*And every day the corners of thine tired mouth Mustir*
*Grow sweeter helpless - sneer the more despair*
*And bloody pale-red poison foams from them*
*At every noble thing to kill thine soul*
*Because thine body is the prey of mice*
*And dies so slowly*

*So noble is thine tired soul Mustir*
*She cannot help to mourn out of thine eyes*
*Thine eyelids nostrils pallor of thine cheek*
*To mourn upon the curving of thine lip*
*Upon the crystal of thine pallid ear*
*To beg forgiveness with flashing smile*
*Like amber-coloured honey*

*The sweet corners of thine tired mouth Mustir*
*Undo thine sin. Thine pain is killed in play*
*Thine body's torture stimulates in play*
*And silly little bells of perfect tune*
*Ring in thine throat*
*Thou art a country devasted bare Mustir*
*Exhausted soil with sandy trembling hills*
*No food no water and ashamed of it*
*Thou shiver and an amber-yellow sun*
*Goes down the horizon*
*Thou art desert with mirages which drive the mind insane*
*To walk and die a-starving.—*

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# Chapter Two

# The 1920s

## Cultural and Historical Context for the Jazz Age

The 1920s as a unit—a wedge of time between the end of World War I in November 1918, and the Stock Market Crash of October 1929—was a time when jazz, popular music, and experimental literature flourished, and when "modernist" painters, sculptors, photographers, and architects rallied together to promote the new and the modern.

In this decade writers and artists discussed with renewed intensity what it meant to be an "American." Was it a common past? Or local customs unique to the regions? Did the exciting popular arts such as jazz or the commercial arts such as advertising and package design make for an American exceptionalism? And what about those Americans who felt the "double consciousness" described by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*? (See Reading 8.) What place did African American traditions, or those of Native Americans, have in "Americanism"? Could Europe still be an inspiration for the arts?

And what about the downside of "Americanism"? Patriotism could easily send chills to progressives who deplored the anti-immigrant and antiradical raids of Attorney General Alexander Mitchell Palmer conducted in 1919 and into the 1920s. The trial in 1921 of Italian immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, accused of robbing and killing a paymaster and guard at a shoe factory but with little convincing evidence, was affected by antiradical and anti-immigrant prejudice. Already there were restrictive immigration laws targeting Asians, and in 1921 more restrictions stemmed the flow from southern and eastern Europe as well. In 1924 a restrictive quota system was established, based on the national origins of people already citizens; this eliminated all but Northern Europeans and Britons. The popularity of the Ku Klux Klan, who marched twenty-thousand strong through the streets of Washington, DC, in the summer of 1925 was a measure of jingoistic Americanism, but also antimodernism.

In retrospect it seems the various issues of modernization dominated the spirit of the times. Certainly, by the 1920s mechanization had arrived in the American city, and it promised to bring about more efficient and comfortable ways of living and working. Telephones, increasingly common in the home, put people in touch with friends and loved ones, and radios connected people with the nation's culture and news. For example, news immediately spread over the airways of Warren G. Harding's election to the presidency on

November 2, 1920, thanks to an initial radio broadcast from Pittsburgh's KDKA. Entertainment and music programs filled the air; by 1922, three million homes had radios. Moreover, people went to the movies in greater and greater numbers; in 1922 an estimated 40 million went to the movies each week, and by 1930, 100 million. Automobiles profoundly affected both business and leisure life. In 1919 there were 6,771,000 passenger cars; the number climbed to 23,121,000 by 1929.[1]

Enthusiasm for the scientific outlook of modernity affected the arts. Louis Lozowick, one of the first artists to visit Soviet Russia, returned with enthusiasm for the Russian avant-garde, who then were the proletarian leaders creating an international art in the service of social revolution. In his *Modern Russian Art* (1925), Lozowick praised the Russian Constructivists who "go for instruction to science and borrow an example from industry. Like science, they aim at precision, order, organization; like industry, they deal with concrete materials: paper, wood, coal, iron, glass." His highest praise was for artist El Lissitzky: "Objectivity is one of the cardinal articles of his credo. Art is not a matter of inspiration or intuition but of logic and craftsmanship. The function of art, before it disappears, is not to decorate or beautify life but to transform and organize it. The artist must change from one who represents existing objects into one who creates a world of new objects." To Lozowick, art should serve to promote a beneficent social order.

Machine age art could also serve the selling of consumer goods. The 1920s was the age of business, the decade when Calvin Coolidge could say that "The man who builds a factory builds a temple." He added: "The man who works there worships there."[2] The products of that factory needed to be sold, and advertising agencies staffed by college-educated entrepreneurs blossomed. Advertising art took on clean lines and a sophisticated look as shrewd ad agencies probed the psychology of the buying public and turned to experienced photographers such as Edward Steichen to sell Pond's soap and Jergens lotion and to painters such as Rockwell Kent to promote Steinway pianos. The appeal of efficiency and comfort was supplemented by the public's desire for status and glamour, which the advertisers assured them could be theirs through the purchase of the advertised goods.

Thus many American artists in the 1920s, who found inspiration in ad layout and package design, who saw beauty in stylized machine forms, and/or believed in a future utopia of modern design encouraged by an enlightened government (whether the socialist state or a modern, reformed capitalism) saw no contradiction between high art, the practical arts, and the arts of commercial promotion. In this sense, they shared common ground with artists at the Bauhaus design school in Germany. But without a national art school given over to such a unified theory of the arts, the propagandizing of such theories of popular and democratic modernity in the United States had to wait until Bauhaus artists established architecture and design programs in this country in the post–World War II years.

[1] See William E. Leuchtenburg's *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914–32*, 2nd ed. 1993, and Frederick Allen Lewis, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's*, 1931.
[2] Quoted in Leuchtenburg, p. 188.



## Machine Age Modernism and Modernity

The modern age demanded a modern art and architecture, one which would exhibit, as Lewis Mumford urged in his essay "Machinery and the Modern Style" (*The New Republic*, August 3, 1921), "the characteristic achievements of technology by which our daily activities have been molded into a hundred new patterns." To Mumford, a new style would follow, one that is "fundamentally the outcome of a way of living, . . . of the complex of social and technological experience that grows out of a community's life."

In 1920 Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand made the short film *Manhatta*, which consisted of a montage of images of skyscrapers, steam vents, the port of New York, and employees hurrying through the canyons of lower Manhattan. Sheeler went on to photograph for industry as well as to develop a precise, reductive style for representing buildings in paintings. Charles Demuth also used flat color and hard edges when he rendered the buildings of Pennsylvania small towns and created his poster portraits. The art historical term "precisionism" defines both the look as well as the content of their work.

Avant-garde poets shared with artists the embrace of technology and the machine age. William Carlos Williams, the pediatrician from New Jersey who moved in avant-garde circles, forged a poetry that often emulated the sounds and the looks of machines. Artists inspired him, and he in turn inspired artists. Stuart Davis, upon reading Williams's *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920), a book given to the young artist whose ink drawing graced the frontispiece, wrote to Williams of his own struggles with the concept of "simultaneity": "I see in it a fluidity as opposed to stagnation of presentation. . . . It opens a field of possibilities. To me it suggests a development toward word against word without any impediments of story, poetic beauty or anything at all except word clash and sequence" (quoted in Patricia Hills, *Stuart Davis*, 1996).

In architecture, design, and the decorative arts, the style that we identify for the period is Art Deco, a phrase adopted from the 1925 Paris Exposition International des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes. This style, which extended from the mid-1920s to the 1940s, is characterized by flat planes, often staggered behind one another; zigzags, chevrons, and semicircles; and plant and animal motifs flattened and made to look as if crafted by machine. In the industrial arts, Art Deco was followed by "streamlining" adapted from designers concerned with objects, such as airplanes, moving quickly and efficiently through space with a minimum of turbulence.

### 23 ✦ Joseph Stella, "The Brooklyn Bridge," *transition* 16/17 (June 1929): 86–89; reprinted from *New York* (Privately printed, c. 1925).

Born in Italy, Joseph Stella had an early classical art education before he arrived in New York in 1896, when he enrolled in the Art Students League and then the New York School of Art. He subsequently worked as an illustrator for magazines and went to Pittsburgh in 1902 to work for *The Survey*, a progressive-era magazine. In 1909 he returned to Italy to

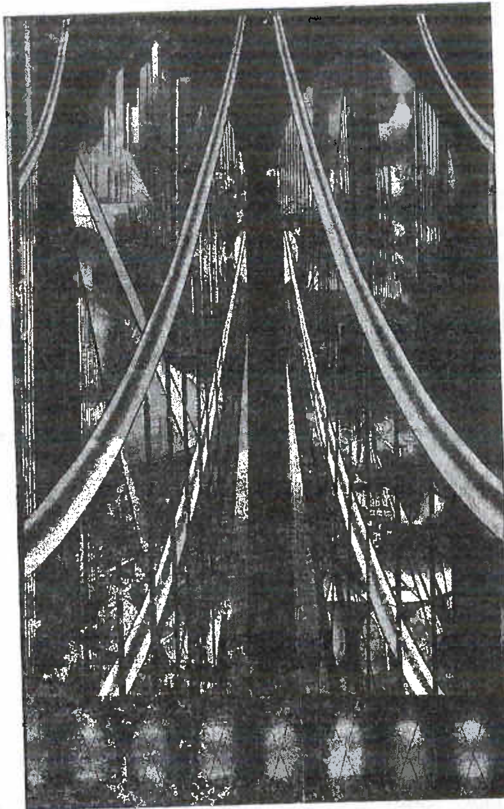

**Figure 2-1.** Joseph Stella, *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted: Brooklyn Bridge,* 1920–22. Oil and tempera on canvas, 88 1/2 × 54 in. The Newark Museum, Newark, NJ. Photograph courtesy The Newark Museum and Art Resource, NY. This image was reproduced in *transition*.

study further old master techniques. Gradually he realized the old methods could not adequately provide him with the means to express his personal experiences. In 1911 he left for Paris, but returned to New York the following year, in time to see the Armory Show in February 1913. Awakened to the artistic possibilities of New York modernity, he painted *Battle of Lights, Coney Island,* 1913, and *Brooklyn Bridge,* 1919 (both Yale University Art Gallery), and *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted: Brooklyn Bridge,* 1920–22 (Newark Museum) (see Fig 2-1).

The journal *transition: An International Quarterly for Creative Experiment* was published in Paris by expatriate Americans: Eugene Jolas was editor, with Harry Crosby and Matthew Josephson among the advisory editors. An editor's note states that Stella's essay was a reprint from a privately printed monograph called *New York.* Although probably written sometime in the mid-1920s, Stella recalls with great vividness the impression that the bridge made just as World War I was ending in 1918. To Stella, the modernity of the bridge and its forms—the arches and cables—were like music, and they inspired him to paint a heroic rendition of the bridge that would incorporate the "luminous dawn of



a new era." The Brooklyn Bridge also inspired Hart Crane, whose long epic poem *The Bridge* was published in 1930.

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During the last years of the war I went to live in BROOKLYN, in the most forlorn region of the oceanic tragic city, in Williamsburg, near the bridge.

Brooklyn gave me a sense of liberation. The vast view of her sky, in opposition to the narrow one of NEW YORK, was a relief—and at night, in her solitude, I used to find, intact, the green freedom of my own self.

It was the time when I was awakening in my work an echo of the oceanic polyphony (never heard before) expressed by the steely orchestra of modern constructions: the time when, in rivalry to the new elevation in superior spheres as embodied by the skyscrapers and the new fearless audacity in soaring above the abyss of the bridges, I was planning to use all my fire to forge with a gigantic art illimited and far removed from the insignificant frivolities of easel pictures, proceeding severely upon a mathematic precision of intent, animated only by essential elements.

War was raging with no end to it—so it seemed. There was a sense of awe, of terror weighing on everything—obscuring people and objects alike.

Opposite my studio a huge factory—its black walls scarred with red stigmas of mysterious battles—was towering with the gloom of a prison. At night fires gave to innumerable windows menacing blazing looks of demons—while at other times vivid blue-green lights rang sharply in harmony with the radiant yellow-green alertness of cats enjewelling the obscurity around.

Smoke, perpetually arising, perpetually reminded of war. One moved, breathed in an atmosphere of DRAMA—the impending drama of POE'S tales.

My artistic faculties were lashed to exasperation of production. I felt urged by a *force* to mould a compact plasticity, lucid as crystal, that would reflect—with impassibility—the massive density, luridly accentuated by lightning, of the raging storm, in rivalry of POE'S granitic, fiery transparency revealing the swirling horrors of the Maelstrom.

With anxiety I began to unfold all the poignant deep resonant colors, in quest of the chromatic language that would be the exact eloquence of steely architectures—in quest of phrases that would have the greatest vitriolic penetration to bite with lasting unmercifulness of engravings.

Meanwhile the verse of Walt Whitman—soaring above as a white aeroplane of Help—was leading the sails of my Art through the blue vastity of Phantasy, while the fluid telegraph wires, trembling around, as if expecting to propagate a new musical message, like aerial guides—leading to Immensity, were keeping me awake with an insatiable thirst for new adventures.

I seized the object into which I could unburden all the knowledge springing from my present experience—"THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE."

For years I had been waiting for the joy of being capable to leap up to this subject—for BROOKLYN BRIDGE had become an ever growing obsession ever since I had come to America.

Seen for the first time, as a weird metallic Apparition under a metallic sky, out of proportion with the winged lightness of its arch, traced for the conjunction of WORLDS, supported by the massive dark towers dominating the surrounding tumult of the surging skyscrapers with their gothic majesty sealed in the purity of their arches, the cables, like divine messages from above, transmitted to the vibrating coils, cutting and dividing into innumerable musical spaces the nude immensity of the sky, it impressed me as the shrine containing all the efforts of the new civilization of AMERICA—the eloquent meeting point of all forces arising in a superb assertion of their powers, in APOTHEOSIS.

To render limitless the space on which to enact my emotions, I chose the mysterious depth of night—and to strengthen the effective acidity of the various prisms composing my Drama, I employed the silvery alarm rung by the electric light.

Many nights I stood on the bridge—and in the middle alone—lost—a defenceless prey to the surrounding swarming darkness—crushed by the mountainous black impenetrability of the skyscrapers—here and there lights resembling suspended falls of astral bodies or fantastic splendors of remote rites—shaken by the underground tumult of the trains in perpetual motion, like the blood in the arteries—at times, ringing as alarm in a tempest, the shrill sulphurous voice of the trolley wires—now and then strange moanings of appeal from tug boats, guessed more than seen, through the infernal recesses below—I felt deeply moved, as if on the threshold of a new religion or in the presence of a new DIVINITY.

The work proceeded rapid and intense with no effort.

At the end, brusquely, a new light broke over me, metamorphosing aspects and visions of things. Unexpectedly, from the sudden unfolding of the blue distances of my youth in Italy, a great clarity announced PEACE—proclaimed the luminous dawn of A NEW ERA.

Upon the recomposed calm of my soul a radiant promise quivered and a vision—indistinct but familiar—began to appear. The clarity became more and more intense, turning into rose. The vision spread all the largeness of Her wings, and with the velocity of the first rays of the arising Sun, rushed toward me as a rainbow of trembling smiles of resurrected friendship.

* * *

## 25 ✦ Samuel M. Kootz, "Ford Plant Photos of Charles Sheeler," *Creative Art* 8 (April 1931): 265–66.

Charles Sheeler studied at both the School of Industrial Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, the city of his birth. In his early 20s he made several trips to Europe. On his 1908–10 sojourn, accompanied by artist Morton Schamberg, he encountered modernism. Back in the States he embarked on a career as a commercial photographer, while also developing a precise realist style. His paintings best exemplify the style that has become known as Precisionism.

In October 1927, N. W. Ayer & Son, the advertising agency for the Ford Motor Company, commissioned Sheeler to photograph Ford's new River Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan. At the time Ford had discontinued its boxy Model T automobile; its more stylish Model A was in production. On October 25, Sheeler wrote to the art patron Walter Arensberg: "My program as mapped out now will consist of photographs of details of the plants and portraits of machinery as well as the new Ford (take my word for it and order one now) and also the Lincoln" [Arensberg Archives, Philadelphia Museum of Art, quoted in Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. and Norman Keyes, Jr., *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1987), p. 26.]

Sheeler's photographs were thus part of a campaign to promote the new Fords and to celebrate the company. The pristine quality of Sheeler's industrial photographs appealed to art entrepreneur and critic Samuel Kootz, who saw in them "the very soul of steel . . . the truest portraits of our times."

✦

The photographs Charles Sheeler has made of the Ford plant in Detroit contain all the grammar so expertly used in making him one of America's finest artists.

The artist, the painter, is merely with us in another medium. All his lucid comprehension of composition and design; the subtlety, the variety of an intellectual arrangement of forms; his marvellously paced spacing; his feeling for depths, for balance; his interesting and completely personal use of color and texture; all these, his painting language, he brings to a different art—and in so doing elevates photography to a new beauty, to an exciting realization of its existing potentialities.



Sheeler's freshness of vision, the alertness of his eye, his sensitive, deliberate intelligence, combine to aid a definite attitude toward photography. That point-of-view may best be called truthfulness, for he believes in presenting the picture taken in naked reality, with no retouching and no sentimental overtones. His statements are crisp and plainspoken, edited only by the exposure of his eye to the objects to be portrayed. Before the camera's work comes into being, the scene or objects have gone through final arrangement in his own mind. When that arrangement is satisfying, inevitable, to him, the lens does its mechanical labor. The piercing integrity of its sight is unspoiled, unchanged, untouched. [. . .]

In the Ford plant Sheeler has beautiful working material. Designed by engineers interested primarily in function, the steel is pure, unornamented, faithful to its utilitarian purposes. Its ductile forms, at times slender, straight, virginal, change with rapid tempo into brutal, clutching, crushing symbols of power. But forms it does have, and these the photographer catches in all their bare economy. There is a rigid elimination of nonessentials, a leap straight to the scene's integrity, its own inner realism.

* * *

If I were asked the origin of these photographs, I would not place them at the Ford plant. Rather would I trace them through the painting history of the artist, through his unceasing vigil to discover the straight way to paint, through his plastic philosophy of order, through his never-ending search for consistent formal harmony, and through his deeply civilized outlook upon life. Only through the combination, the fruition, of all these agents, could there emerge the photographer who in these Ford photographs has articulated the very soul of steel, in a series of the truest portraits of our times.

## The New Negro

The years from 1923 to the mid-1930s saw a flowering of literature by African American writers such as novelists Jean Toomer (*Cane,* 1923), Jessie Fauset (*The Fire in the Flint,* 1924), and Claude McKay (*Home to Harlem,* 1928); ethnologist/novelist Zora Neale Hurston (*Jonah's Gourd Vine,* 1934, and *Mules and Men,* 1938); and poets Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Countée Cullen, and Gwendolyn Bennett. Intellectual leaders connected with activist organizations, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, who edited *The Crisis* for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Charles S. Johnson, who edited *Opportunity* for the National Urban League, provided forums for the cultural issues debated in these literary circles. Little magazines (such as *Harlem* and *Fire*) devoted to African American authors sprang up. While much of the excitement centered in New York's Harlem, which by 1920 had an African American population of over 75,000, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, and Boston also had their literary circles.

This creativity did not go unnoticed by influential white Americans. Paul Underwood Kellogg, editor of *Survey* magazine, planned a special issue of *Survey Graphic* for March 1924 on Harlem writers. On the recommendation of Johnson, Kellogg invited Alain Locke, who taught philosophy at Howard University, to pull together the issue, which became the basis of *The New Negro: An Interpretation* of 1925.[1]

In this compilation of essays and poetry, with art work by Aaron Douglas and Winold Reiss, Locke sought "to document the New Negro culturally and socially—to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America" that had recently made themselves manifest. In a sense Locke goes beyond Du Bois's "double consciousness" to suggest a consciousness *within* a consciousness—an African American cultural core within the larger multivalent American experience.

In the first essay, "The New Negro," written by Locke himself, he attributed the migration of African Americans from the rural South to the northern cities during and after World War I for having brought about a change of consciousness among African Americans. They were being introduced to modernity:

> With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic chance—in the Negro's case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.

Before the "New Negro," the "chief bond" between African Americans to Locke was one of "a common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common," but now in Harlem, Locke saw the "first chances for group expression and self-determination."

*The New Negro* included essays by both blacks and whites such as Albert C. Barnes and Paul Kellogg himself. Other white writers and publishers, including Carl Van Vechten, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, H. L. Mencken, and publisher Alfred Knopf, kept abreast of the cultural, aesthetic, and sociological issues debated on the pages of the African American journals and at evening gatherings. Literary prizes, fellowships, and stipends for artists followed in time from organizations and patrons, which helped support the writers, and later artists, even though such largesse at times compromised the recipients (see Reading 59).

Throughout the 1920s writers debated the degree to which African American artists should be "race men" (the term "race women" was never used) striving in their creative work to "uplift the race" rather than merely attending to literary form. Discussions continued into the 1930s, with additional new themes, as we will see in Chapter 3.

[1]See Arnold Rampersad, intro. to *The New Negro,* ed. Alain Locke (New York: Atheneum, 1992): ix–xxiii.



### 35 ✦ Alain Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation,* Alain Locke, ed. (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925).

Locke's essay, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," has often been misinterpreted to mean that it was Locke's wish that African Americans emulate African art. Locke's exhortation was more subtle. He surmised that since the discovery of African art by Europeans, African Americans would now take "a cultural pride and interest" in their African heritage and that African art should be considered every much as "classic" as the masterworks of Greece and Rome. What African Americans could learn is the discipline that African artists brought to their work and the "almost limitless wealth of decorative and purely symbolic material." To Locke, who was himself struggling to understand modernism, "it is for the development of this latter aspect [the decorative and purely symbolic material] of a racial art that the study and example of African art material is so important." By "racial art" he seems to mean an art expressive of the African American experience. In this essay, Locke also praises the illustrations, reproduced in color, of the portraits by the German artist Winold Reiss, who was a major influence on Aaron Douglas's developing modernism.

Locke became a leading advocate of Harlem's writers, poets and artists. During the 1930s and 1940s he worked tirelessly to promote art exhibitions of African American art, such as those mounted by the Harmon Foundation, and often wrote the introductions to their catalogues.

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Music and poetry, and to an extent the dance, have been the predominant arts of the American Negro. This is an emphasis quite different from that of the African cultures, where the plastic and craft arts predominate; Africa being one of the great fountain sources of the arts of decoration and design. Except then in his remarkable carry-over of the rhythmic gift, there is little evidence of any direct connection of the American Negro with his ancestral arts. But even with the rude transplanting of slavery, that uprooted the technical elements of his former culture, the American Negro brought over as an emotional inheritance a deep-seated aesthetic endowment. And

with a versatility of a very high order, this offshoot of the African spirit blended itself in with entirely different culture elements and blossomed in strange new forms.

There was in this more than a change of art-forms and an exchange of cultural patterns; there was a curious reversal of emotional temper and attitude. The characteristic African art expressions are rigid, controlled, disciplined, abstract, heavily conventionalized; those of the Aframerican,—free, exuberant, emotional, sentimental and human. Only by the misinterpretation of the African spirit, can one claim any emotional kinship between them—for the spirit of African expression, by and large, is disciplined, sophisticated, laconic and fatalistic. The emotional temper of the American Negro is exactly opposite. What we have thought primitive in the American Negro—his naïveté, his sentimentalism, his exuberance and his improvizing spontaneity are then neither characteristically African nor to be explained as an ancestral heritage. They are the result of his peculiar experience in America and the emotional upheaval of its trials and ordeals. True, these are now very characteristic traits, and they have their artistic, and perhaps even their moral compensations; but they represent essentially the working of environmental forces rather than the outcropping of a race psychology; they are really the acquired and not the original artistic temperament.

A further proof of this is the fact that the American Negro, even when he confronts the various forms of African art expression with a sense of its ethnic claims upon him, meets them in as alienated and misunderstanding an attitude as the average European Westerner. Christianity and all the other European conventions operate to make this inevitable. So there would be little hope of an influence of African art upon the western African descendants if there were not at present a growing influence of African art upon European art in general. But led by these tendencies, there is the possibility that the sensitive artistic mind of the American Negro, stimulated by a cultural pride and interest, will receive from African art a profound and galvanizing influence. The legacy is there at least, with prospects of a rich yield. In the first place, there is in the mere knowledge of the skill and unique mastery of the arts of the ancestors the valuable and stimulating realization that the Negro is not a cultural foundling without his own inheritance. Our timid and apologetic imitativeness and overburdening sense of cultural indebtedness have, let us hope, their natural end in such knowledge and realization.

Then possibly from a closer knowledge and proper appreciation of the African arts must come increased effort to develop our artistic talents in the discontinued and lagging channels of sculpture, painting and the decorative arts. If the forefathers could so adroitly master these mediums, why not we? And there may also come to some creative minds among us, hints of a new technique to be taken as the basis of a characteristic expression in the plastic and pictorial arts; incentives to new artistic idioms as well as to a renewed mastery of these older arts. African sculpture has been for contemporary European painting and sculpture just such a mine of fresh *motifs*, just such a lesson in simplicity and originality of expression, and surely, once known and appreciated, this art can scarcely have less influence upon the blood descendants, bound to it by a sense of direct cultural kinship, than upon those who inherit by tradition only, and through the channels of an exotic curiosity and interest.

But what the Negro artist of to-day has most to gain from the arts of the forefathers is perhaps not cultural inspiration or technical innovations, but the lesson of a classic background, the lesson of discipline, of style, of technical control pushed to the limits of technical mastery. A more highly stylized art does not exist than the African. If after absorbing the new content of American life and experience, and after assimilating new patterns of art, the original artistic endowment can be sufficiently augmented to express itself with equal power in more complex patterns and substance, then the Negro may well become what some have predicted, the artist of American life.

* * *

Indeed there are many attested influence of African art in French and German modernist art. [. . .] In Paris, centering around Paul Guillaume, one of its pioneer exponents, there has grown up an art coterie profoundly influenced by an aesthetic developed largely from the idioms of African art. And what has been true of the African sculptures has been in a lesser degree true of the influence of other African art forms—decorative design, musical rhythms, dance forms, verbal imagery and symbolism.

* * *

There is a vital connection between this new artistic respect for African idiom and the natural ambition of Negro artists for a racial idiom in their art expression. To a certain extent contemporary art has pronounced in advance upon this objective of the younger Negro artists, musicians and writers. Only the most reactionary conventions of art, then, stand between the Negro artist and the frank experimental development of these fresh idioms. This movement would, we think, be well under way in more avenues of advance at present but for the timid conventionalism which racial disparagement has forced upon the Negro mind in America.

* * *

A younger group of Negro artists is beginning to move in the direction of a racial school of art. The strengthened tendency toward representative group expression is shared even by the later work of the artists previously mentioned, as in Meta Warrick Fuller's "Ethiopia Awakening," to mention an outstanding example. But the work of young artists like Archibald Motley, Otto Farrill, Albert Smith, John Urquhart, Samuel Blount, and especially that of Charles Keene and Aaron Douglas shows the promising beginning of an art movement instead of just the cropping out of isolated talent. The work of Winold Reiss, . . . which has supplied the main illustrative material for this volume has been deliberately conceived and executed as a path-breaking guide and encouragement to this new foray of the younger Negro artists. In idiom, technical treatment and objective social angle, it is a bold iconoclastic break with the current traditions that have grown up about the Negro subject in American art. It is not meant to dictate a style to the young Negro artist, but to point the lesson that contemporary European art has already learned—that any vital artistic expression of the Negro theme and subject in art must break through the stereotypes to a new style, a distinctive fresh technique, and some sort of characteristic idiom.

While we are speaking of the resources of racial art, it is well to take into account that the richest vein of it is not that of portraitistic idiom after all, but its almost limitless wealth of decorative and purely symbolic material. It is for the development of this latter aspect of a racial art that the study and example of African art material is so important. The African spirit, as we said at the outset, is at its best in abstract decorative forms. Design, and to a lesser degree, color, are its original *fortes*. It is this aspect

of the folk tradition, this slumbering gift of the folk temperament that most needs reachievement and re-expression. And if African art is capable of producing the ferment in modern art that it has, surely this is not too much to expect of its influence upon the culturally awakened Negro artist of the present generation. So that if even the present vogue of African art should pass, and the bronzes of Benin and the fine sculptures of Gabon and Baoulé, and the superb designs of the Bushongo should again become mere items of exotic curiosity, for the Negro artist they ought still to have the import and influence of classics in whatever art expression is consciously and representatively racial.

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## 50 ✦ Diego Rivera, "The Radio City Mural," *Workers Age* 2, no. 15 [Rivera Supplement] (June 15, 1933), unpaginated.

Diego Rivera studied art in Mexico with Posada and others. He lived in Europe from 1907 to 1909 and again from 1912 to 1921 and developed into an accomplished cubist painter. Back in Mexico in 1921 he helped spearhead the Mexican fresco mural movement with its focus on Mexican history and life. Following the completion of his mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts, Rivera and Frida Kahlo came to New York to work on the Rockefeller commission.

Rivera stopped work on his Radio City Mural at Rockefeller Center the evening of May 9, 1933, when Rockefeller agents handed him his final paycheck and ordered him off the premises. The newspapers carried news about demonstrations as well as commentary. Rivera released a letter that Nelson Rockefeller had sent him prior to the event, published in *The News-week in Entertainment* (May 20, 1933). The letter read in part:

> I noticed that in the most recent portion of the painting you had included a portrait of Lenin. This piece is beautifully painted, but it seems to me that his portrait, appearing in this mural, might very easily seriously offend a great many people. If it were in a private house it would be one thing, but this mural is in a public building, and the situation is therefore quite different. As much as I dislike to do so, I am afraid we must ask you to substitute the face of some unknown man where Lenin's face now appears.



*The New York Times* published a protest letter on May 28, 1933, signed by about four dozen artists, while William Randolph Hearst editorialized in the *New York American* (June 11, 1933): "Inasmuch as Rockefeller Center is a private enterprise, its owners have some rights." E. B. White penned his amusing poem, "I Paint What I See," for *The New Yorker.*

Rivera stayed on in New York and painted another mural for the New Workers' School. A duplicate of *Man at the Crossroads* was painted in 1934 for the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. *Workers Age,* a Trotskyist newspaper, published Rivera's version of the controversy. When Rivera describes the "left" in the painting, he means the viewers' right; "right" means the viewers' left.

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[. . .] The most important and complete of my American paintings is the series of frescoes in Detroit in which I realized as correctly as possible an analysis of the relations of the worker to the means of production and the natural forces and materials involved, creating a beauty appropriate to the proletariat.

* * *

### The Case of Rockefeller Center

Those who gave me the work at Radio City knew perfectly well my artistic tendencies and my social and political opinions. And the Detroit affair had just served to make very clear the nature of my reaction to the environment of the United States. They did much urging to persuade me to accept the work, which I finally did only on condition that they would give me full liberty to paint as I saw fit. My interpretation of the theme and my sketches for the painting were discussed and approved. The theme they assigned was: Man at the crossroads, looking with uncertainty but with hope to a better world. My interpretation, naturally, portrayed the crossroads with the road to the left as the socialist world, that to the right, the world of capitalism. The steel worker, in the midst of a connected system of machines which give him control of energy and means of knowledge of the various aspects of life, the infinitely great and the infinitely small, and a simultaneous vision of the most distant and the nearest things, and power over the forces of nature and the vegetable products and mineral wealth of the earth. [. . .] At the sides, arranged in horizontal zones like the floors of a building, were, at the left, an image of a May Day demonstration in Moscow, projected by television, and below, the workers of a factory gathered during the lunch hour to listen to a working class leader. At the right, in the upper part, war—at attack of infantry equipped with masks and flame-throwers, and supported by tanks and areoplanes. And, below that, as a consequence, a demonstration of unemployed workers in Wall Street corner of South Street, with the mounted police just in the act of attacking and dispersing the

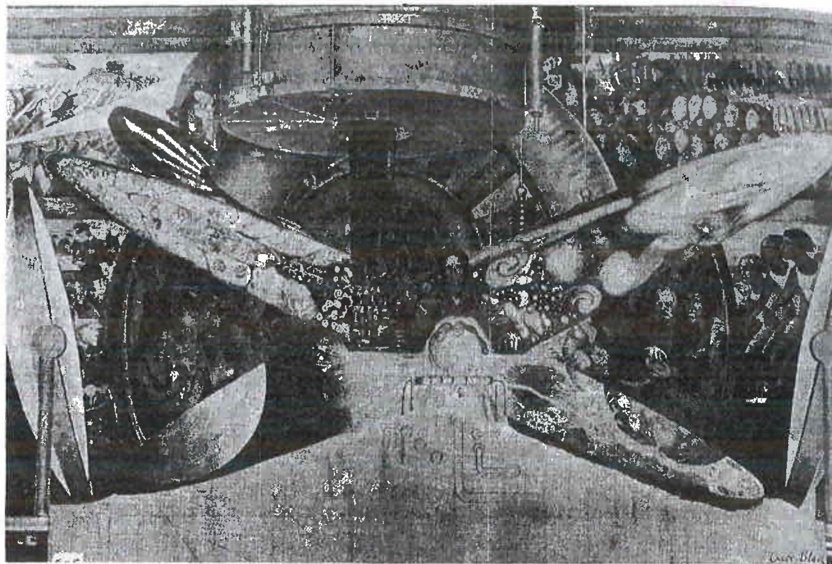

**Figure 3–3.** Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads,* Rockefeller Center, New York City (unfinished/destroyed), 1933. Fresco. Photograph by Lucienne Bloch, courtesy Old Stage Studios, Gualala, CA. Archives of the Detroit Institute of Arts. Bloch, her husband Stephen Dimitroff, and Ben Shahn assisted Rivera on his mural in New York.

demonstration; in the background, crossed, an elevated structure and the steeple of a church. In the ellipses, representing the microscopic and telescopic views, on the side nearest the war, the wounds and the microbes of decomposition and infection and those of the typical plagues and diseases of war. On the lower edge of the ellipse, the microbes of venereal disease, syphilis, etc., and adjoining a sector showing a scene of gaming, drinking and dancing of members of the bourgeoisie, reminiscent of Marx's observation that such a scene was the overflowing scum of capitalist decay. Beneath this, in the astronomic field, was represented the moon, dead planet, and near the center, the sun, in eclipse. In the same field, on the left, constellations and nebulas in ascending evolution. Near this, a group of young women, youth and pioneers of the Communist movement. [. . .]

Since, as much for my personal sentiments and opinions as for the historical truth, the outstanding leader of the proletariat is Lenin, I could not conceive or represent the figure of the worker-leader as any other than that of Lenin. [. . .]

As the best answer to the financial dictatorship of the Rockefellers my co-workers and I have decided to make the revolutionary painting accessible to the New York workers which the Rockefellers tried to shut off from them. Therefore, we have decided to use the money that the Rockefellers paid to paint without charge in workers schools. Thus the Rockefellers have been stripped of their assumed mask of liberalism as art patrons and yet are paying for revolutionary art in the workers headquarters much against their will. At the same time, the whole incident has served to stir the interest of great numbers of workers in the development of proletarian art and the storm aroused demonstrates the living character of the art of the working class as against the art of the bourgeoisie which is no longer capable of stirring controversy.

We are confident that the workers will yet unveil our buried mural and, if it be destroyed or incomplete, they will create out of their own midst the artists of tomorrow who will fulfil our intentions and carry revolutionary art to far greater heights.



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## 51 ✦ E. B. White, "I Paint What I See: A Ballad of Artistic Integrity," *The New Yorker* 9, no. 14 (May 20, 1933):25. Reprinted by permission; ©1933 E. B. White. All rights reserved.

Elwyn Brooks White was a poet, essayist, and editor for *The New Yorker.* He is best remembered as the author of *Stuart Little* and for his updating of William Strunk's *The Elements of Style,* a much-consulted handbook on good writing.

**I Paint What I See**
A Ballad of Artistic Integrity

"What do you paint, when you paint a wall?"
Said John D.'s grandson Nelson.
"Do you paint just anything there at all?
"Will there be any doves, or a tree in fall?
"Or a hunting scene, like an English hall?"

*"I paint what I see," said Rivera.*

"What are the colors you use when you paint?"
Said John D.'s grandson Nelson.
"Do you use any red in the beard of a saint?
"If you do, is it terribly red, or faint?
"Do you use any blue? Is it Prussian?"

*"I paint what I paint," said Rivera.*

"Whose is that head that I see on my wall?"
Said John D.'s grandson Nelson.
"Is it anyone's head whom we know, at all?
"A Rensselaer, or a Saltonstall?
"Is it Franklin D? Is it Mordaunt Hall?
"Or is it the head of a Russian?"

*"I paint what I think," said Rivera.*

*"I paint what I paint, I paint what I see,*
*"I paint what I think," said Rivera,*
*"And the thing that is dearest in life to me*
*"In a bourgeois hall is Integrity;*
*"However . . .*
*"I'll take out a couple of people drinkin'*
*"And put in a picture of Abraham Lincoln,*
*"I could even give you McCormick's reaper*
*"And still not make my art much cheaper.*
*"But the head of Lenin has got to stay*
*"Or my friends will give me the bird today,*
*"The bird, the bird, forever."*

"It's not good taste in a man like me,"
Said John D.'s grandson Nelson,
"To question an artist's integrity
"Or mention a practical thing like a fee,
"But I know what I like to a large degree,
"Though art I hate to hamper;
"For twenty-one thousand conservative bucks
"You painted a radical. I say shucks,
"I never could rent the offices—
"The capitalistic offices.
"For this, as you know, is a public hall
"And people want doves, or a tree in fall,
"And though your art I dislike to hamper,
"I owe a *little* to God and Gramper,
"And after all,
"It's *my* wall . . ."

*"We'll see if it is," said Rivera*

# Modern Art in the USA

## Issues and Controversies of the 20th Century

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