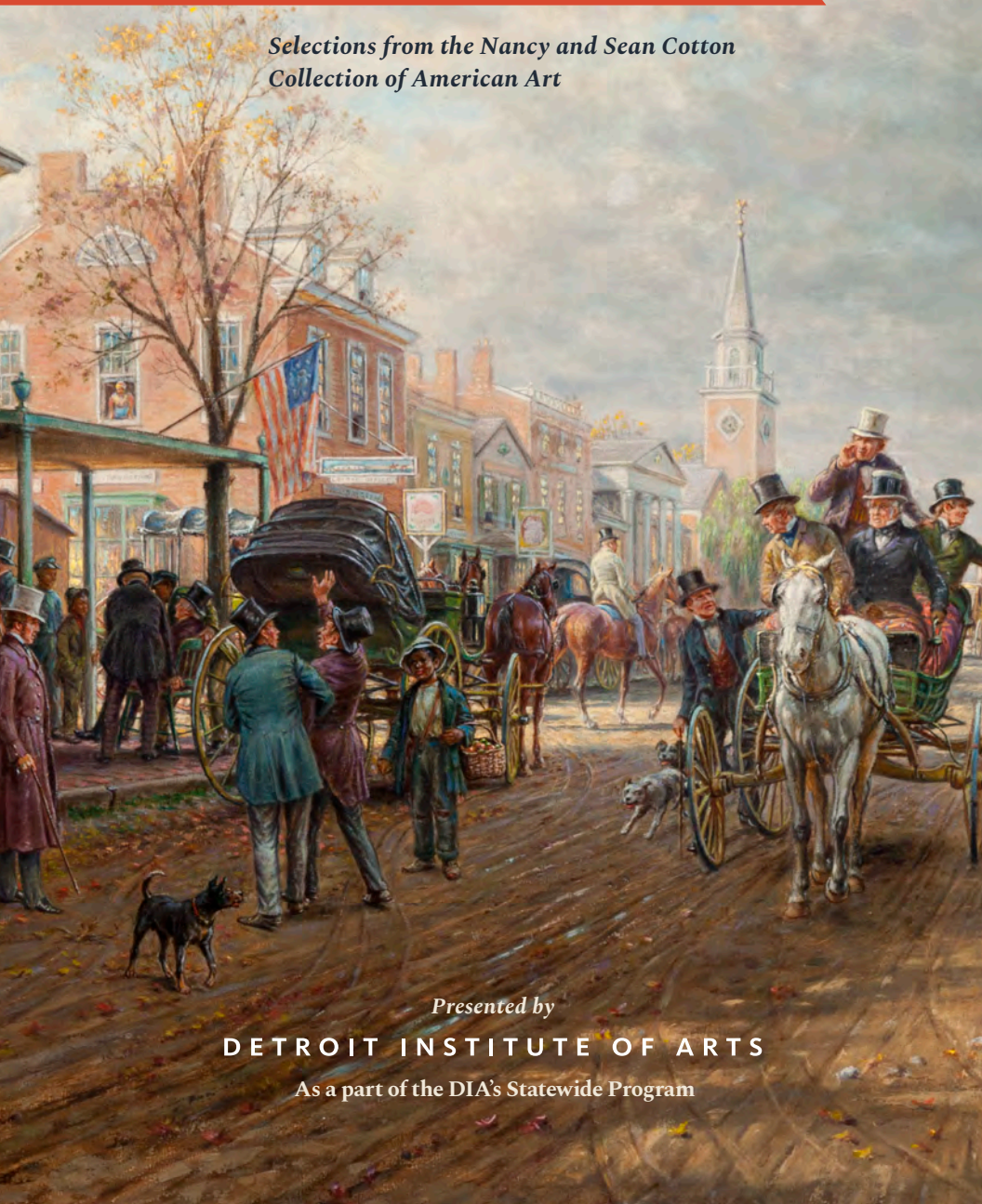


AMERICAN SPECTACLE

*Selections from the Nancy and Sean Cotton
Collection of American Art*



Presented by

DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

As a part of the DIA's Statewide Program

The DIA provides a number of services to institutions, organizations and communities throughout the State of Michigan. In addition to the Statewide Exhibition Program, the DIA also provides conservation services to Michigan museums, educator programs for teachers throughout the state and professional development opportunities for museum staff.

American painters of the late 19th century explore competing visions of American culture and identity through works of art that remain relevant today.

From sweeping landscapes to still life paintings, the striking images in this exhibit reveal a variety of ways artists struggled to define the nation.

Painted between 1855 and 1936, these artworks depict images of American spectacle—dramatic moments, places, and events in U.S. history. During periods of immense change, these artists explored issues of:

- American Culture and Identity
- National Memory
- Ideas about History and Progress

As you explore the art in this exhibit, we encourage you to reflect on the complex and changing meanings associated with this country, then and now.



★ *A New World*, 1864, Thomas Moran, American, 1837–1926; oil on canvas. Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection.



★ *Schooner Progress Wrecked on Coney Island*, 1875, Francis Augustus Silva, American, 1835–1886; oil on canvas. Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection.

PROGRESS REVISITED



In *A New World*, the rich colors and vibrant hues belie the moment when Europeans first made contact with inhabitants of the Americas. Thomas Moran imagines an island’s indigenous people looking out toward a ship on the horizon. It carries Christopher Columbus. His arrival will ultimately lead to European colonists coming to the “New World” in the name of progress, changing the lush paradise and altering the course of world history.

In Francis A. Silva’s painting, the battered hull of the sailboat *Progress* lies stranded on the beach on Independence Day, symbolizing the disillusionment Americans felt following the destruction and chaos of the Civil War. To the ships out at sea, the shattered vessel serves as a warning of the dangers of unfettered progress.



★ *Election Day 1844, 1913*, Edward Lamson Henry, American, 1835–1886; oil on canvas. Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection.



★ *Decoration Day, 1885*, Carl Hirschberg, 1854–1923; oil on canvas. Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection.

The CIVIL WAR REMEMBERED



In the years following the Civil War (1861–65), artists struggled to represent the reasons for the conflict, the losses endured, and its lasting impact.

In *Election Day 1844*, a carriage moves down the middle of a road that splits the town in two. This element of the composition hints at a divisive presidential election over the questions of territorial expansion and the spread of slavery. These debates would erupt into violence with the outbreak of the Civil War.

In comparison, *Decoration Day* shows a community honoring the memory of Union soldiers on Decoration Day, the precursor of Memorial Day.

Both paintings are a response to the Civil War—one highlights its causes and the other the war's lasting effects. Look for the African American figures in the paintings. Their presence reminds viewers that the abolition of slavery was the cause of the war.



★ *Trompe L'Oeil Landscape*, 1858, Charles Baker, American, 1839–1888; oil on panel. Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection.



★ *After the Hunt*, 1902, Richard La Barre Goodwin, American, 1840–1910; oil on canvas. Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection.

The NATION & The NATURAL WORLD



★ *Niagara Falls at Sunset*, ca. 1861, George Loring Brown, American, 1814–1889; oil on canvas. Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection.



George Loring Brown's expansive view of Niagara Falls captures the majestic, untamable power of the country's landscape, conveying a distinctively American spirit and identity.

In contrast, the other two paintings here present nature as controlled and contained.

Fresh game, a rifle, and empty shells appear in *After the Hunt*. Drawing on the romanticized image of the rugged frontiersman, Richard La Barre Goodwin portrays nature tamed by man in this still-life painting.

In Charles Baker's piece, notice how the edges of the landscape painting appear to curl off the board. By using a *trompe l'oeil* technique, Baker creates the illusion of a painting within a painting, raising questions about how images of nature and their meanings are constructed.

IMAGINING AMERICA



In this pairing, you will see how Europeans have imagined America in different ways.

In *American Circus in Brittany*, a muscle-man and daring woman rider take center stage. Just beyond the ring, a member of the crowd inspects a performer who appears to be Native American. The artist depicts an American circus troupe in exaggerated roles to pander to the French audience's assumptions about Americans.

By contrast, *Queen Mary Coming to New York* shows the massive luxury liner arriving in New York from England. Set against an elaborate backdrop of towering skyscrapers, this painting projects a modern, cosmopolitan understanding of America.



- ★ *American Circus in Brittany, 1869-70, Frederic Arthur Bridgman, American, 1847-1928; oil on canvas. Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection.*



- ★ *Queen Mary Coming to New York, 1936, William John Patton McDowell, British, 1888-1950; oil on canvas. Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection.*

WHAT ARE AMERICAN ICONS?



During the 1800s, some artists found significant meaning in landscapes like Michigan's Pictured Rocks on Lake Superior. The contrasting stripes on these cliffs and the sweeping arch of the Great Cave attracted painters from across the country, like Thomas Moran or the group of artists pictured in the foreground.

Other artists looked to built environments. Frederick Rondel captures the excited crowds gathered on the cloudy day when the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France, was unveiled in New York Harbor. The image of the statue in a hazy mist suggests the statue's complex associations of immigration with the nation's founding ideals and principles of freedom.



- ★ *The Great Cave, Pictured Rocks, Lake Superior, Michigan, 1873, Thomas Moran, American, 1837–1926; oil on canvas. Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection.*



- ★ *Statue of Liberty Celebration, about 1886, Frederick Rondel, American, 1826–1892; oil on canvas. Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection.*

This educational resource was developed by the DIA Education Programs team in collaboration with social studies curriculum specialists representing the Michigan Department of Education, Genesee Intermediate School District, Wayne RESA, Eastpointe Community Schools, and Southfield Public Schools.



This exhibition is organized by the Detroit Institute of Arts and made possible by the Nancy and Sean Cotton Collection. This is one in a series of American art exhibitions created through a multi-year, multi-institutional partnership formed by the Detroit Institute of Arts as part of the Art Bridges + Terra Foundation Initiative. Generous support is provided by the Richard and Jane Manoogian Foundation.

Art Bridges + **TERRA**
FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART



DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

dia.org