

High Museum of Art

*Cross Country:
The Power of Place in American Art 1915—1950*

An Acoustiguide Tour

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STOP LIST

100. Introduction at wall mural of Dorothea Lange, *Highway to the West*
101. Lamar Baker, *Sinner What You Gonna Do?*
102. Hale Woodruff, *Opening Day at Talladega College*
103. Thomas Hart Benton, *Tobacco Sorters*
104. William Edmondson, *Nurse*
105. Walker Evans, *Roadside Stand, near Birmingham*
106. Charles Henry Alston, *Farm Boy*
107. Andrew Wyeth, *Black Hunter*
108. Charles Sheeler, *Staircase, Doylestown*
109. John Kane, *Turtle Creek Valley*
110. Gordon Parks, *Ella Watson, American Gothic, Washington, D.C.*
111. Arthur Dove, *Below the Flood Gates-Huntington Harbor*
112. Charles Ephraim Burchfield, *Thunderstorm Entering a Wood*
113. Grandma Moses, *Bringing in the Maple Sugar*
114. Georgia O'Keefe, *Lake George – Autumn*
115. Edward Weston, *Sand Dunes, Oceano*
116. Callahan, *Weed Against Sky, Detroit*
117. Grant Wood, *Appraisal*
118. Emil Bisttram, *Church at Ranchos II*
119. Marsden Hartley, *New Mexico Landscape*
120. Josephine Joy, *Aloes*
121. Ansel Adams, *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*
122. Maynard Dixon, *Red Butte with Mountain Men*
123. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*

100. INTRODUCTION AT WALL MURAL OF DOROTHEA LANGE, HIGHWAY TO THE WEST

RAND SUFFOLK:

Welcome to *Cross Country: The Power of Place in American Art*. I'm Rand Suffolk, Nancy and Holcombe T. Green, Jr., Director of the High Museum of Art.

Today, we'll explore the work of American artists who drew inspiration from their surroundings, especially outside the city. Some lived in the country; some turned to it as a place of retreat; and some traveled across it, funded by government grants and fellowships.

In many cases, these artists were seeking a new vocabulary of art. Rather than imitating the European tradition, they wanted to create an original American point of view. They discovered it in the place itself.

These artists communicated a distinctly American vision and experience through a diversity of subjects: bringing in the maple sugar through a flurry of snow at twilight ... trekking across the blazing heat of a red rock desert at high noon ... bargaining over a chicken ... or, as we see here, travelling across an open stretch of Highway 54 in New Mexico, as captured by Dorothea Lange during the Great Depression

The exhibition, organized by geographic region, begins either in the South, to your right, or the West, to your left. Three curatorial departments collaborated to bring you the work of trained painters as well as that of photographers and self-taught artists, who gained recognition for the first time during this period.

Sharing their insights on this tour are Stephanie Heydt, Margaret and Terry Stent Curator of American Art; Gregory Harris, Assistant Curator of Photography; and Katherine Jentleson, Merrie and Dan Boone Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art.

As you explore the over 200 works of art in this exhibition, we invite you to consider how America's landscapes shaped these artists – and inspired them to discover new artistic forms. Come visit again and bring a friend or family member. In this tremendous and diverse body of work, there is always something new to see.

This exhibition was organized by Brandywine River Museum of Art in collaboration with the High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Generous support for the exhibition's presentation in Atlanta is provided by Sarah and Jim Kennedy.

411. User Instructions – PICK ONE FROM BELOW**OPUS TOUCH****NARRATOR:**

Look for the audio tour icon and a number by selected works. Enter that number on your keypad, then press the green “play/pause” button. If you make a mistake, press the red ‘stop’ button.

You can pause the commentary by pressing the green Play/Pause button. Press that button again to resume. The volume control is on the left side of the player.

To fast forward or rewind within the commentary, press the left or right arrow buttons at the bottom of the screen.

To enter a new commentary number, press the red stop button. This will return you to the entry screen.

101. LAMAR BAKER, *SINNER WHAT YOU GONNA DO?*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

I'm Stephanie Heydt, the Margaret and Terry Stent Curator of American Art at the High. In 1943, the Atlanta-born artist Lamar Baker made this work – an image of apocalypse.

STEPHANIE HEYDT (INT 1):

It's a really expressive, terrifying – but somehow also embracing – work. You see this hellfire in the distance. It's burning, it's billowing smoke. You realize that nobody has been left out from God's wrath here. You have both the wealthy and the poor, fleeing from the plantation home as well as the sharecropper's shack next door. And we can see on top of the hill, the preacher, who's standing with the blasted tree behind him; he's got two sinners with him that we can only hope he's about to save.

But my favorite part of the picture are these two angels flying in from the right. They're equipped with fireman's gear. He's giving us a little bit of a humorous outlet to hang onto.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

The only building in the scene untouched by fire is the church.

Baker had traveled throughout rural Georgia, living as a white artist among African-American sharecroppers. He attended church in communities across the state and the spirituals inspired his art. The African-American poet Jean Toomer described what it was like to be in one of those churches:

MALE ACTOR:

“They sang. And this was the first time I'd ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful.”

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Baker's image here is based on the spiritual, “Sinner What You Gonna Do When the World's on Fire?”

STEPHANIE HEYDT (INT 1):

The song is really hypnotic. You hear that phrase repeated again and again, such that you start imagining, what *would* you do if the world is on fire? It's meant to probe and question your place in this world.

SFX MUSIC “Sinner What You Gonna Do When the World's on Fire”

102. HALE WOODRUFF, *OPENING DAY AT TALLADEGA COLLEGE*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

The setting here is Talladega, Alabama in 1867, just two years following the end of the Civil War. It's registration day at Talladega College – one of the first in the nation to open to African Americans. This painting is one of six murals the college commissioned in 1942 from artist Hale Woodruff.

At the center, William Savery, the founder, gestures toward the college's first and at that time only building – Swayne Hall. It was a structure he himself had worked to build while enslaved.

STEPHANIE HEYDT (INT 1):

This is a tremendous painting, just chockablock full of really amazing details. We've got a lot of activity, folks gathered around, to register for the first day of school. They've brought with them all manner of payment in exchange for tuition. So we see farm animals and sacks of grain, bushels of fruit. Even a pig trying to escape from the crate.

Hale Woodruff is really impressing upon us the unique moment here that we're watching, of students who had grown up in slavery and now, at the conclusion of the Civil War, are entering into universities and becoming educated. And in the far-right corner, two young men are seated with books in their hands, ready to get started with their studies.

Another really moving detail is right above them, you can see a man walking out of the picture frame, and he's got on his shoulder a bundle of sugarcane, one of the main crops as part of the slave industry internationally. And he's very distinctly carrying that off campus, away from the activity.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

This picture of a specific time from 1867 encouraged students who would be looking at it in 1942, and in 2017 to think about the particular place where they're standing, and the deep history that is linked to this place.

103. THOMAS HART BENTON, *TOBACCO SORTERS*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

This painting and the photograph next to it focus on farming life in the South – and both were made on commission. Thomas Hart Benton painted ‘Tobacco Sorters’ as part of an ad campaign for Lucky Strike cigarettes.

STEPHANIE HEYDT (INT 1):

Here we have a grandfather and he’s showing a young girl how to sort tobacco: find the quality in each leaf and rank it according to the grades. We can see behind them there’s a curing barn, and there are men and women gathered around it, and you get a sense that the whole family is involved in this process.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Photographer Walker Evans was working on an article for Fortune magazine with writer James Agee when he made the portrait of tenant farmer Allie Mae Burroughs. Curator Gregory Harris.

GREGORY HARRIS:

[00:01:17] Evans spent about four weeks in August of 1936 living with the Burroughs family in their cabin in Alabama. Evans photographed Burroughs in front of the side of the house, you can see the rough grain of the wood. He [00:02:29] likely shot this with a large format camera, which helps compress the space a little bit. So Burroughs seems like she’s contained very tightly within this frame. There’s no real depth to the picture. Everything is right there in the foreground.

[00:02:00] Her lips are slightly pursed, her brow is furrowed. She seems rather weary. But she’s still confronting the camera with this very direct gaze, looking right back at Evans as he’s looking at her.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Both works were ultimately turned down by the companies that commissioned them.

Though Benton’s painting is a sweet image to our eyes, in the 1940s – coming out of the Depression – it might have been the farmer’s thin, worn face that viewers remembered. Lucky Strike also worried that the small girl in Benton’s painting would convince consumers that tobacco led to stunted growth.

Evans’ photographs – along with Agee’s article – didn’t make the cut.

GREGORY HARRIS:

The project was rejected by *Fortune*, presumably because *Fortune*’s wealthy readers were not particularly interested in hearing about the lives of the downtrodden.

[00:06:09] Evans and Agee continued to work on the project. And the book [Let Us Now Praise Famous Men] was eventually published in 1941. [00:06:23] it was reissued

in 1960 and has since become an iconic piece of American documentary literature and photography.

104. WILLIAM EDMONDSON, *NURSE*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Sculptor William Edmondson began carving in order to create tombstones for members of his community in Nashville, Tennessee. He later became the first African American and the first self-taught artist to have a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art. Curator Katherine Jentleson.

KATHERINE JENTLESON:

Edmondson, before he was a tombstone carver, worked in a hospital, and the nurses that he worked with were dear friends of his who even after he no longer worked there came to visit him in his house. And so this is a portrait of one of those women.

His faces often have this really remarkable mystery to them. The eyes, and the finely-detailed nose, and the kind of little tiny line of a mouth – somebody who’s not speaking and almost has a secret they’re keeping. It’s part of what I think is so entrancing about the human subjects that Edmondson created.

One thing that’s really remarkable about the work is how from a distance it appears so smooth, And then as you get closer to it, you can see all of the scores of the artist’s chisel. And Edmondson was using actually just a railroad spike to carve his sculpture.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

The chunks of limestone he used were salvaged from demolished buildings. He would often preserve the original dimensions of the slab.

KATHERINE JENTLESON:

They always have a pedestal that they’re attached to, that represents the original limestone block from which they came. And in that way, a direct link to his neighborhood in Nashville where he was working.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Edmondson displayed his sculptures in the yard around his house.

KATHERINE JENTLESON:

So the nurse that we see here was once a part of this incredible [menagerie of hundreds of sculptures.]

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

The yard became a site of pilgrimage for other artists – like Edward Weston, who captured Edmondson and his yard in a photograph displayed nearby.

105. WALKER EVANS, *ROADSIDE STAND, NEAR BIRMINGHAM*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Walker Evans photographed this roadside stand in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1936. He was working for the Farm Security Administration, or FSA, a government organization that hired photographers to document the challenges rural communities experienced during the Great Depression. For Evans, the task inspired one of the most productive years of his career. Curator Gregory Harris.

GREGORY HARRIS:

It was during this time that Evans really developed his signature way of photographing things. He was known for this direct, seemingly objective way of composing his pictures. So you see that this wooden building, he's framed it dead on. Everything is squared off and straight and very rational. Whereas another photographer might have photographed it from down below or off to an angle, giving it a more dramatic composition, Evans has photographed it very flat, very direct. So it renders the subject in a presumably accurate way.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

He also focuses on the signage in the scene: the hand-painted fish, the careful lettering.

GREGORY HARRIS:

It was a theme that he came back to throughout his career. When he died, he had a huge collection of signs that he picked up along roadsides.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Despite the fact that he was working for a government agency with a social mission, Evans declared of his work:

MALE ACTOR:

“This is pure record not propaganda. The value ... for the government lies in the record itself, which in the long run will prove an intelligent and farsighted thing to have done.”

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Yet Evans also shaped what he saw – every choice he made was deliberate.

GREGORY HARRIS:

He called his method of photographing a lyrical documentary.

106. CHARLES HENRY ALSTON, *FARM BOY***STEPHANIE HEYDT (INT 1):**

Charles Alston was an artist based in Harlem, New York, but his roots were in the South. And he was interested in traveling there to paint a series of works that sought to push back against images that he felt dehumanized African-Americans.

In 1941, he receives a grant from the Rosenwald Foundation to travel to the South and to really seek out subjects in the rural communities. He was not trying to idealize their experience. He wasn't sugarcoating any of his representations. But rather, giving his subjects a gravitas and an identity.

So here we see an earnest young man; and he sits on a porch of a rundown house; it's probably a sharecropper's home. He's also preparing to head out into the field, [you can see] the rake or the tool that is loosely gripped in his left hand.

Alston has taken on a bit of a tough subject, because you see the youth in this boy. He's just barely become a young man. He's still a child in many ways, and yet you also see the long stare in his eyes, and it gives you a sense [01:00:40] that he has had a difficult life. He has probably seen hard labor. He's probably seen hunger and poverty. And Alston is shining a light on this. And hoping that other people pay attention to the realities of life in the rural South.

107. ANDREW WYETH, *BLACK HUNTER*

STEPHANIE HEYDT (INT 1):

We're looking here at Andrew Wyeth's 'Black Hunter' from 1938.

This is really a startling image, I find. The subject is directly confronting the viewer, but it's not an aggressive confrontation; it's just a gaze. And you get the sense that the subject actually has a relationship with the person that he's gazing at – the artist. And in fact, this is true. The subject here is David Lawrence and he was a childhood friend of Andrew Wyeth's. David [is] standing here in the landscape that the two of them would have wandered about together as children.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

They grew up in Chadds Ford, about an hour west of Philadelphia.

It's fall – hunting season. Wyeth once said:

MALE ACTOR:

"I prefer winter and fall, when you can feel the bone structure of the landscape. Something waits beneath it; the whole story doesn't show."

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

A few buildings dot the landscape, including – just over David's shoulder – Mother Archie's Church, the hub of the African American community in Chadds Ford.

STEPHANIE HEYDT (INT 1):

What's interesting is that same church is also depicted in the painting nearby called the 'Road Cut.'

The 'Road Cut' shows essentially the same scene, except he's moved to the road, rather than positioned himself in the fields. And you can see that it's also roughly the same time of year.

And I love that he comes back to this place again and again, and depicts it from a variety of viewpoints. And in this case, he adds in this individual who was so important to him as a child.

108. CHARLES SHEELER, *STAIRCASE, DOYLESTOWN*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

In this painting and the photograph of a stairwell nearby, Charles Sheeler builds a complex dialogue across different artistic media – and across history.

STEPHANIE HEYDT (INT 1):

Sheeler's not only a painter, but also a photographer, and he uses each of these practices to inform the other.

The photograph was taken in a historic home in Williamsburg, and you get the sense that he's really interested in light and dark, in transitions. And also the geometry of space.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

The painting is part of an investigation that lasted years.

STEPHANIE HEYDT (INT 1):

In 1910, Sheeler rents an 18th century farmhouse in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, with his good friend, also an artist, Morton Schamberg. And the two of them spend a number of years using this house as a subject for many of their paintings.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

His subject here is the elaborate twist of a so-called 'winder' staircase, common to old homes built in the Pennsylvania Dutch community.

STEPHANIE HEYDT (INT 1):

He's thinking about the physical space that this staircase creates and its abstract qualities. He's celebrating in a sense what he sees in it that is modern. We've got this idea of static motion, in a way. And again, he's not standing back and getting the whole staircase structure, but rather he's cropping it, and he's angling our experience of this in a very deliberate and almost photographic way.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

He said of the work:

MALE ACTOR:

"I meant it to be a study in movement and balances."

You don't really expect to see a picture of an interior in an exhibition about place. But Sheeler's investigation of the house and its contents over the course of years is really extraordinary.

109. JOHN KANE, *TURTLE CREEK VALLEY*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

In this painting, self-taught artist John Kane captures a view of Pittsburgh in the early '30s. Kane was a house and boxcar painter who also worked in the steel, coal and railroad industries. He rose to fame in the late 1920s after his work was admitted to the Carnegie International, the nation's most prestigious exhibition of contemporary art. Curator Katherine Jentleson.

KATHERINE JENTLESON:

If you've never been to Pittsburgh, and you look at a Kane painting, it just doesn't seem possible (Chuckles) that a landscape can look that way. But that is Pittsburgh. It's a city that lies at the junction of three rivers, that was very industrialized at the turn of the century, and has incredible bridges cutting across its rivers. And then this incredible green landscape that somehow rises above it all.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Kane includes the particular details and textures of the city.

KATHERINE JENTLESON:

He was so proud [of every boxcar,] of every cobblestone, that he had a hand in painting or laying, that he included that kind of detail in his painting.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

He once said of the city:

MALE ACTOR:

"I have been asked why I am particularly interested in painting Pittsburgh, her mills with their plumes of smoke, her high hills and deep valleys and winding rivers. Because I find beauty everywhere in Pittsburgh. It is the beauty of the past which the present has not touched."

KATHERINE JENTLESON:] I just think what's amazing is the degree to which Kane really conveys the spirit of the place. The industry of the place. And the way that it combines all of these natural and manmade forces into one really very unlikely landscape.

110. GORDON PARKS, *ELLA WATSON, AMERICAN GOTHIC, WASHINGTON, D.C.*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

The African American photographer Gordon Parks made this, one of his most famous images, early in his career. The subject is an ordinary woman named Ella Watson. Curator Gregory Harris.

GREGORY HARRIS:

She is standing centered, fairly resolute, in the frame. Parks was clearly interested in the various textures, so the different fibers in the broom, the folds of her dress, the delicacy of her hair. The American flag in the background is slightly out of focus and yet, it's such an iconic image that it's clearly recognizable, and carries a lot of weight in the picture. It's almost looming over Watson.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Parks took the photograph in Washington D.C. He had traveled to the capitol on a fellowship, hoping to challenge media stereotypes by capturing images of middle and upper class African Americans. Upon his arrival, he met with his sponsor: Roy Stryker, an administrator at the Farm Security Administration, or FSA.

GREGORY HARRIS:

Roy Stryker asked him to spend a little time getting to know the city – to go out and try to have a meal, to go to a store – so that he could really get a sense of what it was like to be black in Washington at that time. And after just a couple hours of roaming around the city, Parks had been denied service at many different places, and went back to the FSA offices and was outraged at the treatment that African Americans received on a daily basis throughout Washington. So, Stryker encouraged him to channel that and to make pictures that would reflect that outrage; to really use his photographs as a weapon of social change.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Parks encountered Ella Watson in the FSA building, where she worked as a custodian.

GREGORY HARRIS:

[00:14:14] This was the very first picture that he made of Watson ... and brought it back to Stryker, and Stryker told him that it was a very clear indictment of American society at the time.

Parks went on to become the first African American staff photographer for *Life* magazine.

111. ARTHUR DOVE, *BELOW THE FLOOD GATES—HUNTINGTON HARBOR*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

We're looking here at 'Below the Floodgates – Huntington Harbor' by Arthur Dove.

STEPHANIE HEYDT :

In this picture, I love the rolling, sinuous lines. Dove really encourages you to imagine the chaos and the motion of water rushing from the floodgates. And this rendering is so visceral, you can almost hear it. It's not really a traditional landscape, as we would consider it, but rather he seems to be translating an audible experience of hearing the intense rumbling of a wave as it crashes in upon itself.

And you almost can't distinguish between where the water ends and where the land begins. And even the horizon line is pulled into this cacophony of water and rushing energy –it really does overwhelm you.

He focuses often on how the experience of nature provokes something inside of us as a visual or physical or even an emotional response.

Dove's interest in natural phenomena was not only just as an observer, but also as someone who worked the land, and lived close to it. He sought refuge from the urban lifestyle, and he became a farmer in Connecticut. And then around 1924, he moved onto a houseboat in Huntington Harbor, which was off Long Island, with his wife, who was also a painter, Helen Torr.

112. CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD, *THUNDERSTORM ENTERING A WOOD*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Charles Burchfield felt – and these are his words – ‘We should feel humbled by nature and learn from it.’

STEPHANIE HEYDT :

There's something really particular, I think, about experiencing a storm. It's like a sudden realization that the sky is darkening and the air feels thicker, and the wind starts picking up. And it's this energy and this mood of anticipation that I think Burchfield is showing us in this picture.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Artists working in other media have also responded to the experience of a thunderstorm. Poet Jean Toomer’s meditation on the subject uncannily evokes Burchfield’s painting.

MALE ACTOR:

Thunder Blossoms gorgeously above our heads,
Great, hollow, bell-like flowers,
Rumbling in the wind,
Stretching clappers to strike our ears . . .
Full lipped flowers
Bitten by the sun
Bleeding rain
Dripping rain like golden honey—
And the sweet earth flying from the thunder.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Toomer’s words remind us of the universality of certain experiences in nature.

STEPHANIE HEYDT :

Burchfield’s chosen medium was watercolor, and I find it a perfect choice for this subject. He had to work quickly, and you can see the energy in the strokes. And then there's this frenetic layer of white crayon that Burchfield adds to the edges of some of the trees, as if to emphasize the flash of intense light that comes down along with the shock of lightning.

And then there's this charming detail in the foreground. There's a cluster of pink flowers. I love the symbol of this little patch of beauty in this really dramatic, dark storm. Once the storm passes, these flowers will not only still be there, but they'll be renewed and refreshed from the rain that's just fallen on them.

113. GRANDMA MOSES, *BRINGING IN THE MAPLE SUGAR*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Grandma Moses was a self-taught artist who rose to fame in her 80s. She lived most of her life in Eagle Bridge, NY, across the border from Vermont, and in this painting, she stages a quintessential northeastern ritual.

Curator Katherine Jentleson.

KATHERINE JENTLESON:

This is a scene called ‘Bringing in the Maple Sugar.’

There's of course a gorgeous landscape, this snow-covered valley with a forest of coniferous green trees in the background, and then these beautiful tall maple trees with their elegant bare branches cascading up into a twilight sky.

But what really is very prominent are the figures. It's this scene of incredible industry.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

The figures retrieve buckets full of sap at the tree spouts and drive sleighs loaded with firewood to the sugar shack. Meanwhile children skip and slide between the trees.

KATHERINE JENTLESON:

[Grandma Moses] was born in 1860 and she had firsthand experience with all kinds of agrarian practices and rituals like this.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

She painted this work in 1939, but there's no sign of modern farm equipment.

KATHERINE JENTLESON:

She often did exclude the trappings of modern society, things like telephone poles and cars and railroads, to really focus on the rituals of the past.

Her paintings were reproduced many times over as greeting cards and fabric and decorative plates; all kinds of different things that people relished and loved having in their homes, because of this comforting image of America that they provided.

114. GEORGIA O'KEEFFE, LAKE GEORGE – AUTUMN

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

This painting and the photographs of clouds nearby were made at the same place: Lake George in the Adirondack mountains. The artists – painter Georgia O'Keeffe and photographer Alfred Stieglitz – were in love with each other ... and the lake. You can sense their shared passion in one of O'Keeffe's letters:

FEMALE ACTOR:

“I wish you could see the place here. There is something so perfect about the mountains and the lakes and the trees—sometimes I want to tear it all to pieces—it seems so perfect.”

STEPHANIE HEYDT :

Lake George becomes a special retreat for Stieglitz and O'Keeffe, and they would often arrive in the spring and stay there until the leaves had fallen in November.

In this picture, O'Keeffe captures a stunning display of autumnal colors. She pares down the scene to its most essential elements; land, water, sky and color. You can almost imagine O'Keeffe soaking in the view, breathing in this cool mountain air. [And you can sense how moved she is by this landscape.]

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Meanwhile, Stieglitz was immersed in making studies of clouds, which he came to call his *Equivalents Series*. Curator Gregory Harris.

GREGORY HARRIS:

Stieglitz said that the *Equivalents* were the culmination of everything that he'd learned about photography; that a photograph was more than just a picture of a subject. The visual forms found in the photograph – the line, the shape, the tonality – could express deep emotion that paralleled the artist's own inner state and ideas.

The *Equivalents Series* really marked a creative breakthrough for Stieglitz, and that happened at Lake George. And so the connection to that place was really important to Stieglitz's evolution as an artist.

STEPHANIE HEYDT :

Lake George was a place of transformation. [00:26:19] This is where we start seeing [O'Keeffe] delve into abstraction – [00:21:06] and flowers really become the essential subjects for her during these Lake George visits.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Nearby you can see a photograph of O'Keeffe at Lake George, taken by Stieglitz. O'Keeffe looks stoic, almost epic, wrapped in a black cape. Behind her, you see the glimmer of the lake.

115. EDWARD WESTON, *SAND DUNES, OCEANO***STEPHANIE HEYDT:**

In these three photographs, Edward Weston delves into the formal possibilities of the landscape at locations around California. Curator Gregory Harris.

GREGORY HARRIS:

Edward Weston was the first photographer to receive a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation, and this allowed him to leave his day job as a portrait photographer to explore his deep emotional connection to the landscape of California and the West.

In this particular image of the Sand Dunes , Weston is really interested in the shape and the texture of the scene. The deep shadows and the contrasting highlights that pop up as the sand dunes recede off into the distance. He's placed the horizon line very high in the frame, almost to the point where it's not even in the frame, which is a somewhat unusual choice for a landscape photograph.

Despite the precision of the image – it's very sharp, very highly-focused – it moves into fairly deep abstraction. And because of the way he's framed the picture, you lose almost all sense of scale. This could be a pile of sand that's held in the palm of someone's hand or it could be a vast open space.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Weston returned to the same locations many times, yet felt continually inspired by what he saw. He once wrote of Point Lobos, a natural reserve on the ocean in Northern California:

MALE ACTOR:

"Point Lobos! I saw it with different eyes yesterday than those of nearly fifteen years ago. And I worked, how I worked! And I have results! And I shall go again, and again!"

116. HARRY CALLAHAN, *WEED AGAINST SKY, DETROIT***GREGORY HARRIS:**

Harry Callahan – who was largely a self-taught photographer – is considered one of the most important innovators in modern photography.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

He was born in Detroit and moved to Chicago in the 1940s. Every morning, he would go out into the city, looking for different things to photograph. Curator Gregory Harris.

GREGORY HARRIS:

Despite the fact that Callahan lived in one of the largest cities in the country, he was still able to focus on natural forms that he could find throughout the city. [He] was often interested in these overlooked elements of the natural world and even of urban spaces.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Here, he's photographing a weed, silhouetted against an empty sky.

GREGORY HARRIS:

Because Callahan had really no formal training as a photographer, he often experimented with different ways of making pictures. So, in this instance, he's playing a great deal with the contrast and printing the image in a very delicate way [00:51:59] such that all of the details are stripped out of the picture. It's reduced to pure black and white and three intersecting lines. The form evokes a drawing or a formal nude in some ways. It's a really beautiful picture that has come to be known as one of Callahan's most important images.

117. GRANT WOOD, *APPRAISAL*

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Grant Wood has a great way of turning seemingly straightforward scenes of everyday life into complex and layered exchanges.

The two women are from very different worlds, and they're coming together here over a chicken. You can see that there's a little bargaining going on here, but there's no doubt who has the upper hand. Perhaps an offer has been made – but you know, this is a beautiful chicken! (Laughs) The city woman seems to be looking down at the chicken, and she knows she can't say no. She knows she's going to pay whatever is asked and you can see that acknowledgement in the farmwoman's eyes. And she's got this great slight smile as well that confirms it.

Wood painted 'Appraisal' right around the time that he returned from Europe, where he'd been really trying to determine what kind of painter he wanted to be. But when he came back home to Iowa, it was not the impression of Europe that lingered with him; but rather, now with fresh eyes, home became an inspiration.

MALE ACTOR:

"I spent twenty years wandering around the world hunting 'arty' subjects to paint. I came back . . . and the first thing I noticed was the cross stitched embroidery of my mother's kitchen apron."

STEPHANIE HEYDT :

The patterns we see throughout the painting's composition become a trademark for Wood. So if you look behind the women, for example, you'll see orderly rows of crops that take on the appearance of a quilt pattern, and Even the feathering on the chicken becomes an extraordinary thing here. It's fancier, I think, than even the city woman's beaded purse.

Wood is telling us here that there's something worth paying attention to in the ordinary, and perhaps that we just have to make sure that we're looking closely to see it.

118. EMIL BISSTRAM, *CHURCH AT RANCHOS II*

STEPHANIE HEYDT :

We're looking here at possibly one of the most pictured buildings in the Southwest. It's the 18th century adobe mission church of San Francisco de Assisi. It was in the village of Rancho (sic) de Taos, which is situated in Northern New Mexico. I find it to be a really very beautiful, but humble building. [00:47:00] It's built of mud and brick and straw that blends traditional building methods from the region's Pueblo Indians with the Spanish Missionary architectural styles.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Despite its remote location, it attracted many 20th century artists. Here, Emil Bisstram paints a frontal view of the church; nearby, Ansel Adams photographs the back of it.

STEPHANIE HEYDT :

Bisstram here is showing us the symmetry of the façade, which is very much like any church you would see in Europe. But then behind the church, you have this unusual buttressing that you wouldn't have seen in other parts of the world. It's very specific to adobe architecture, the mounds that's pressing up against the apse in the background.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

You can get a better look in the Ansel Adams photograph.

STEPHANIE HEYDT :

Adams photographed this site over the course of about 25 to 30 years. He muses on the formal properties of its architecture. And it intrigued him. And he thought that even though it was not an especially large building, that it appeared immense. He said...

MALE ACTOR:

It was altogether an outcropping of the earth, rather than merely an object constructed upon it.

STEPHANIE HEYDT :

And as a subject, it expressed something distinctly and uniquely American.

119. MARSDEN HARTLEY, *NEW MEXICO LANDSCAPE***STEPHANIE HEYDT :**

Marsden Hartley was a restless artist, and he was in constant motion, it seems. He moved from place to place. And was experimenting constantly.

When you get up close to this painting, you notice that the mountain and the canyon are really comprised of a collection of these bold, forceful strokes of color. You see greens and yellows and reds. And this chaos of color comes together, to form this really beautiful landscape. I especially love the clouds in the background. They're really amazing. They're these ellipses, and they seem themselves to be suggesting movement.

What I find really curious about this painting is that it's quite likely that he painted it after he had left New Mexico. He was only there for 18 months, in 1918 and 1919, but when he comes back to New York – and even when he goes to Europe in the 1920s – he continues to paint subjects and themes related to his time in New Mexico.

He's finding, or he's expressing here, the need for American artists to really turn to American subjects, to turn to things that are distinct and unique about where they live. The place. And he describes his time [in New Mexico] as 'an American discovering America.'

120. JOSEPHINE JOY, *ALOES***STEPHANIE HEYDT:**

This painting of an aloe plant and the nearby photograph of a magnolia blossom show two women artists reacting to natural forms in California. Curator Katherine Jentleson.

KATHERINE JENTLESON:

Their depictions of botanical life here are stunningly similar in the way that they really deconstruct their objects, turning an aloe plant and a magnolia blossom into something that's unfamiliar.

Josephine Joy was one of the only women self-taught artists to get recognition in this era. And this is an extreme close-up of an aloe plant. It really vibrates with warm tones of gold, orange, crimson. And she turned it into almost a two-dimensional object, so that it's pressed right up against the desert landscape behind and the sky above.

It's also got a surreal quality to it. The way that the fronds of the aloe plant look almost like tongues, or serpents, And then, you have this incursion of this harsh wire fence. The aloe plant seems to be rising above it and against it in this almost monstrous way. It's really a strange juxtapositioning of the manmade and the natural.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

The work communicates a direct encounter with nature. Joy once reflected:

FEMALE ACTOR:

"I love to paint in the open sitting in some beautiful garden, hillside or remote place."

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Like Josephine Joy, photographer Imogen Cunningham gained recognition in a field that was almost completely male-dominated. She was a member of f/64, a group of photographers based around San Francisco that included Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. Curator Gregory Harris.

GREGORY HARRIS:

Cunningham was one of the few women in the group and she was a major force within that group. Cunningham had three small children at home at the time, and so she would often photograph things that could be found close to home, either within her house or in her backyard and her flower garden.

This image of a magnolia blossom is one of her most well-known photographs. She's zoomed in very, very close, filled the entire frame with the petals and then focused particularly on that pineapple-like form that's at the middle of the frame.

[01:07:29] California in the natural world and the organic beauty of these natural forms.

121. ANSEL ADAMS, *MOONRISE, HERNANDEZ, NEW MEXICO***STEPHANIE HEYDT:**

On his trip cross-country to photograph the national parks, Ansel Adams recorded:

MALE ACTOR:

"The next morning all was diamond bright and clear ... and I fell quickly under the spell of the astonishing New Mexican light."

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Curator Gregory Harris.

GREGORY HARRIS:

Ansel Adams was really known as the quintessential landscape photographer and a hallmark of his work was his ability to capture not only the specific drama of a place but also to do so with the most immaculate and evocative lighting. This picture, 'Moonrise Hernandez', is one of his most well-known images.

Adams was driving south along a highway and he spotted the reflection of the setting sun bouncing off these white grave markers in this small town in New Mexico. He pulled over and set up his camera and was able to capture this brilliant image with the sun illuminating the foreground as the moon rises up into this deep, black sky.

It's a fairly daunting image for me, particularly knowing that it was made just as World War II was beginning. The looming dark sky over this small town ... the town is swallowed up by the landscape here.

Adams had to leave the lens open longer to capture all the light so that it would register on the film. And with that long exposure that was likely several seconds in length, if not more, the clouds in the background – which have this very silky smooth, wispy texture – were likely moving through the sky as he was making the picture. So where everything else is crisp and sharp, the clouds have an even more soft and delicate feel that sweeps through the background.

122. MAYNARD DIXON, *RED BUTTE WITH MOUNTAIN MEN*

STEPHANIE HEYDT :

Maynard Dixon is from California. He's one of the few artists in the 20th century who really gained acclaim who was actually born and worked out West. In 1915, Dixon filled out a biographical card that's on file at the California State Library, and it asks: Where did you study? And Dixon's response was: In the open.

'Red Butte with Mountain Men' is really the perfect scale and size for these monumental landscapes of the Southwest.

We've got vibrant reds and oranges of the mesa and the deep blue of the sky. And then when you take a second look, you notice that silhouetted against the rocky outcroppings in the foreground, we see a group of figures. A trail of men on horseback, and they're herding animals.

This is a representation of Kit Carson, who was a famous frontiersman from the 19th century. He was based in Taos, New Mexico. And he led expeditions across the West with his mountain men.

So Dixon here, he's included the human figure in a way to demonstrate the monumentality of nature. We're engulfed by this painting. And it's really quite an amazing work. You want to linger in front of it.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

The transcendent quality of nature also strikes us: this same butte has stood her for millennia, and will remain standing long after we are gone.

The painting was actually made on commission for a restaurant: the Kit Carson Cafe, a popular cocktail spot in San Francisco's theater district.

In an interview with a local newspaper in 1935, Dixon concluded:

MALE ACTOR:

"Work which grows out of your own direct responses to nature and the world around you... will be genuine."

123. DOROTHEA LANGE, *MIGRANT MOTHER*, NIPOMO, CALIFORNIA

GREGORY HARRIS:

“Migrant Mother” is probably the most well-known image in the history of photography. It’s come to symbolize the Great Depression of the 1930s in America.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Taken in 1936 by Dorothea Lange, the image was distributed nationally as evidence of the plight of migrant workers – many of whom had abandoned their homes in the Midwest, only to find equally challenging conditions in California. Lange made the picture at a workers’ camp on a pea farm north of Los Angeles. Curator Gregory Harris.

GREGORY HARRIS:

She made five different pictures of Florence Owens Thompson, the mother shown in this picture. Each time Lange moved closer and closer in and this is the final image that she made in the series. She shows Owens sitting in a makeshift tent surrounded by three of her children, two of the older ones resting their heads on her shoulder, and a baby in her arms down toward the bottom of the picture.

Owens is very delicately stroking her cheek with her fingertips, gazing off into the distance. It shows a woman who has the weight of the world resting on her shoulders, yet still seems to be persevering despite all of that.

Owens was only 32 when Lange made this portrait of her, but her brow is furrowed, she has deep creases beside her eyes and her nose. She looks much older than her years would seem to indicate.

At the farm that Owens was trying to find work, the pea crop had frozen and, therefore, the migrant workers weren’t able to be paid because there was no work to be done. Owens was subsisting on some of the frozen peas that she could find scattered throughout the field.

STEPHANIE HEYDT:

Lange later said about her experience documenting the Depression:

FEMALE ACTOR:

“Well, I many times encountered courage, real courage. Undeniable courage. I’ve heard it said that that was the highest quality of the human animal. There is no other. . . I encountered that many times [traveling across this country], in unexpected places.”