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The Museum of Modern Art

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THE NATURAL PARADISE: PAINTING IN AMERICA 1800-1950

THE NATURAL PARADISE: PAINTING IN AMERICA 1800-1950, an exhibition surveying the romantic tradition in American art, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from October 1 through November 30. Directed by Kynaston McShine, Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, who also edited the fully illustrated book that accompanies the exhibition*, the show includes 157 works lent by private collectors and museums in the U.S. and Europe. It will be on view in the Museum's René d'Harnoncourt Galleries (1st floor). The exhibition, presented on the occasion of the Bicentennial, has been made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Featuring 84 nineteenth-century works and 73 paintings of the twentieth century, THE NATURAL PARADISE probes and clarifies those attitudes--romantic, transcendental, intent on the sublime--that have grandly and persistently linked the aspirations of American artists. From the landscapes of Albert Bierstadt and Frederic E. Church to Barnett Newman's and Mark Rothko's attempts to capture "The Sublime" in totally abstract and metaphorical terms, there exists what Professor Robert Rosenblum has called in his catalog essay an "obsessive fascination with the heavenly and hellish extremes of nature." Professor Rosenblum goes on to underscore the pressing current need for a reexamination of this distinctive, coherent American tradition in painting and its influence on modern

*THE NATURAL PARADISE: PAINTING IN AMERICA 1800-1950. Edited by Kynaston McShine, with essays by Barbara Novak, Robert Rosenblum and John Wilmerding. 180 pages, 185 illustrations (16 in color). Clothbound \$19.95; paperbound \$7.95. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Distributed to the trade by New York Graphic Society, Boston.

The Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950

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art, particularly Abstract Expressionism, when he notes: "Now, in the year of the Bicentennial, it is especially appropriate to explore the native soil from which the Abstract Expressionists grew. This book and the exhibition it accompanies should therefore help to reassess the proportions of America to Europe in their achievement, and to consider what aspects of their work should be regrafted onto American trees."

While the connection between international abstract art and the work of Pollock, Still, Newman and Rothko has been recognized from the first, critics and the public have been slow to appreciate in the work of these painters a continuation or extension of attitudes that have characterized American art over the generations. By undertaking such a survey of the romantic current in American painting, The Museum of Modern Art continues to recognize that, as Mr. McShine writes, "other periods of art can illuminate the present and provide a more general understanding of modern art."

The English philosopher John Locke observed: "In the beginning, all the world was America." This succinctly described the imagined America--a vastness populated by "noble savages" and filled with exotic flora and fauna, an abundance promising freedom and opportunity, a natural paradise. In this new land the European settler developed a romantic consciousness, an elemental relationship to the land itself, to earth and water in all their primeval benevolence, silence and terror.

The romantic paintings of Washington Allston, such as Landscape with a Lake (1804), expressed the first flowering in art of a distinctively American experience, a focusing on nature in its most profound and universal sense. Yet, Allston, who studied in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century, embodies the paradox that while American painters were confronted with the wilderness and unusual landscapes, they frequently sought out European models, placing themselves under the influence of a Claude or a Salvator Rosa, or later, of a Turner or Constable. Throughout the nineteenth century American artists often

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returned to the European art centers of London, Rome, Dusseldorf and Paris to study.

Nevertheless, an American style began to develop, perhaps achieving its first blossoming in the Hudson River School--the landscapes of Thomas Cole and his companions--and shortly afterward, in the sublime paintings of the Luminists--Martin Johnson Heade, Sanford R. Gifford and Fitz Hugh Lane. Their concept of nature was strongly tied to the literature and philosophy of the time, particularly the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. In the paintings of the Luminists, such as Heade's Newburyport Marshes: Passing Storm (c. 1865-70), Gifford's Kauterskill Falls (1862) or Fitz Hugh Lane's Brace's Rock, Eastern Point, Gloucester (1863), we experience, as Professor Rosenblum observes, "that silent, primordial void of light and space where material forms, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral, are virtually pulverized or banished by the incorporeal deity of light." And Professor John Wilmerding, in his catalog essay, finds an explicit link between Luminism and the art of the Abstract Expressionists a century later: "In their consciousness of the spiritual as well as physical presence of the country's landscape, their celebration of an expansive continental and pictorial scale, their evocation of both personal and national energies, the two movements present telling distillations of the American character."

There is almost a religiosity surrounding the nineteenth-century romantic painters, who felt an increasing urgency to transmute the objective world--whether a quiet clearing in the woods or a chasm of the Colorado--into the almost unattainable sublime. Indeed, Frederic E. Church's Niagara Falls (1857) conveys a spirituality of which Barbara Novak in her contribution to the catalog writes: "The waterfall and the still lake--the visual symbols of sound and silence--often signaled the oppositions of old and new sublimity. As in Christian symbolism, water, a medium poised between transparency and reflection, touched upon central spiritual profundities that engaged the age."

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The romantic impulse and sensibility that had conquered the majestic Hudson and the awesome Niagara now compelled the more adventurous and the more passionate artists to explore new regions of the seemingly boundless Western hemisphere. Frederic E. Church's journeys to Colombia, Ecuador, Jamaica and Labrador resulted in paintings such as Cotopaxi (1862) and Rainy Season in the Tropics (1866). William Bradford painted An Arctic Summer, Boring through the Pack Ice in Melville Bay (1871) after his trip to the Arctic, and Martin Johnson Heade pursued the splendid hummingbirds and alluring orchids of Brazil. Not neglected were the magnificent wonders of Yosemite, the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone. Professor Novak writes: "The landscape artists fulfilled a painterly 'manifest destiny' of their own. As God's continent opened up before them, these artist-explorers followed quickly, either traveling with the topographical expeditions or close behind them. As curates of God's nature, they felt a special obligation to experience the widest range of natural aspects and climates." The natural wonders of the American West provided new and vast dimensions for paintings such as Albert Bierstadt's The Great Trees, Mariposa Grove, California (c.1875) and Thomas Moran's The Chasm of the Colorado (1873-74).

Included in the exhibition are other major nineteenth-century American paintings such as George Caleb Bingham's The Storm (c. 1850), Ralph Albert Blakelock's The Poetry of Moonlight (c. 1880-90), Thomas Cole's Mount Etna from Taormina (1844), Winslow Homer's Winter Coast (1890), John Frederick Kensett's Coast Scene with Figures (1869), and Albert Pinkham Ryder's Macbeth and the Witches (1890-1908) and Toilers of the Sea (c. 1880-84).

With the approach of the twentieth century, the wilderness began to recede and to yield to expansion and industrialization. Faced by the growing complexities of an increasingly pluralistic society, the Transcendental tradition in American art became somewhat attenuated. Innovations in contemporary European art such as Impressionism were well-known to American artists, who in continuing their involvement with nature could scarcely ignore the discoveries and

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accomplishments of a Cézanne. The influence of Impressionism is particularly marked in paintings such as Thomas Wilmer Dewing's The White Birch (c. 1896-99), Frank Duveneck's Ophelia (c. 1885-90) and John Singer Sargent's Val d'Aosta (A Stream over Rocks) (c. 1910). The emergence of Cubism introduced an international vocabulary that was reinforced and extended by Kandinsky's abstractions. Georgia O'Keeffe, Arthur G. Dove and Marsden Hartley continued the American involvement with nature; however, it was only a partial ingredient in their assertion of a larger romantic and aesthetic response to be achieved through the masterful painterliness evident in O'Keeffe's Orange and Red Streak (1919), Dove's Sunrise, III (1937) or Hartley's Evening Storm, Schoodic, Maine (1942).

With the rapid intellectual and political changes of the first decades of the twentieth century, the heroic could no longer be measured concretely. While the artist still could embrace the sense of space and the grandeur of America, he felt increasingly compelled to capture the passion and sentiment of the heroic in abstract, even metaphorical terms. Mr. McShine writes of this new interiorization of nature by American artists: "Nature was perceived as a reflection of self rather than a manifestation of immanent divinity. For the twentieth-century artist nature was no longer an end but an intellectual means. Given his identification of self with nature and his perception of the developments of twentieth-century European art and philosophy, it was inevitable that he should eventually state his work in abstract terms."

In the 1940s, the pursuit of an almost primordial and mystical nature--yet another manifestation of the native tradition--was a common aspect of the abstract work of such artists as William Bazotes, Adolph Gottlieb, Morris Graves, Theodoros Stamos and Mark Tobey. As the mid-twentieth century approached, that remarkable moment--the moment of Abstract Expressionism--occurred when the artist united his American individuality and heritage with European ideas of modernity in the visual arts to give us an invomparable new

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definition of "The Sublime", exemplified by such works as Barnett Newman's The Voice (1950), Mark Rothko's Number 22 (1949), Jackson Pollock's The Deep (1953) and Clyfford Still's 1954 (1954). Through the inspired wisdom and courageous endeavor of the Abstract Expressionists, an art was created that, while personal, spoke to a universal intelligence and humanity. This new definition of sublimity, the Abstract Expressionists' new dream of the New World was proclaimed by Jackson Pollock when he declared: "I am Nature."

Photographs, color transparencies and additional information available from Bruce Wolmer, Assistant and Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 10019. Phone: (212) 956-7295; 7501.
