a statue of the seated figure was put up in Pennsylvania during the Great Depression as a tribute to all mothers. Claude Debussy, the composer, who described his Nocturnes as “an experiment in the different combinations that can be obtained from one color – what a study of gray would be in a painting,” was very moved by the painting.

9. **Georges Seurat. *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*
1884-1886, oil on canvas, 82” x 121”
Art Institute of Chicago**

Seurat was a French post-Impressionist who is famous for creating the technique known as pointillism. He precisely placed small dots of contrasting colors next to each other on the canvas, like pixels on a screen, without blending the colors, allowing the eye to do the work of blending them to create tones of color. He believed that this resulted in a more vibrant experience of the colors.

Seurat’s first work in this technique, *Bathers at Asnieres*, 1883, was rejected by the Paris Salon, and he exhibited instead with the Groupe des Artistes Indépendants. The painting was immediately hailed as a new and exciting version of impressionism, which became known as Neo-Impressionism. Seurat was influenced by the Impressionists in his light, bright color choices, but unlike Impressionists who painted quickly and directly from nature, he made careful studies and preparatory works for his paintings (there are over sixty preparatory studies for *Sunday Afternoon*). His figures were carefully outlined and almost sculptural in form, unlike the quick, vague forms of figures in Impressionist works.

Sunday Afternoon is a huge 10-foot canvas, framed in white wood to accentuate the color theory. It shows Parisians enjoying a sunny day at a park on the outskirts of Paris, on the banks of the River Seine. The figures are wearing the costumes of the middle or upper class, such as the top hats worn by the men and the bustle of the lady in the foreground, in contrast with the more working-class figures he depicted in *Bathers at Asnieres*.

There is a lady in the foreground who has a pet monkey on a leash, and a little girl in white at the center of the canvas who stares directly out at the viewer. The composition is serene and quiet. There is little or no interaction between the figures shown, and it has a dreamlike quality to it. Seurat explained that he was inspired by the Panathenaic procession on the Parthenon frieze; he wanted to “make the moderns file past ... in their essential form.”

**10. Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night*
1889, oil on canvas, 29” x 36”
Museum of Modern Art, New York**

After van Gogh’s mental breakdown of December 1888, the artist voluntarily entered a mental asylum, at St. Paul de Mausole, in a former monastery in St. Remy, Provence. The asylum catered to the wealthy, and was only half-full, so van Gogh had room to set up a studio in a ground floor room as well as having a bedroom on the second floor. He was not allowed to paint in his bedroom but could sketch in ink or charcoal on paper.

Starry Night is the view through his east-facing bedroom window painted in June 1889. Like the Impressionists, Van Gogh preferred to paint in series, creating many versions of the same subject, as he had done with *Sunflowers*. He painted this view 21 different times, saying of the view, “Through the iron-barred window ... I can see an enclosed square of wheat ... above which, in the morning, I watch the sun rise in all its glory.”

He painted many different versions of the view – at different times of day, seasons, and in various weather conditions, with the constant being the slope of the Alpilles Mountains. In *Starry Night* he took the artistic liberty of adding a village that was not in fact there. In 15 of the versions he included the cypress trees, and exaggerated their size in six of the works, including this one. Van Gogh often argued with his friend, the artist Paul Gauguin, as to whether art should be painted from nature, or purely from the imagination, “Abstractions” as Gauguin called them. Van Gogh wrote of this debate in 1888, “When Gauguin was in Arles, I once or twice allowed myself to be led astray into abstraction, as you know. But that was a delusion, dear friend, and one soon comes up against a brick wall ... And yet, once again I allowed myself to be led into reaching for stars that are too big – another failure – and I have had my fill of that”.

In June 1889, he wrote to his brother Theo, “This morning I saw the countryside from my window a long time before sunrise with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big.” Astronomical records show that Venus, commonly known as the morning star, was visible at dawn in Provence in spring 1889, so we can identify the large and bright star in the painting as being the planet Venus. The moon was actually gibbous on this date, but Van Gogh has painted it as a more conventional crescent shape.

The large swirls of the stars have been explained in a variety of ways; perhaps Van Gogh had seen the pictures being published at that time of spiral galaxies or comets; perhaps the swirls represent the Mistral, the strong summer winds in Provence that was thought to have triggered his mental breakdown. One fascinating theory is that he suffered from digitalis toxicity. Digitalis is a medicine found in the leaves of the foxglove plant. It was (and still is) used to treat heart arrhythmias. Van Gogh painted a portrait of his doctor, Dr. Gachet, holding a sprig of foxglove. An excess of digitalis causes a condition called xanthopsia, which causes the sufferer to see yellow or green haloes around objects, an effect found not just in *Starry Night* but in several of Van Gogh’s paintings.

11. Winslow Homer, *Gulf Stream*, 1899
1899, oil on canvas, 28" x 49"
Metropolitan Museum of Art , New York

Homer's depiction of a man alone and adrift in a small boat was more melodramatic than many of his works and received mixed reactions. The sailor has no supplies, his mast is broken and he has no way to steer; he is surrounded by a school of sharks, in tumultuous waves tinged with red – perhaps the blood of less-fortunate companions - and there is a waterspout approaching on the horizon. Only a ship on the horizon offers any hope of rescue, but that too invokes the fear that it may pass on without seeing his plight. Homer was a keen sailor and had sailed the Gulf Stream at least ten times himself; he was painting a subject he knew well.

It has been suggested that the painting was a response to the death of his father a year earlier, perhaps indicating emotional pain, loneliness, or despair. The painting is full of details that may allude to death – the black cross made by the remnants of the wheel on the foredeck; the rectangular black hatch that looks like an open grave, the shroud like sail, and the ropes suggestive of those used to lower a coffin into the grave.

The painting invokes comparison with works that Homer would have been familiar with, such as Copley's "Watson and the Shark" – although Homer was clearly far more familiar with the appearance of sharks than Copley, who was probably painting from a written description; Turner's "Slave Ship" with its similar ship on the horizon, and an approaching typhoon, although a very different narrative is suggested, and even Gericault's "Raft of the Medusa", a more crowded depiction of survival at sea.

Critics were mixed in their reactions; a Philadelphia reviewer labelled it "Smiling Sharks", and described it as "a naked [man] lying in a boat while a school of sharks are waltzing around him in the most ludicrous manner," while the art historian Gardner described it as "a particularly enigmatic and tantalizing episode, a marine puzzle that floats forever in a region of unsolved mysteries." A curator at the Met commented that, "it assumes the proportions of a great allegory, if one chooses,". It has been interpreted as an allegory of the situation of blacks in the United States, both during the era of slavery, and in the post-Civil War period. A poem in the novel "The Ruler", even suggested it was an allegory for the position of teachers in American schools!

Homer was annoyed at those wanting to know what it meant, what story it told, and what happened next. He felt they were engaging with it as an illustration of a narrative, rather than an emotional image of a moment that stood alone as an artwork. He bit back at the questions, "You can tell those ladies that the unfortunate [sailor] who now is so dazed and parboiled will be rescued and returned to his friends and home and ever after live happily."

**12. Edvard Munch, *The Scream*
1893, oil on cardboard, 36" x 29"
National Museum of Norway, Oslo**

The artist recorded in his diary on 22 January 1892 that, “One evening I was walking along a path, the city was on one side and the fjord below. I felt tired and ill. I stopped and looked out over the fjord – the sun was setting, and the clouds turning blood red. I sensed a scream passing through nature; it seemed to me that I heard the scream. I painted this picture, painted the clouds as actual blood. The color shrieked. This became *The Scream*.”

He later expanded on his recollection of the evening, saying, “I was walking along the road with two friends ... there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city – my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety.”

The resultant image has been described as “One of the most iconic images in art, seen as symbolizing the anxiety of the human condition.”

Various rational explanations have been suggested for the unusually red sky in the scream, including the idea that it was the lingering effects of the explosion of the volcano Krakatoa in 1883-4, which had led to unusually red sunsets over Europe for a decade, or that he was depicting the phenomenon of nacreous or polar stratospheric skies, which are visible in Norway, and which look remarkably like the sky in the painting.

Edvard Munch was a Norwegian artist. His mother had died when he was a boy, and his father was disappointed when he decided to become an artist, describing it as an “unholy trade.” Insanity ran in his family – his sister was in an asylum close to the location of *The Scream*, and fear that he too would go mad plagued Munch throughout his life.

As an artist, Munch was inspired by both Naturalism and Impressionism but wanted to express his own state of mind in his works, and not only to recreate what he saw. He experimented with a style known as Symbolism, meaning that the objects depicted carried hidden meaning, and also with Synthetism, in which color expresses hidden emotional meanings. He was one of the first artists to deliberately over-dilute his paint, allowing the paint to drip down his work.

There are four versions of *The Scream*, all, unusually, on cardboard. Two are in pastels and two in oils. The original sketch and oil date from 1893, another pastel sketch was made in 1895, and a second oil version in 1910. Three versions are in museums in Norway today, and the 1895 pastel is in a private collection, after being sold in 2012 for \$120,000,000.

The 1893 oil carries the faint inscription “Could only have been made by a madman”, which Munch added after hearing viewers comment that the artist must be mad. Both oil versions have been stolen from their respective museums in 1994, and then 2004, although both were later recovered. The 1895 pastel sold in 2012 for \$120,000,000.

Despite the turmoil of his earlier years as an artist, Munch came to be respected and admired. He was made a knight of the Royal Order of St Olaf for services to art. During the 1930s and 1940s, the German Nazis labelled Munch's work as "degenerate" and removed 82 of his works from German museums. When the Germans invaded Norway in 1940, Munch lived in fear that his works would be confiscated from his studio, although in fact they never were. At his death in 1944 the Nazis organized a public funeral, attempting to co-opt the artist as a supporter of their regime, despite their previous condemnation of his work.

The Scream has become literally iconic, inspiring, among other things, an emoji, the *Home Alone* movie poster image, a series of Andy Warhol silkscreen prints, and a US Department of Energy pictograph, a non-language symbol to warn future societies of radioactive waste.

**13. John Singer Sargent, *The Wyndham Sisters*
1899, oil on canvas, 115”x 84”
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York**

Sargent was born in Florence to American parents and spent most of his childhood traveling Europe with his parents. He was largely unschooled; his mother believed that living in Europe and visiting museums and churches was as much education as he needed. He showed early talent for painting and was trained in the traditional academic style. He showed great ability to “draw with a brush”, applying paint directly to the canvas without needing to prepare with sketching and underpainting. His first interest was landscapes, but he created a successful portraiture business, becoming known as the most sought-after portraitist of the Gilded Age. In Paris in 1884 he exhibited “Portrait of Madame X”, a full-length portrait of a lady in a black dress with one strap of the dress falling off the shoulder. This was considered outrageously immodest; the scandal was so great that Sargent left Paris and moved to London where he set up studio.

His style combined the dignity of Grand Manner portraiture with the energy and idiosyncrasy of Impressionism. He would paint about 14 portraits a year, each requiring 8-10 sittings. He charged about 5,000 pounds, the equivalent of over \$130,000 now. He would visit the client’s home to inspect the room where the finished picture would hang, and he would even offer advice on the client’s costume, helping them to select the outfit to be worn. In 1907 he was successful enough that he felt able to close the studio, recording that, “painting a portrait would be quite amusing if one were not forced to talk while working ... What a nuisance having to entertain the sitter and to look happy when one feels wretched.”

The Wyndham sisters, the subjects of this portrait, were the daughters of the Honorable Percy Wyndham, younger son of George Wyndham, first Baron Leconfield. From left to right, they are Madeline Adeane (1869-1941), aged 30, Pamela Tennant (1871-1928), aged 28, and Lady Mary Elcho (1862-1937), aged 37.

They are pictured at their parents’ home in Belgrave Square, a wealthy and exclusive area of London. Their mother’s portrait by George Frederic Watts, hangs on the wall behind them, as they recline surrounded by magnolias, with the later afternoon sun glinting off the picture’s gilded frame and revealing the luxuriant white damask and green velvet furnishings of the room. The Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) referred to this elegant composition as “The Three Graces”.

All three women, together with their husbands and brothers, were key members of an elite social and intellectual group known as “The Souls”, who would meet at country house weekend parties and soirees in London to discuss art, books, ideas, and politics. They lived privileged and comfortable lives at the top of the social hierarchy, but this did not protect them from the devastation of World War I. Pamela lost two sons in the fighting, and Lady Elcho, lost a son at the Somme.

**14. John Singer Sargent, *Gassed*
1919, oil on canvas, 91” x 240”
Imperial War Museum, London**

This very large canvas was the result of Sargent’s engagement as a war artist by the British Ministry of Information in 1918. Sargent travelled to the Western Front in France, to Arras and Ypres. His task was to create a work that captured Anglo-American co-operation in the war, but he initially found it difficult to create a large-scale composition of a crowd scene that did not, as he put it, “look like going to the Derby (horse races)”.

On August 21, 1918, he witnessed the aftermath of a German mustard gas attack. He sketched groups of men making their way with bandaged eyes, guided by orderlies, to a dressing station for treatment. The dressing station is indicated in the painting only by the ropes of the tent, giving direction to the moving groups of men. The central group is made up of three groups of three men, assisted by two unharmed soldiers, one of whom is guiding them up a small step, a plank in the mud. In the background, a second similar group makes its way to the same destination. They are on a clear path, but surrounded by piles of bodies – dead, injured, or resting. One man in the right foreground looks up through binoculars above the viewer’s head, creating the uneasy feeling that danger is above the viewer too, not just in the painting. Barely perceptible planes, like flies, dogfight above, while in the background to the left, faint figures of soldiers play soccer. The whole painting is suffused with a pale golden light, the setting sun filtered through the clouds and smoke of the battlefield.

The painting was an immediate success. Winston Churchill praised its “brilliant genius and painful significance”, although E.M. Forster thought it “too heroic” in its relatively gentle allusion to the horrors of war. There is no one central character; none fully face the viewer. Any of these soldiers could be anyone’s husband, son, brother, or friend. Unlike *The Death of General Wolfe*, the plight of the ordinary soldier in war was fully acknowledged; unlike *3rd May 1808 in Madrid*, there was hope; hope that the soldiers could be treated and survive. The procession seems almost like a religious procession. It is reminiscent of the Parthenon frieze, while also being a moving witness to the terrible effects of chemical weapons, as captured in Wilfred Owens poem, “Dulce et Decorum Est.”

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! — An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

**15. Grant Wood, *American Gothic*
1930, oil on beaverboard, 30” x 24”
Art Institute of Chicago**

This simple picture is one of the most recognizable icons of American art. It depicts a humble cottage together with an imagined midwestern farmer and his daughter (not wife, as is often assumed), “the kind of people the artist fancied should live in that house”. The house is the Dibble House in Eldon, Iowa, built in 1881-2, for a couple and their eight children. It was originally three rooms and a bathroom downstairs, with two bedrooms upstairs. The gothic window was ordered from a sears catalogue. Grant Wood was visiting the area and, driving past, was struck by the absurdity of including this fanciful window, the style taken from European castles and cathedrals, in this humble home. He made a sketch of the house on the spot and finished the picture in his studio.

The fictional owners were posed by his dentist, Dr. Byron McKeeby, and Wood’s daughter, Nan Wood Graham. He dressed them in period costume – overalls, jacket and a pitchfork for the “farmer”, and a colonial print apron decorated with rickrack trim for his “daughter”. Nan Wood Graham made the apron herself, taking the trim from her mother’s old dresses, as it was no longer available in the 1930s. Her dress is black, and she wears a cameo portrait brooch at her white collar.

The triple vertical tracings of the Gothic window which inspired the picture are echoed in the three tines of the pitchfork, as well as the triple stripe pattern of the farmer’s shirt and even the pocket seams of his overalls. The curtains are drawn in the house, a mourning custom in Victorian America; one interpretation of the scene is that the farmer’s wife has recently died, hence the daughter’s black dress, the cameo brooch, often used to memorialize loved ones, and her glancing away, as if to hold back tears.

Some Iowans were upset at the unflattering depiction of the homeowners as being “pinched, grim-faced, puritanical bible-thumpers”. Wood responded both defensively “In general, I have found the people who resent the painting are those that feel that they themselves resemble the portrayal,” but also more flatteringly, claiming that he had portrayed the couple as “survivors, to pay homage to the strength of the rural community, and to provide reassurance in a time of great economic upset.”

Wood’s style was formed by the American movement known as Regionalism, which was particularly strong in the Midwest, in contrast to the European-inspired Abstraction which was popular on the East and West coasts. Wood made at least four trips to Europe to study art and claimed to have been particularly influenced by Van Eyck. Can you see any similarities between Wood’s *American Gothic* and Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Marriage*?

The Dibble House is now on the National Register of Historic Places, and over 15,000 visitors a year come to view the house from the outside and take photos dressed up as the characters.

**16. Salvador Dali, *The Persistence of Memory*
1931, oil on canvas, 9” x 13”
Museum of Modern Art, New York City**

As a young artist, Dali spent hours at the Prado Museum in Madrid, studying art. He was later influenced by the myriad styles of the Avant Garde Movement – Cubism, Dada, Futurist – and developed his own style known as Surrealism, depicting recognizable objects in distorted, unfamiliar, and impossible, dream-like compositions. By 1930, Dali was deliberately inducing psychotic hallucinations to inspire his art, which he called his “Paranoic-Critical Method”. His eccentric paintings were appealing. His style was an attack on objective reality, but unlike Cubism, he did not reduce reality into its component forms, but used reality as a jumping-off point to explore the subconscious. His paintings allow people to project their own interpretation on the scene.

The Persistence of Memory, often referred to as “Melting Clocks” is one of his most famous works. Attempts were made to explain it as a commentary on time and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, but Dali himself explained that it was a Surrealist perception of Camembert cheese melting in the sun. The ants on the orange clock may suggest decay, and the craggy rocks resemble the Cap de Creus Peninsula in Spain, which appears frequently in his works. The shadow of the fly on the large clock resembles a human figure, and the white object on the ground appears to have a single closed eye with several eyelashes.

He was an eccentric exhibitionist who frequently engaged in outrageous behavior, attracting comment and criticism as much as his art. He sported a thin waxed and curled moustache, and once asserted at a lecture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “The difference between a mad man and me is that I am not mad.”

He designed a Surrealist pavilion for the 1939 World’s Fair in New York, which has been called the first example of an art installation, or a “happening”. Visitors entered and watched through a glass wall as swimmers in a tank depicted a dream unfolding, pretending to play a piano shaped like a woman, type on a floating typewriter, and milk a cow wrapped in bandages. A statue of Venus, modelled after Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, stood over the entrance to the “Surrealist Funhouse”. Dali had intended that she should be made with the head of a fish, and that many of the models inside the exhibit should also wear fish heads. When the organizers vetoed this plan, Dali was furious and hired a plane to fly over Manhattan and drop copies of a semi coherent manifesto denouncing what he saw as hypocrites and philistines in the art world. It was called "Declaration of the Independence of the Imagination and the Rights of Man to His Own Madness."

However, Dali also had a more serious side; he painted several famous religious scenes, such as *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*, *Crucifixion: Corpus Hypercubus*, and *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* which combine dreamlike surrealism and mystical realism.

**17. Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*
1942, oil on canvas, 33” x 60”
Art Institute of Chicago**

Hopper was born in Nyack, NY, and trained as an artist in New York City, as well as spending time studying art in Paris. He experimented with using the lighter, brighter color palette of Impressionist artists, but then reverted to the darker tones he preferred working with. In Paris, he spent time drawing scenes of everyday life – cafes and street scenes, theaters and bars. Stylistically he preferred the representative styles of the Old Masters, such as Rembrandt and Goya, and does not seem to have shown much interest in more cutting-edge styles such as Cubism or Abstraction. On returning to New York, he took up illustration to support himself, working in etchings and watercolors – anything that was easy to sell. His favorite subject matter was the everyday scenes of American life. He was sometimes compared to Norman Rockwell, but he indignantly rejected the comparison, arguing that he was “more subtle, less illustrative, and certainly not sentimental.”

Night Hawks (as it was originally entitled) was inspired by an Ernest Hemmingway story (both “The Killers” and “A Clean Well-Lighted Place” have been identified as the inspiration). Hopper later asserted that, “unconsciously, probably, I was painting the loneliness of a large city”. Hopper himself posed, using a mirror, as the two customers; his wife posed for the female figure. The work resonated with viewers and achieved iconic status.

In the 1970s, the artist Gottfried Heinwein recreated the scene as *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams*, inserting Hollywood stars Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Elvis Presly, and Humphrey Bogart into the scene in place of Hopper’s anonymous figures. The scene has since been immortalized in the movie “Night at the Museum”, the television series “The Simpsons”, and numerous parodies have been created, inserting characters such as those from Peanuts, Tintin, and Santa with his reindeer. It is probably now one of the most recognizable of American paintings.

**18. Mark Rothko, *Number 14*
1960, oil on canvas, 114” x 105”
Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco**

Rothko was born Markus Yakovlevich Rothkowitz in Latvia. He moved with his family to the United States, coming through Ellis Island in 1913, and moving to Portland, Oregon. He was a good student and won a scholarship to Yale, but left without finishing his degree and came to New York at the age of 20 to pursue art.

His works can be divided into three distinct stages. In the early years he painted urban scenes, representational art influenced by Impressionism. In his middle years, from 1940-1950, his work became more abstract, although it still included representational features, often of mythological references. By his mature period, from 1951-1970, his canvasses were large rectangular bands of color, carefully calibrated to induce specific emotional effects. He called this Color Field painting and explained that he was evoking “the sublime”. His interest was “only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on. And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate these basic human emotions . . . The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if, as you say, you are moved only by their color relationship, then you miss the point”. The colors are not only pleasing effects; they are asserted to contain deep emotional significance.

Rothko was scathing of other current fashions and trends in art, calling Pop Artists such as Andy Warhol, “charlatans and young opportunists,” and wondered aloud during a 1962 exhibition of pop art, “Are the young artists plotting to kill us all?” Rothko himself, in contrast, was utterly sincere and serious about his artistic endeavors.

Fourteen of his large-scale canvases, all in varying hues and textures of black, hang on the walls of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. This chapel opened in 1971, and was intended as the world's first ecumenical chapel, “a holy place open to all religions and belonging to none.”