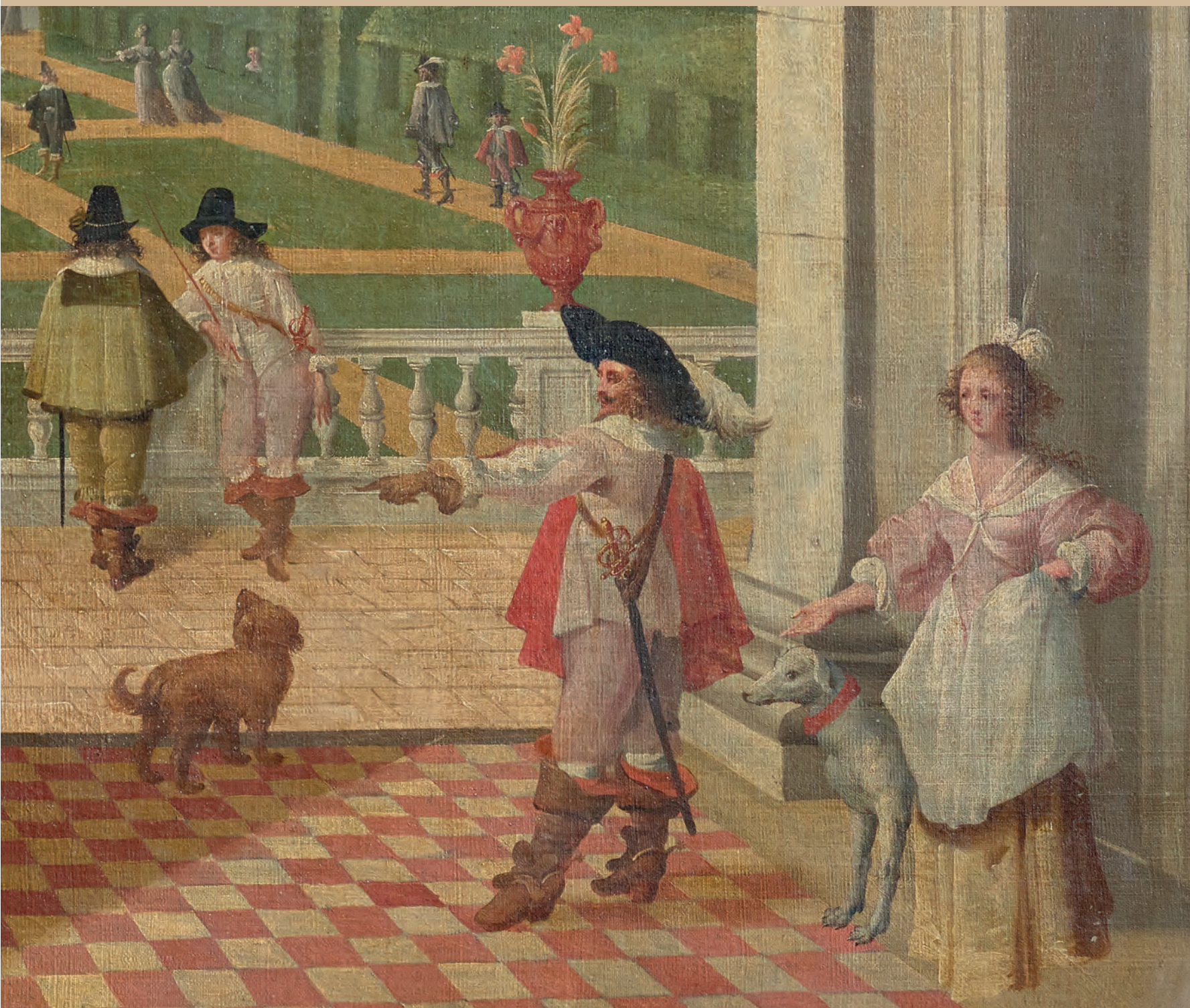


THE
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Arcadia rediscovered: 'The Paston prospective'

A bronze 'Bathing woman' after Giambologna | Modern French art in Victorian Glasgow
Richard Thomson on Rodin and ancient Greece | Delacroix in Paris | Monet in London | Joan Jonas at Tate



no.111), invite comparisons with Robert and Sonia Delaunay, while *The fair (contradance)* (1921–22; National Gallery, Prague; no.147) recalls the Futurist emphasis on overlapping planes and the successive positions of a figure.

One aspect of Kupka's work that is placed in its contemporary setting is the graphic art he produced for satirical journals at the turn of the twentieth century. He described this work as 'his bread and butter', but writers such as Patricia Leighton have shown how Kupka's anarchist critique of a degenerate society, especially its commodification of sex, is the corollary of the regenerative forces that are expressed in his paintings.³ He was also heavily influenced by the anarchist geographer Élisée Reclus, whose writings he illustrated with some distinction. There are, however, other contexts. Kupka's depictions of capitalists reflect the visual conventions of anti-Semitism, even though his personal life, above all his friendship with the industrialist Jindřich Waldes, tells a different story.

This exhibition offers glimpses of Kupka's worldly life: his involvement with the Czechoslovakian legions during the First World War, for example, is documented by a variety of patriotic designs and even his kepi. Although Kupka's art can seem esoteric in the extreme, his high abstraction sometimes makes references to the modern world. 'Reminiscences and syntheses', the section opening the second half of the show, begins with jewel-like images inspired by medieval stained glass, but these are followed by striking mechanistic compositions from the late 1920s and early 1930s.

These abrasive works, which reveal Kupka's response to jazz as well as technology, are interpreted in terms of a 'crise de "machinisme"', as though they were incompatible with Kupka's artistic goals. If so, the crisis was resolved during the 1930s, when the industrial forms were absorbed into a style of geometric purity. The final section, 'Ultimate renewals', which presents these developments, closes with the paintings that Kupka displayed in the 1950s at the Salon des réalités nouvelles, Paris. With their subtle nuances of hue, tone and



texture, they also exemplify the perfect marriage of colour and form for which Kupka strived throughout his career.

Yet this is a show that delivers its punches early on. If one were to identify the heart of the display, it would perhaps be the seminal *Around a point* (no.175; Fig.21), hung to great effect in the stark white setting. With its networks of vibrant concentric forms, this famous canvas evokes the grandeur of the cosmos in a composition that is based on a single black dot. By uniting works from the National Gallery, Prague, the Centre Pompidou, and elsewhere, this exhibition provides a rare opportunity to enjoy the breadth of Kupka's achievement, but ultimately his brilliant synthesis of macrocosm and microcosm, the unreachable and the ungraspable, can be condensed to a few select images.



21. *Around a point*, by František Kupka. 1920–30. Canvas, 194.5 by 200 cm. (Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris; exh. Grand Palais, Paris).

22. *Water (the bather)*, by František Kupka. 1906–09. Canvas, 63 by 80 cm. (Centre Pompidou, Paris; exh. Grand Palais, Paris).

¹ The exhibition will be shown at the National Gallery, Prague, 7th September–20th January 2019, and at the Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, 22nd February–19th May 2019. Catalogue: *Kupka: Pionnier de l'abstraction*. By Brigitte Léal, Marketa Theinhardt and Pierre Brullé. 304 pp. incl. 321 col. and b. & w. ill. (Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris, 2018), €49. ISBN 978-2-7118-6391-4.
² Reviewed by Elizabeth Clegg in this Magazine, 139 (1997), pp.897–99.
³ P. Leighton: *The Liberation of Painting: Modernism and Anarchism in Avant-Guerre Paris*, Chicago 2013, pp.148–55 and 168–74.

America's Cool Modernism: O'Keeffe to Hopper

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
23rd March–22nd July

by DAVID ANFAM

To measure art with a thermometer is hard. This exhibition finely gauges the temperature of a key phase in the United States's creative trajectory.¹ The two star names in its subtitle were near-contemporaries, so they stand slightly askew as a chronological span and are probably there for the box office. However, the selection boasts trophies that amply justify the selling point. They include Charles Demuth's resplendent *I saw the figure 5 in gold* (1928; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; cat. no.26), Hopper's *Manhattan bridge loop* (1928; Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover; no.36) and Stuart Davis's *Odol* (1924; Museum of Modern Art, New York; no.21). Loans of this stature would be noteworthy anywhere. Hence it reflects upon the capital's art scene that apart from last year's *America after the Fall: Painting in the 1930s* at the Royal Academy, London (which anyway addressed a somewhat different timeframe), the last proper survey of this subject was held at the Hayward Gallery over four decades ago.² Equally shocking is the Tate collection's total vacuum in this area. Oxford therefore deserves merit for leading where others have failed.

Neither exhaustive nor meagre, the display feels right for its subject, especially insofar as idiosyncratic stylistic tendencies emerge that would tire if overexposed. Across three capacious galleries, freestanding walls parse the spaces at sensible intervals. Given that sculpture was a negligible factor in the 1920s its absence is just,

Exhibitions



23. *New York night, no.2*, by George Ault. 1921. Canvas, 51.4 by 35.6 cm. (The Jan T. and Marica Vilcek Collection; exh. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

24. *Dawn in Pennsylvania*, by Edward Hopper. 1942. Canvas, 61.9 by 112.4 cm. (Terra Collection, Chicago; exh. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

although a few sleek pieces by the likes of Robert Laurent, Paul Manship or Elie Nadelman could have added further piquancy and referential breadth. At the start, Marsden Hartley's and Edward Steichen's brightly emblematic pictures both intimate the curatorial concept and undermine its 'cool' premise. This premise references a context that predates its customary assignation to the post-1945 era, when the term was equated with cultural interconnections that encompassed jazz, cinema, literature, 'hip' attitudes and, indeed, the overarching Cold War itself.³ The present endeavour posits instead an older coolness in the American aesthetic climate, and may even revise scholarship in this area.

In fact, the current perspective takes its cue from a critic in 1925: 'A picture by Sheeler has the clear, sharp, cold beauty of one of our modern machines, the severe impersonality of a mechanical drawing'.⁴ Distinct from our contemporary vogue for 'chilling out', this definition actually fits its antithesis – the taut, analytical detachment dominating the period style, which surfaces as the presentation unfolds. It ranged from the ubiquitous machine aesthetic espoused by most Precisionists to O'Keeffe's crisp minimalism as applied to nature in her *Black abstraction* (1927; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; no.54), as well as the intrinsically incisive lines cut by the epoch's towering architectural edifices, skyscrapers and industrial

plants. These attest to an ideology that supplanted humanity per se with reification and mechanolatry. It proved a duplicitous altar at which to worship.

Along the way essential, well-known players – Sheeler himself, Charles Demuth, the photographer Berenice Abbott – mingle with others less familiar or still peregrine in this country. Among the latter, George Ault shines with two beautifully mysterious urban nocturnes (no.4; Fig.23). Who would have guessed that London's Slade School of Fine Art and another in St John's Wood nurtured this most seemingly East Coast of talents? Different surprises feature with a little-seen abstraction by the poet E.E. Cummings (1919; Metropolitan Museum; no.17); Morton Schamberg's *Untitled (Mechanical abstraction)* (1916; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; no.58), which must have been a crucial inspiration for Walter Tandy Murch, a later, now-neglected painter who was coeval with the Abstract Expressionists; and Jacob Lawrence's tributes, the more poignant for understatement, to his fellow long-suffering African-Americans in the *Migration series* (1940–41; Phillips Collection, Washington; nos.45–46). These instructive pictorial insights well fulfil the requirements of the Terra Foundation's enabling sponsorship and its educational mission. Still, 'cool' does not underwrite everything, tempting though a flexible rubric may be.

Hartley's exuberance, Oscar Bluemner's ruddy New Jersey houses

and Arthur Dove's distilled meditations on landscape sidestep the 'cool' tenor. In fact, *I saw the figure 5 in gold* waxes hot as hell, blaring at the beholder with its synaesthetic horn. Unless, of course, the thesis applies that the process of abstraction itself somehow belongs to that designation. Moreover, Louis Lozowick's coded *Red circle* (no.48; Fig.25), painted after a European trip that took him to Moscow, offers a timely reminder that these years saw powerful political passions as sanguine as the colour that denotes their synecdoche. In a telling little aquatint (its encrypted message goes unremarked), *Which way?* (1932; Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago; no.47), Martin Lewis depicted a car stalled at a snowbound crossroads. To the right its direction is benighted; to the left, light illumines. Likewise, Hopper's frigid *Dawn in Pennsylvania* (no.37; Fig.24) hides what must have originally been spawned in heat. Namely, a coupling at once literal and metaphoric – witness the phallic lever to the rightward trolley now undone from the railway carriage's gaping rear void. After all, Precisionism's zenith and its aftermath was otherwise the ribald Roaring Twenties.

America's Cool Modernism rightly stresses that the nation's economic boom had a downside. Capitalism's very success threatened the people who had engineered it by replacing them with Fordism and mechanisation; their inevitable overreach collapsed in the Great Depression. The results



were all too pictorially palpable in the emptiness and unease that haunted Hopper's silent theatricals, Lawrence's faceless tenements (their affinity with the inhuman punch card is noted in Leo Mazow's perspicacious catalogue essay) and even Davis's astringent pale paean to Odol mouthwash. True, greater attention might go to how such qualities were not peculiarly 'American' – they shared common ground with the European 'call to order', especially with *pittura metafisica's* legacy and its Symbolist sources.¹ An argument also exists for the First World War as a structuring absence to the prevalent sense of loss and melancholia. In

25. *Red circle*, by Louis Lozowick. 1924. Canvas. 45.7 by 38.1 (The Jan T. and Marica Vilcek Collection; exh. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

any case, this lucid show easily ranks among the best of its kind not to have been seen in London for some time.

- 1 Catalogue: *America's Cool Modernism: O'Keeffe to Hopper*. By Katherine M. Bourguignon, Lauren Kroiz and Leo G. Mazow. 184 pp. incl. 176 col. ills. (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 2018), £25. ISBN 978-1-910807-21-7.
- 2 The former was reviewed by Angela Miller in this Magazine, 158 (2016), pp.998-99. Milton Brown curated the latter, for which see M. Brown: exh. cat. *The Modern Spirit: American Painting 1908-1935*, Edinburgh (Royal Scottish Academy) and London (Hayward Gallery) 1977.
- 3 See J. Dinerstein: *The Origins of Cool in Postwar America*, Chicago 2017.
- 4 Dudley Poore, quoted in Bourguignon *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.26.
- 5 For example, the deserted city scenes by the British artist Algernon Newton bear an uncanny transatlantic affinity with those of Precisionism.

Joan Jonas

Tate Modern, London
14th March–5th August

by JAMES BOADEN

On the north bank of the Thames a figure dressed in white breaks away from a group that is lined up against the wall of the embankment and walks towards the edge of the shallow beach. He draws up his arms above his head into a wide V-shape, as if signalling in semaphore to the audience gathered on the south bank of the river. In his hands are two white wooden blocks, which he bangs together above his head; the sound reaches the opposite shoreline seconds after the action took place. There, under the shadow of Tate Modern, an identical group has formed, and one of them responds by clapping back her own signal in an identical fashion. This crude form of communication continues as others join in, the smack of wood on wood ricocheting across the river. For the audience of this performance (both viewers come to see the performance and baffled passers by), huddled together in the crisp spring sunlight on the raised southern embankment above the beach, it becomes difficult to tell where the sound is being generated. The echo of this work is heard not only from the banks of the Thames but also, figuratively, from previous sites – the Hudson River in Manhattan, the Tiber in Rome and a beach in Nova Scotia – where motifs and actions within the piece had been performed almost fifty years earlier.

This waterfront performance was the opening sequence of *Delay delay (London Version 2018)*, a compilation of gestures and actions from a number of works that Joan Jonas and a small group of performers put together in the early 1970s. It is best known today through Jonas's film *Songdelay* (1973), which functions both as a document and as a statement about how we view the world and where we position ourselves to do so. The confusion of action, time and viewpoint demonstrated so succinctly on the riverbank is one of the most salient aspects of Jonas's practice, one that has been addressed head-on by the curators of the current exhibition.

