THE AMERICAN ARTS IN SIX PARTS

*A lecture series by Estill Curtis Pennington*

For more than 200 years the artists of America have provided an illustrated guide to national identity, multi-cultural diversity, aesthetic responses to international art movements, and individual expressions in the fine and decorative arts. This lecture series explores six topics whose thematic content is drawn from a body of work created between 1792 and 1942, a span of some 150 years, moving forth from the early days of the young republic to the emergence of America upon the global stage. While the creative material culture of those years is little known outside the United States, it defies certain stereotypical notions of a country racked by violent wild west shoot outs, torn by racial prejudice, struck by harsh class divisions fostered by a robber baron elite, and held back by sparse educational opportunity. We will see a far more subtle America, one in which the overwhelming beauty of the natural setting provides an inspiring backdrop to the ambitions of those struggling to mold “this new found land, this new found man…” into a land where the much vaunted idea of freedom of expression nurtured a fledgling art world.

Three critical modes will be deployed in the presentation of these artworks: formalism, deconstruction, and reconstruction. Formalism encourages a response to the formal qualities of a work of art…line, massing, color value, shape…divorced from imagined narrative implications. Deconstruction returns the viewer to an Aristotelian state of mind: if an object can be observed then it is open to description, an incentive to ask what informs the object in order to answer how the object informs us. Reconstruction connotes an interest in detecting, through historical documentation, the national and international references available to the local artist in the act of creating works of art which evoke a particular sprit of place. This last approach also invites comparative scenarios in keeping with the mission of the John Adams Institute to nurture the intellectual synergy between our countries, prompting counter references to certain Dutch artworks of the 17th and 19th centuries which will play a large role in these presentations.

**Lecture 1: 1776-1830: Creating an American identity**

Early American portrait artists created a body of work which secured a symbolic American identity, inhabited by the rugged individual, struggling against hostile nature and foreign encroachment upon life, “liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Artists and objects to be presented and discussed include: the paintings of Matthew Pratt, Benjamin West, Gilbert Stuart, and the Peale family; the sculpture of Horatio Greenough; and the architecture of John Mills and Benjamin Henry Latrobe.

**Lecture 2: 1830-1870: Luminism: light in the wilderness, dinner on the table**

Romantic American artists celebrated the hidden, the magical, and the obviously beautiful features of life, especially as seen in nature, as manifest in the dramatically lit landscapes and abundantly laden tables we will see. Artists and objects to be presented and discussed include; the paintings of Thomas Cole, Frederick Edwin Church, Martin Johnson Heade, Fitzhugh Lane, W. C. A. Frerichs, Albert Bierstadt, Robert Scott Duncanson, Severin Roesen, and John Francis; the architecture of A. J. Downing and A. J. Davis; and the sculpture of Joel Tanner Hart and Hiram Powers.

**Lecture 3: 1840-1890: Color, Coincidence and Class: “seeing” American diversity**

Though America has long been heralded as a “melting pot”, three distinct groups existed outside the mainstream of popular culture notions of what it was to be an “American”: native Americans, African-Americans, and the urban poor drawn from many and varied ethnographic sources. This lecture focuses upon their representation and includes works by George Catlin, Charles Bird King, Charles Marion Russell, Christian Mayr, William Sidney Mount, Thomas Satterwhite Noble, William Aiken Walker, Edward Lamson Henry, Winslow Homer, John George Brown and John Nagele; and the sculpture of Erastus Dow Palmer, Mary Edmonia Lewis, Harriet Hosmer, William Wetmore Story and Frederick Remington.

**Lecture 4: 1870-1900: The Holland America line: genteel impressionism**

France was not the only source for impressionist inspiration; several Americans worked in the Netherlands, notably in the area of Bergen and Egmond-aa-zee, resulting in an interaction with various Dutch counterparts in the Hague School and by the shore of the north sea, transforming genre and landscape painting into atmospheric evocations of place. Artists to be seen include Anton Mauve, Mesdag, George Hitchcock, Henry Ward Ranger, Lila Cabot Perry, Willard Leroy Metcalfe, and John Henry Twachtman.

**Lecture 5: 1890-1920 Counter culture: the “modernist” agenda**

This lecture will seek to ask some difficult questions: did the Modernist emphasis on being “new”, “innovative”, and “progressive” result in a critical climate in which well-honed realism was not only disparaged, but dismissed; has one result of the modern era been a disconnect with certain historical styles which still have value? Artists and objects to be discussed include the paintings of Stuart Davis, Georgia O’Keefe, Andrew Dasburg, Robert Delauney, Marsden Hartley, Joseph Stella, John Sloan and George Luks; the sculpture of ElieNadleman and William Zorach; and the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright.

**Lecture 6: 1910-1940 Still to be seen: an American magic realism?**

The final lecture of the series, will consider the term “magic realism” within the context of Dutch painting, with reference to Pyke Koch, CarelWillink, Dick Ket, WimSchumaker and Raoul Hynkes, as a way of seeing certain aspects of American painting created as an offset to modernism in the first half of the 20th century. Artists to be discussed include Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, Grant Wood, , Robert Brackman, Leon Kroll and Edward Hopper.

**Estill Curtis Pennington** has served in curatorial capacities for the Archives of American Art, the National Portrait Gallery, the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Morris Museum of Art. His publications include *William Edward West, 1788-1857*, *Kentucky Painter, Romantic Spirits, Scenic Impressions* and *Kentucky: The Master Painters from the Frontier Era to the Great Depression.*He also published articles and catalog essays on the Dutch magic realists, and contemporary Dutch realism.

**SUGGESTED READING LIST:**

Bjelajac, David. *American Art: a critical history.* Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005.

Broude, Norma. *Impressionism, A Feminist Reading*. New York, 1991.

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Dunlap, William. *AHistory of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States.* New York: George P. Scott and Company, Printers, 1834. Reprint edited by Rita Weiss. New York: Dover Publications, 1969.

Larkin, Oliver. *Art and Life in America.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968.

McElroy, Guy C. *Facing history: the black image in American Art 1710-1940.* Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1988.

Pennington, Estill Curtis. *Romantic Spirits: nineteenth century paintings of the South from the Johnson Collection.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012.

Stott, Annette. *Dutch Utopia : American Artists in Holland 1880-1914.* Savannah : Telfair Museum of Art, 2009.

\_\_\_. *Holland Mania : the unknown Dutch period in American art and culture.* Overlook Books : 1998.

Weinberg, H. Barbara, et. al. *American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885-1915*. New York,1994.

Wilmerding, John. *American Light: the luminist movement 1850-1875.* Princeton University Press, 1989.