

United States

Cultural life

The great art historian Sir Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich once wrote that there is really no such thing as “art”; there are only artists. This is a useful reminder to anyone studying, much less setting out to try to define, anything as big and varied as the culture of the United States. For the culture that endures in any country is made not by vast impersonal forces or by unfolding historical necessities but by uniquely talented men and women, one-of-a-kind people doing one thing at a time—doing what they can, or must. In the United States, particularly, where there is no more a truly “established” art than an established religion—no real academies, no real official art—culture is where one finds it, and many of the most gifted artists have chosen to make their art far from the parades and rallies of worldly life.

Some of the keenest students of the American arts have even come to dislike the word *culture* as a catchall for the plastic and literary arts, since it is a term borrowed from anthropology, with its implication that there is any kind of seamless unity to the things that writers and poets and painters have made. The art of some of the greatest American artists and writers, after all, has been made in deliberate seclusion and has taken as its material the interior life of the mind and heart that shapes and precedes shared “national” experience. It is American art before it is the culture of the United States. Even if it is true that these habits of retreat are, in turn, themselves in part traditions, and culturally shaped, it is also true that the least illuminating way to approach the poems of Emily Dickinson or the paintings of Winslow Homer, to take only two imposing instances, is as the consequence of large-scale mass sociological phenomenon.



Daydreaming, watercolours, pencil, pen, and black ink on paper by Winslow Homer, 1880 and 1882; in a private collection.

In a private collection

Still, many, perhaps even most, American culture makers have not only found themselves, as all Americans do, caught in the common life of their country—they have chosen to make the common catch their common subject. Their involvement with the problems they share with their neighbours, near and far, has given their art a common shape and often a common substance. And if one quarrel has absorbed American artists and thinkers more than any other, it has been that one between the values of a mass, democratic, popular culture and those of a refined elite culture accessible only to the few—the quarrel between “low” and “high.” From the very beginnings of American art, the “top down” model of all European civilization, with a fine art made for an elite class of patrons by a specialized class of artists, was in doubt, in part because many

Americans did not want that kind of art, in part because, even if they wanted it, the social institutions—a court or a cathedral—just were not there to produce and welcome it. What came in its place was a

commercial culture, a marketplace of the arts, which sometimes degraded art into mere commerce and at other times raised the common voice of the people to the level of high art.

In the 20th century, this was, in some part, a problem that science left on the doorstep of the arts. Beginning at the turn of the century, the growth of the technology of mass communications—the movies, the phonograph, radio, and eventually television—created a potential audience for stories and music and theatre larger than anyone could previously have dreamed that made it possible for music and drama and pictures to reach more people than had ever been possible. People in San Francisco could look at the latest pictures or hear the latest music from New York City months, or even moments, after they were made; a great performance demanded a pilgrimage no longer than the path to a corner movie theatre. High culture had come to the American living room.

But, though interest in a “democratic” culture that could compete with traditional high culture has grown in recent times, it is hardly a new preoccupation. One has only to read such 19th-century classics as Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) to be reminded of just how long, and just how keenly, Americans have asked themselves if all the stained glass and sacred music of European culture is all it is cracked up to be, and if the tall tales and Cigar-Store Indians did not have more juice and life in them for a new people in a new land. Twain’s whole example, after all, was to show that American speech as it was actually spoken was closer to Homer than imported finery was.



Mark Twain, lithograph from *Puck*, 1885.
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. LC-
USZC4-4294

In this way, the new machines of mass reproduction and diffusion that fill modern times, from the daguerreotype to the World Wide Web, came not simply as a new or threatening force but also as the fulfillment of a standing American dream. Mass culture seemed to promise a democratic culture: a cultural life directed not to an aristocracy but to all men and women. It was not that the new machines produced new ideals but that the new machines made the old dreams seem suddenly a practical possibility.

The practical appearance of this dream began in a spirit of hope. Much American art at the turn of the 20th century and through the 1920s, from the paintings of Charles Sheeler to the poetry of Hart Crane, hymned the power of the new technology and the dream of a common culture. By the middle of the century, however, many people recoiled in dismay at what had happened to the American arts, high and low, and thought that these old dreams of a common, unifying culture had been irrevocably crushed. The new technology of mass communications, for the

most part, seemed to have achieved not a generous democratization but a bland homogenization of culture. Many people thought that the control of culture had passed into the hands of advertisers, people who used the means of a common culture just to make a buck. It was not only that most of the

new music and drama that had been made for movies and radio, and later for television, seemed shallow; it was also that the high or serious culture that had become available through the means of mass reproduction seemed to have been reduced to a string of popularized hits, which concealed the real complexity of art. Culture, made democratic, had become too easy.

As a consequence, many intellectuals and artists around the end of World War II began to try to construct new kinds of elite “high” culture, art that would be deliberately difficult—and to many people it seemed that this new work was merely difficult. Much of the new art and dance seemed puzzling and deliberately obscure. Difficult art happened, above all, in New York City. During World War II, New York had seen an influx of avant-garde artists escaping Adolf Hitler’s Europe, including the painters Max Ernst, Piet Mondrian, and Joan Miró, as well as the composer Igor Stravinsky. They imported many of the ideals of the European avant-garde, particularly the belief that art should always be difficult and “ahead of its time.” (It is a paradox that the avant-garde movement in Europe had begun, in the late 19th century, in rebellion against what its advocates thought were the oppressive and stifling standards of high, official culture in Europe and that it had often looked to American mass culture for inspiration.) In the United States, however, the practice of avant-garde art became a way for artists and intellectuals to isolate themselves from what they thought was the cheapening of standards.



Piet Mondrian, photograph by Arnold Newman, 1942.

© Arnold Newman

And yet this counterculture had, by the 1960s, become in large American cities an official culture of its own. For many intellectuals around 1960, this gloomy situation seemed to be all too permanent. One could choose between an undemanding low culture and an austere but isolated high culture. For much of the century, scholars of culture saw these two worlds—the public world of popular culture and the private world of modern art—as irreconcilable antagonists and thought that American culture was defined by the abyss between them.

As the century and its obsessions closed, however, more and more scholars came to see in the most enduring inventions of American culture patterns of cyclical renewal between high and low. And as scholars have studied particular cases instead of abstract ideas, it has become apparent that the contrast between high and low has often been overdrawn. Instead of a simple opposition between popular culture and elite culture, it is possible to recognize in the prolix and varied forms of popular culture innovations and

inspirations that have enlivened the most original high American culture—and to then see how the inventions of high culture circulate back into the street, in a spiraling, creative flow. In the astonishing achievements of the American jazz musicians, who took the popular songs of Tin Pan Alley and the Broadway musical and inflected them with their own improvisational genius; in the works of great choreographers like Paul Taylor and George Balanchine, who found in tap dances and marches and

ballroom bebop new kinds of movement that they then incorporated into the language of high dance; in the “dream boxes” of the American avant-garde artist Joseph Cornell, who took for his material the mundane goods of Woolworth’s and the department store and used them as private symbols in surreal dioramas: in the work of all of these artists, and so many more, we see the same kind of inspiring dialogue between the austere discipline of avant-garde art and the enlivening touch of the vernacular.

This argument has been so widely resolved, in fact, that, in the decades bracketing the turn of the 21st century, the old central and shaping American debate between high and low has been in part replaced by a new and, for the moment, still more clamorous argument. It might be said that if the old debate was between high and low, this one is between the “centre” and the “margins.” The argument between high and low was what gave the modern era its special savour. A new generation of critics and artists, defining themselves as “postmodern,” have argued passionately that the real central issue of culture is the “construction” of cultural values, whether high or low, and that these values reflect less enduring truth and beauty, or even authentic popular taste, than the prejudices of professors. Since culture has mostly been made by white males praising dead white males to other white males in classrooms, they argue, the resulting view of American culture has been made unduly pale, masculine, and lifeless. It is not only the art of African Americans and other minorities that has been unfairly excluded from the canon of what is read, seen, and taught, these scholars argue, often with more passion than evidence; it is also the work of anonymous artists, particularly women, that has been “marginalized” or treated as trivial. This argument can conclude with a rational, undeniable demand that more attention be paid to obscure and neglected writers and artists, or it can take the strong and often irrational form that all aesthetic values are merely prejudices enforced by power. If the old debate between high and low asked if real values could rise from humble beginnings, the new debate about American culture asks if true value, as opposed to mere power, exists at all.

Adam Gopnik

Literature

Because the most articulate artists are, by definition, writers, most of the arguments about what culture is and ought to do have been about what literature is and ought to do—and this can skew our perception of American culture a little, because the most memorable American art has not always appeared in books and novels and stories and plays. In part, perhaps, this is because writing was the first art form to undergo a revolution of mass technology; books were being printed in thousands of copies, while one still had to make a pilgrimage to hear a symphony or see a painting. The basic dispute between mass experience and individual experience has been therefore perhaps less keenly felt as an everyday fact in writing in the 20th and 21st centuries than it has been in other art forms. Still, writers have seen and recorded this quarrel as a feature of the world around them, and the evolution of American writing in the past 50 years has shown some of the same basic patterns that can be found in painting and dance and the theatre.

In the United States after World War II, many writers, in opposition to what they perceived as the bland flattening out of cultural life, made their subject all the things that set Americans apart from one another. Although for many Americans, ethnic and even religious differences had become increasingly less important as the century moved on—holiday rather than everyday material—many writers after World War II seized on these differences to achieve a detached point of view on American life. Beginning in the 1940s and '50s, three groups in particular seemed to be “outsider-insiders” who could bring a special vision to fiction: Southerners, Jews, and African Americans.

Each group had a sense of uncertainty, mixed emotions, and stifled aspirations that lent a questioning counterpoint to the general chorus of affirmation in American life. The Southerners—William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor most particularly—thought that a noble tradition of defeat and failure had been part of the fabric of Southern life since the Civil War. At a time when “official” American culture often insisted that the American story was one of endless triumphs and optimism, they told stories of tragic fate. Jewish writers—most prominently Chicago novelist Saul Bellow, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth—found in the “golden exile” of Jews in the United States a juxtaposition of surface affluence with deeper unease and perplexity that seemed to many of their fellow Americans to offer a common predicament in a heightened form. At the turn of the 21st century, younger Jewish writers from the former Soviet Union such as Gary Shteyngart and Lara Vapnyar dealt impressively with the experience of immigrants in the United States.

Among the immigrant writers who explored the intersection of their old and new cultures at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st were Cuban American writer Oscar Hijuelos, Antigua-born Jamaica Kincaid, Bosnian immigrant Aleksandar Hemon, Indian-born novelist and short-story writer Bharati Mukherjee, and Asian American writers Maxine Hong Kingston and Ha Jin.



Mukherjee, Bharati

For African Americans, of course, the promise of American life had in many respects never been fulfilled. “What happens to a dream deferred,” the poet Langston Hughes asked, and many African American writers attempted to answer that question, variously, through stories that mingled pride, perplexity, and rage. African American literature achieved one of the few unquestioned masterpieces of late 20th-century American fiction writing in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). Later two African American women, Toni Morrison (the first African American female to win the Nobel Prize for Literature; 1993), and Alice Walker, published some of the most important post-World War II American fiction.

The rise of feminism as a political movement gave many women a sense that their experience too is richly and importantly outside the mainstream; since at least the 1960s, there has been an

explosion of women's fiction, including the much-admired work of Joyce Carol Oates, Anne Tyler, Ann Beattie, Gail Godwin, and Alison Lurie.

Perhaps precisely because so many novelists sought to make their fiction from experiences that were deliberately imagined as marginal, set aside from the general condition of American life, many other writers had the sense that fiction, and particularly the novel, might not any longer be the best way to try to record American life. For many writers the novel seemed to have become above all a form of private, interior expression and could no longer keep up with the extravagant oddities of the United States. Many gifted writers took up journalism with some of the passion for perfection of style that had once been reserved for fiction. The exemplars of this form of poetic journalism included the masters of *The New Yorker* magazine, most notably A.J. Liebling, whose books included *The Earl of Louisiana* (1961), a study of an election in Louisiana, as well as Joseph Mitchell, who in his books *The Bottom of the Harbour* (1944) and *Joe Gould's Secret* (1942) offered dark and perplexing accounts of the life of the American metropolis. The dream of combining real facts and lyrical fire also achieved a masterpiece in the poet James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; with photographs by Walker Evans), an account of sharecropper life in the South that is a landmark in the struggle for fact writing that would have the beauty and permanence of poetry.



Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Bud Fields and his family, Hale county, Alabama, photograph by Walker Evans, c. 1936–37; from the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) by Evans and James Agee.

Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Photograph Collection/Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (digital file no. 8c52407u)

As the century continued, this genre of imaginative nonfiction (sometimes called the documentary novel or the nonfiction novel) continued to evolve and took on many different forms. In the writing of Calvin Trillin, John McPhee, Neil Sheehan, and Truman Capote, all among Liebling's and Mitchell's successors at *The New Yorker*, this new form continued to seek a tone of subdued and even amused understatement. Tom Wolfe, whose influential books included *The Right Stuff* (1979), an account of the early days of the American space program, and Norman Mailer, whose books included *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), a ruminative piece about the Republican and Democratic national conventions in 1968, deliberately took on huge public subjects and subjected them to the insights (and, many people thought, the idiosyncratic whims) of a personal sensibility. During the 1990s autobiography became the focus for a number of accomplished novelists, including Frank McCourt, Anne Roiphe, and Dave Eggers. At the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st, massive, ambitious novels were published by David Foster Wallace (*Infinite Jest*, 1996) and Jonathan Franzen (*The Corrections*, 2001; *Freedom*, 2010).

As the nonfiction novel often pursued extremes of grandiosity and hyperbole, the American short story assumed a previously unexpected importance in the life of American writing; the short story became

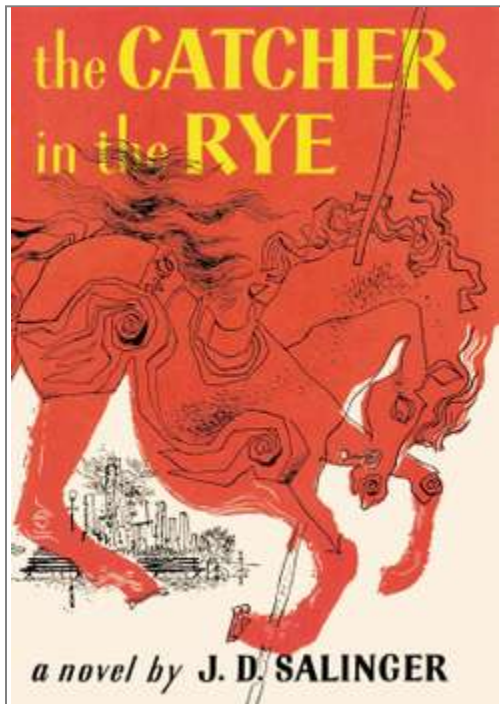


Tom Wolfe.

Jim Cooper/AP/REX/Shutterstock.com

the voice of private vision and private lives. The short story, with its natural insistence on the unique moment and the infrangible glimpse of something private and fragile, had a new prominence. The rise of the American short story is bracketed by two remarkable books: J.D. Salinger's *Nine Stories* (1953) and Raymond Carver's collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). Salinger inspired a generation by imagining that the serious search for a spiritual life could be reconciled with an art of gaiety and charm; Carver confirmed in the next generation their sense of a loss of spirituality in an art of taciturn reserve and cloaked

emotions.



cover of *The Catcher in the Rye*

Reproduction of the cover of the first edition of J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).

Little, Brown and Company/Hachette Book Group USA

Carver, who died in 1988, and the great novelist and man of letters John Updike, who died in 2009, were perhaps the last undisputed masters of literature in the high American sense that emerged with Ernest Hemingway and Faulkner. Yet in no area of the American arts, perhaps, have the claims of the marginal to take their place at the centre of the table been so fruitful, subtle, or varied as in literature. Perhaps because writing is inescapably personal, the trap of turning art into mere ideology has been most deftly avoided in its realm. This can be seen in the dramatically expanded horizons of the feminist and minority writers whose work first appeared in the 1970s and '80s, including the Chinese American Amy Tan. A new freedom to write about human erotic experience previously considered strange or even deviant shaped much new writing, from the comic obsessive novels of Nicholson Baker through the work of those short-story writers and novelists, including Edmund White and David Leavitt, who have made art out of previously repressed and unnarrated areas of homoerotic experience. Literature is above all the narrative medium of the arts, the one that still best relates *What Happened to Me*, and American literature, at least, has only been enriched by new “mes” and new narratives. (See *also* American literature.)

Adam Gopnik The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

The visual arts and postmodernism

Perhaps the greatest, and certainly the loudest, event in American cultural life since World War II was what the critic Irving Sandler has called “The Triumph of American Painting”—the emergence of a new form of art that allowed American painting to dominate the world. This dominance lasted for at least

40 years, from the birth of the so-called New York school, or Abstract Expressionism, around 1945 until at least the mid-1980s, and it took in many different kinds of art and artists. In its first flowering, in the epic-scaled abstractions of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and the other members of the New York school, this new painting seemed abstract, rarefied, and constructed from a series of negations, from saying “no!” to everything except the purest elements of painting. Abstract Expressionism seemed to stand at the farthest possible remove from the common life of American culture and particularly from the life of American popular culture. Even this painting, however, later came under a new and perhaps less-austere scrutiny; and the art historian Robert Rosenblum has persuasively argued that many of the elements of Abstract Expressionism, for all their apparent hermetic distance from common experience, are inspired by the scale and light of the American landscape and American 19th-century landscape painting—by elements that run deep and centrally in Americans’ sense of themselves and their country.



de Kooning, Willem: *Woman II*

Woman II, oil on canvas by Willem de Kooning, 1952; in the Museum of Modern Art, New York City. 149.9 × 109.3 cm.

Fine Art Images/SuperStock

It is certainly true that the next generation of painters, who throughout the 1950s continued the unparalleled dominance of American influence in the visual arts, made their art aggressively and unmistakably of the dialogue between the studio and the street. Jasper Johns, for instance, took as his subject the most common and even banal of American symbols—maps of the 48 continental states, the flag itself—and depicted the quickly read and immediately identifiable common icons with a slow, meditative, painterly scrutiny. His contemporary and occasional partner Robert Rauschenberg took up the same dialogue in a different form; his art consisted of dreamlike collages of images silk-screened from the mass media, combined with personal artifacts and personal symbols, all brought together in a *mélange* of jokes and deliberately perverse associations. In a remarkably similar spirit, the eccentric surrealist Joseph Cornell made little shoe-box-like dioramas in which images taken from popular culture were made into a dreamlike language of nostalgia and poetic reverie. Although Cornell, like William Blake, whom he in many ways resembled, worked largely in isolation, his sense of the poetry that lurks unseen in even the most absurd everyday objects had a profound effect on other artists.

By the early 1960s, with the explosion of the new art form called Pop art, the engagement of painting and drawing with popular culture seemed so explicit as to be almost overwhelming and, at times, risked losing any sense of private life and personal inflection at all—it risked becoming all street and no studio. Artists such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Claes Oldenburg took the styles and objects of popular culture—everything from comic books to lipstick tubes—and treated them with the absorption and grave seriousness previously reserved for religious icons. But this art too had its secrets,



"Monogram," combine painting (mixed media) by Robert Rauschenberg, 1959; in the Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Moderna Museet, Stockholm/Photograph:
Statens Konstmuseer

as well as its strong individual voices and visions. In his series of drawings called *Proposals for Monumental Buildings*, 1965–69, Oldenburg drew ordinary things—fire hydrants, ice-cream bars, bananas—as though they were as big as skyscrapers. His pictures combined a virtuoso's gift for drawing with a vision, at once celebratory and satirical, of the P.T. Barnum spirit of American life. Warhol silk-screened images of popular movie stars and Campbell's soup cans; in replicating them, he suggested that their reiteration by mass production had emptied them of their humanity but also given them a kind of hieratic immortality. Lichtenstein used the techniques of comic-book illustration to paraphrase some of the monuments of modern painting, making a coolly witty art in which Henri Matisse danced with Captain Marvel.

But these artists who self-consciously chose to make their art out of popular materials and images were not the only ones who had

something to say about the traffic between mass and elite culture. The so-called Minimalists, who made abstract art out of simple and usually hard-edged geometric forms, from one point of view carried on the tradition of austere abstraction. But it was also the Minimalists, as art historians have pointed out, who carried over the vocabulary of the new International Style of unornamented architecture into the world of the fine arts; Minimalism imagined the dialogue between street and studio in terms of hard edges and simple forms rather than in terms of imagery, but it took part in the same dialogue. In some cases, the play between high and low has been carried out as a dialogue between Pop and Minimalist styles themselves. Frank Stella, thought by many to be the preeminent American painter of the late 20th century, began as a Minimalist, making extremely simple paintings of black chevrons from which everything was banished except the barest minimum of painterly cues. Yet in his subsequent work he became almost extravagantly "maximalist" and, as he began to make bas-reliefs, added to the stark elegance of his early paintings wild, Pop-art elements of outthrusting spirals and Day-Glo colors—even sequins and glitter—that deliberately suggested the invigorating vulgarity of the Las Vegas Strip. Stella's flamboyant reliefs combine the spare elegance of abstraction with the greedy vitality of the American street.

In the 1980s and '90s, it was in the visual arts, however, that the debates over postmodern marginality and the construction of a fixed canon became, perhaps, most fierce—yet, oddly, were at the same time least eloquent, or least fully realized in emotionally potent works of art. Pictures and objects do not "argue" particularly well, so the tone of much contemporary American art became debased, with the cryptic languages of high abstraction and conceptual art put in the service of narrow ideological arguments. It became a standard practice in American avant-garde art of the 1980s and '90s to experience an installation in which an inarguable social message—for instance, that there should be fewer homeless people in the streets—was encoded in a highly oblique, Surrealist manner, with the duty of the viewer then reduced to decoding the manner back into the message. The long journey of

American art in the 20th century away from socially “responsible” art that lacked intense artistic originality seemed to have been short-circuited, without necessarily producing much of a gain in clarity or accessibility.

No subject or idea has been as powerful, or as controversial, in American arts and letters at the end of the 20th century and into the new millennium as the idea of the “postmodern,” and in no sphere has the argument been as lively as in that of the plastic arts. The idea of the postmodern has been powerful in the United States exactly because the idea of the modern was so powerful; where Europe has struggled with the idea of modernity, in the United States it has been largely triumphant, thus leaving the question of “what comes next” all the more problematic. Since the 1960s, the ascendance of postmodern culture has been argued—now it is even sometimes said that a “post-postmodern” epoch has begun, but what exactly that means is remarkably vague.

In some media, what is meant by postmodern is clear and easy enough to point to: it is the rejection of the utopian aspects of modernism, and particularly of the attempt to express that utopianism in ideal or absolute form—the kind experienced in Bauhaus architecture or in Minimalist painting.

Postmodernism is an attempt to muddy lines drawn falsely clear. In American architecture, for instance, the meaning of *postmodern* is reasonably plain. Beginning with the work of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Peter Eisenman, postmodern architects deliberately rejected the pure forms and “truth to materials” of the modern architect and put in their place irony, ornament, historical reference, and deliberate paradox. Some American postmodern architecture has been ornamental and cheerfully cosmetic, as in the later work of Philip Johnson and the mid-1980s work of Michael Graves. Some has been demanding and deliberately challenging even to conventional ideas of spatial lucidity, as in Eisenman’s Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio. But one can see the difference just by looking.

In painting and sculpture, on the other hand, it is often harder to know where exactly to draw the line—and why the line is drawn. In the paintings of the American artist David Salle or the photographs of Cindy Sherman, for instance, one sees apparently postmodern elements of pastiche, borrowed imagery, and deliberately “impure” collage. But all of these devices are also components of modernism and part of the heritage of Surrealism, though the formal devices of a Rauschenberg or Johns were used in a different emotional key. The true common element among the postmodern perhaps lies in a note of extreme pessimism and melancholy about the possibility of escaping from borrowed imagery into “authentic” experience. It is this emotional tone that gives postmodernism its peculiar register and, one might almost say, its authenticity.

In literature, the postmodern is, once again, hard to separate from the modern, since many of its keynotes—for instance, a love of complicated artifice and obviously literary devices, along with the mixing of realistic and frankly fantastic or magical devices—are at least as old as James Joyce’s founding modernist fictions. But certainly the expansion of possible sources, the liberation from the narrowly white male view of the world, and a broadening of testimony given and testimony taken are part of what postmodern literature has in common with other kinds of postmodern culture. It has been

part of the postmodern transformation in American fiction as well to place authors previously marginalized as genre writers at the centre of attention. The African American crime writer Chester Himes, for example, has been given serious critical attention, while the strange visionary science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick was ushered, in 2007, from his long exile in paperback into the Library of America.

What is at stake in the debates over modern and postmodern is finally the American idea of the individual. Where modernism in the United States placed its emphasis on the autonomous individual, the heroic artist, postmodernism places its emphasis on the “de-centred” subject, the artist as a prisoner, rueful or miserable, of culture. Art is seen as a social event rather than as communication between persons. If in modernism an individual artist made something that in turn created a community of observers, in the postmodern epoch the opposite is true: the social circumstance, the chain of connections that make seeming opposites unite, key off the artist and make him what he is. In the work of the artist Jeff Koons, for instance—who makes nothing but has things, from kitsch figurines to giant puppies composed of flowers, made for him—this postmodern rejection of the handmade or authentic is given a weirdly comic tone, at once eccentric and humorous. It is the impurities of culture, rather than the purity of the artist’s vision, that haunts contemporary art.

Nonetheless, if the push and charge that had been so unlooked-for in American art since the 1940s seemed diminished, the turn of the 21st century was a rich time for second and even third acts. Richard Serra, John Baldessari, Elizabeth Murray, and Chuck Close were all American artists who continued to produce arresting, original work—most often balanced on that fine knife edge between the blankly literal and the disturbingly metaphoric—without worrying overmuch about theoretical fashions or fashionable theory.

As recently as the 1980s, most surveys of American culture might not have thought photography of much importance. But at the turn of the century, photography began to lay a new claim to attention as a serious art form. For the bulk of the first part of the 20th century, the most remarkable American photographers had, on the whole, tried to make photography into a “fine art” by divorcing it from its ubiquitous presence as a recorder of moments and by splicing it onto older, painterly traditions. A clutch of gifted photographers, however, have, since the end of World War II, been able to transcend the distinction between media image and aesthetic object—between art and photojournalism—to make from a single, pregnant moment a complete and enduring image. Walker Evans, Margaret Bourke-White, and Robert Frank (the latter, like so many artists of the postwar period, an emigrant), for instance, rather than trying to make of photography something as calculated and considered as the traditional fine arts, found in the instantaneous vision of the camera something at once personal and permanent. Frank’s book *The Americans* (1956), the record of a tour of the United States that combined the sense of accident of a family slide show with a sense of the ominous worthy of the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico, was the masterpiece of this vision; and no work of the postwar era was more influential in all fields of visual expression. Robert Mapplethorpe, Diane Arbus, and, above all, Richard Avedon and Irving Penn, who together dominated both fashion and portrait photography for almost half a century and straddled the lines between museum and magazine, high portraiture and low

commercials, all came to seem, in their oscillations between glamour and gloom, exemplary of the predicaments facing the American artist.

Adam Gopnik

The theatre

Perhaps more than any other art form, the American theatre suffered from the invention of the new technologies of mass reproduction. Where painting and writing could choose their distance from (or intimacy with) the new mass culture, many of the age-old materials of the theatre had by the 1980s been subsumed by movies and television. What the theatre could do that could not be done elsewhere was not always clear. As a consequence, the Broadway theatre—which in the 1920s had still seemed a vital area of American culture and, in the high period of the playwright Eugene O'Neill, a place of cultural renaissance—had by the end of the 1980s become very nearly defunct. A brief and largely false spring had taken place in the period just after World War II. Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, in particular, both wrote movingly and even courageously about the lives of the “left-out” Americans, demanding attention for the outcasts of a relentlessly commercial society. Viewing them from the 21st century, however, both seem more traditional and less profoundly innovative than their contemporaries in the other arts, more profoundly tied to the conventions of European naturalist theatre and less inclined or able to renew and rejuvenate the language of their form.

Also much influenced by European models, though in his case by the absurdist theatre of Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett, was Edward Albee, the most prominent American playwright of the 1960s. As Broadway's dominance of the American stage waned in the 1970s, regional theatre took on new importance, and cities such as Chicago, San Francisco, and Louisville, Kentucky, provided significant proving grounds for a new generation of playwrights. On those smaller but still potent stages, theatre continues to speak powerfully. An African American renaissance in the theatre has taken place, with its most notable figure being August Wilson, whose 1985 play *Fences* won the Pulitzer Prize. And, for the renewal and preservation of the American language, there is still nothing to equal the stage: David Mamet, in his plays, among them *Glengarry, Glen Ross* (1983) and *Speed the Plow* (1987), both caught and created an American vernacular—verbose, repetitive, obscene, and eloquent—that combined the local colour of Damon Runyon and the bleak truthfulness of Harold Pinter. The one completely original American contribution to the stage, the musical theatre, blossomed in the 1940s and '50s in the works of Frank Loesser (especially *Guys and Dolls*, which the critic Kenneth Tynan regarded as one of the greatest of American plays) but became heavy-handed and at the beginning of the 21st century existed largely as a revival art and in the brave “holdout” work of composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim (*Company*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Into the Woods*). As the new century progressed, however, innovation once again found its way to Broadway with productions such as Steve Sater and Duncan Sheik's *Spring Awakening*, Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman's *Wicked*, Jeff Whitty, Jeff Marx, and Robert Lopez's *Avenue Q*, Lopez, Matt Stone, and Trey Parker's *The Book of Mormon*, and Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*.



Playwright August Wilson

Ted S. Warren/AP Images

Motion pictures

In some respects the motion picture is the American art form par excellence, and no area of art has undergone a more dramatic revision in critical appraisal in the recent past. Throughout most of the 1940s and '50s, serious critics, with a few honourable exceptions (notably, James Agee and Manny Farber), even those who took the cinema seriously as a potential artistic medium, took it for granted that (excepting the work of D.W. Griffith and Orson Welles), the commercial Hollywood movie was, judged as art, hopelessly compromised by commerce. In the 1950s in France,

however, a generation of critics associated with the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* (many of whom later would become well-known filmmakers themselves, including François Truffaut and Claude Lelouch) argued that the American commercial film, precisely because its need to please a mass audience had helped it break out of the limiting gentility of the European cinema, had a vitality and, even more surprisingly, a set of master-makers (auteurs) without equal in the world. New studies and appreciations of such Hollywood filmmakers as John Ford, Howard Hawks, and William Wyler resulted, and, eventually, this new evaluation worked its way back into the United States itself: another demonstration that one country's low art can become another country's high art. Imported back into the United States, this reevaluation changed and amended preconceptions that had hardened into prejudices.



(From left) Lauren Bacall, Marcel Dalio, and Humphrey Bogart in *To Have and Have Not* (1944), directed by Howard Hawks.

© 1945 Warner Brothers, Inc.; photograph from a private collection

The new appreciation of the individual vision of the Hollywood film was to inspire a whole generation of young American filmmakers, including Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and George Lucas, to attempt to use the commercial film as at once a form of personal expression and a means of empire building, with predictably mixed results. By the turn of the century, new waves of filmmakers (notably Spike Lee, Stephen Soderbergh, John Sayles, Ang Lee, and later Richard Linklater, Paul Thomas Anderson, David O. Russell, and J.J. Abrams), like the previous generation mostly trained in film schools, had graduated from independent filmmaking to the mainstream, and the American tradition of film comedy stretching from Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin to Billy Wilder, Preston Sturges, and Woody Allen had come to include the quirky sensibilities of Joel and Ethan Coen and Wes Anderson. In

mixing a kind of eccentric, off-focus comedy with a private, screw-loose vision, they came close to defining another kind of postmodernism, one that was as antiheroic as the more academic sort but cheerfully self-possessed in tone.



Robert Duvall in *Apocalypse Now*

Robert Duvall (centre) in *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

© 1979 Omni Zoetrope; photograph from a private collection



Lee, Ang

Film director Ang Lee on the set of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000).

Chan Kam Chuen/Sony Pictures Classic



Iron Man

Robert Downey, Jr., appearing as Iron Man/Tony Stark in a scene from the film *Iron Man* (2008).

Paramount Pictures/Marvel Entertainment

As the gap between big studio-made entertainment—produced for vast international audiences—and the small “art” or independent film widened, the best of the independents came to have the tone and idiosyncratic charm of good small novels: films such as Nicole Holofcener’s *Lovely & Amazing* (2001), Kenneth Lonergan’s *You Can Count on Me* (2000), Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris’s *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), Jason Reitman’s *Juno* (2007), Debra Granik’s *Winter’s Bone* (2010), and Todd Haynes’s *Carol* (2015) reached audiences that felt bereft by the steady run of Batman, Lethal Weapon, and Iron Man films. But with that achievement came a sense too that the audience for such serious work as Francis Ford Coppola’s Godfather films and *Chinatown* (1974), which had been intact as late as the 1970s, had fragmented beyond recomposition.

Television

If the Martian visitor beloved of anthropological storytelling were to visit the United States at the beginning of the 21st century, all of the art forms listed and enumerated here—painting and sculpture and literature, perhaps even motion pictures and popular music—would seem like tiny minority activities compared with the great gaping eye of American life: “the box,” television. Since the mid-1950s, television has been more than just the common language of American culture; it has been a common atmosphere. For many Americans television is not the chief manner of interpreting reality but a substitute for it, a wraparound simulated experience that has come to be more real than reality itself. Indeed, beginning in the 1990s, American television was inundated with a spate of “reality” programs, a wildly popular format that employed documentary techniques to examine “ordinary” people placed in unlikely situations, from the game-show structure of *Survivor* (marooned contestants struggling for supremacy) to legal dramas such as *The People’s Court* and *Cops*, to *American Idol*, the often caustically judged talent show that made instant stars of some of its contestants. Certainly, no medium—not even motion pictures at the height of their popular appeal in the 1930s—has created so

much hostility, fear, and disdain in some “right-thinking” people. Television is chewing gum for the eyes, famously characterized as a vast wasteland in 1961 by Newton Minow, then chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. When someone in the movies is meant to be shown living a life of meaningless alienation, he is usually shown watching television.

Yet television itself is, of course, no one thing, nor, despite the many efforts since the time of the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan to define its essence, has it been shown to have a single nature that deforms the things it shows. Television can be everything from *Monday Night Football* to the Persian Gulf War's Operation Desert Storm to *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* The curious thing, perhaps, is that, unlike motion pictures, where unquestioned masters and undoubted masterpieces and a language of criticism had already emerged, television still waits for a way to be appreciated. Television is the dominant contemporary cultural reality, but it is still in many ways the poor relation. (It is not unusual for magazines and newspapers that keep on hand three art critics to have but one part-time television reviewer—in part because the art critic is in large part a cultural broker, a “cultural explainer,” and few think that television needs to be explained.)

When television first appeared in the late 1940s, it threatened to be a “ghastly gelatinous nirvana,” in James Agee’s memorable phrase. Yet the 1950s, the first full decade of television’s impact on American life, was called then, and is still sometimes called, a “Golden Age.” Serious drama, inspired comedy, and high culture all found a place in prime-time programming. From Sid Caesar to Lucille Ball, the performers of this period retain a special place in American affections. Yet in some ways these good things were derivative of other, older media, adaptations of the manner and styles of theatre and radio. It was perhaps only in the 1960s that television came into its own, not just as a way of *showing* things in a new way but as a way of *seeing* things in a new way. Events as widely varied in tone and feeling as the broadcast of the Olympic Games and the assassination and burial of Pres. John F. Kennedy—extended events that took place in real time—brought the country together around a set of shared, collective images and narratives that often had neither an “author” nor an intended point or moral. The Vietnam War became known as the “living room war” because images (though still made on film) were broadcast every night into American homes; later conflicts, such as the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War, were actually brought live and on direct video feed from the site of the battles into American homes. Lesser but still compelling live events, from the marriage of Charles, prince of Wales, and Lady Diana Spencer to the pursuit of then murder suspect O.J. Simpson in his white Bronco by the Los Angeles police in 1994, came to have the urgency and shared common currency that had once belonged exclusively to high art. From ordinary television viewers to professors of the new field of cultural studies, many Americans sought in live televised events the kind of meaning and significance that they had once thought it possible to find only in highly wrought and artful myth. Beginning in the late 1960s with CBS’s *60 minutes*, this epic quality also informed the TV newsmagazine; presented with an in-depth approach that emphasized narrative drama, the personality of the presenters as well as the subjects, and muckraking and malfeasance, it became one of television’s most popular and enduring formats.

By the turn of the 20th century, however, the blurring of the line between information and entertainment in news and current affairs (that is, between “hard” and “soft” news) had resulted in the ascent of a new style of television program, infotainment. Infotainment came to include daytime talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (later *Oprah*; 1986–2011), entertainment news programs such as *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood*, and talking-head forums such as *Hannity & Colmes*

(1996–2009; featuring Sean Hannity), *The O'Reilly Factor* (with Bill O'Reilly), and *The Rachel Maddow Show*, whose hosts and host networks (especially the Fox News Channel and MSNBC) revealed pronounced political biases. Among the most-popular infotainment programs of the first two decades of the 21st century was *The Daily Show*, a so-called fake news show that satirized media, politics, and pop culture.



Political commentator and TV host
Rachel Maddow

MSNBC—NBCU Photo Bank/AP



(from left) Jason Alexander, Julia
Louis-Dreyfus, Michael Richards, and
Jerry Seinfeld

Scene from the television series
Seinfeld, with actors (from left) Jason
Alexander, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Michael
Richards, and Jerry Seinfeld.

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Cast members of *The Sopranos* (from
left to right): Tony Sirico, Steve Van

Even in the countless fictional programs that filled American evening television, a sense of spontaneity and immediacy seemed to be sought and found. Though television produced many stars and celebrities, they lacked the aura of distance and glamour that had once attached to the great performers of the Hollywood era. Yet if this implied a certain diminishment in splendour, it also meant that, particularly as American film became more and more dominated by the demands of sheer spectacle, a space opened on television for a more modest and convincing kind of realism. Television series, comedy and drama alike, now play the role that movies played in the earlier part of the century or that novels played in the 19th century: they are the modest mirror of their time, where Americans see, in forms stylized or natural, the best image of their own manners. The most acclaimed of these series—whether produced for broadcast television and its diminishing market share (*thirtysomething*, *NYPD Blue*, *Seinfeld*, *Lost*, and *Modern Family*) or the creations of cable providers (*The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Boardwalk Empire*, *Girls*, and *Game of Thrones*)—seem as likely to endure as popular storytelling as any literature made in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Popular music

Every epoch since the Renaissance has had an art form that seems to become a kind of universal language, one dominant artistic form and language that sweeps the world and becomes the common property of an entire civilization, from one country to another. Italian painting in the 15th century, German music in the 18th century, or French painting in the 19th and early 20th centuries—all of these forms seem to transcend their local sources and become the one essential soundscape or image of their time. Johann Sebastian Bach and Georg Frideric Handel, like Claude Monet and Édouard Manet, are local and more.



Game of Thrones

Peter Dinklage (as Tyrion Lannister) in a scene from the HBO series *Game of Thrones*.

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At the beginning of the 21st century, and seen from a worldwide perspective, it is the American popular music that had its origins among African Americans at the end of the 19th century that, in all its many forms—ragtime, jazz, swing, jazz-influenced popular song, blues, rock and roll and its art legacy as rock and later hip-hop—has become America’s greatest contribution to the world’s culture, the one indispensable and unavoidable art form of the 20th century.

The recognition of this fact was a long time coming and has had to battle prejudice and misunderstanding that continues today.

Indeed, jazz-inspired American popular music has not always been well served by its own defenders, who have tended to romanticize rather than explain and describe. In broad outlines, the history of American popular music involves the adulteration of a “pure” form of folk music, largely inspired by the work and spiritual and protest music of African Americans. But it involves less the adulteration of

those pure forms by commercial motives and commercial sounds than the constant, fruitful hybridization of folk forms by other sounds, other musics—art and avant-garde and purely commercial, Bach and Broadway meeting at Birdland. Most of the watershed years turn out to be permeable; as the man who is by now recognized by many as the greatest of all American musicians, Louis Armstrong, once said, “There ain’t but two kinds of music in this world. Good music and bad music, and good music you tap your toe to.”

Armstrong’s own career is a good model of the nature and evolution of American popular music at its best. Beginning in impossibly hard circumstances, he took up the trumpet at a time when it was the military instrument, filled with the marching sounds of another American original, John Phillip Sousa. On the riverboats and in the brothels of New Orleans, as the protégé of King Oliver, Armstrong learned to play a new kind of syncopated ensemble music, decorated with solos. By the time he traveled to Chicago in the mid-1920s, his jazz had become a full-fledged art music, “full of a melancholy and majesty that were new to American music,” as Whitney Balliett has written. The duets he played with the renowned pianist Earl Hines, such as the 1928 version of “Weather Bird,” have never been equaled in surprise and authority. This art music in turn became a kind of commercial or popular music, commercialized by the swing bands that dominated American popular music in the 1930s, one of which Armstrong fronted himself, becoming a popular vocalist, who in turn influenced such white pop vocalists as Bing Crosby. The decline of the big bands led Armstrong back to a revival of his own earlier style, and, at the end, when he was no longer able to play the trumpet, he became, ironically, a still more celebrated straight “pop” performer, making hits out of Broadway tunes, among them the German-born Kurt Weill’s “Mack the Knife” and Jerry Herman’s “Hello, Dolly.” Throughout his career, Armstrong engaged in a constant cycling of creative crossbreeding—Sousa and the blues and Broadway each adding its own element to the mix.



King Oliver (standing, trumpet) and his Creole Jazz Band, Chicago, 1923.

Frank Driggs Collection/Archive Photos



John (Aaron) Lewis with the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Frank Driggs Collection

By the 1940s, the craze for jazz as a popular music had begun to recede, and it began to become an art music. Duke Ellington, considered by many as the greatest American composer, assembled a matchless band to play his ambitious and inimitable compositions, and by the 1950s jazz had become dominated by such formidable and uncompromising creators as Miles Davis and John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Beginning in the 1940s, it was the singers whom jazz had helped spawn—those who used microphones in place of pure lung power and who adapted the Viennese operetta-inspired songs of the great Broadway composers (who had, in turn, already been changed by jazz)—who became the bearers of the next dominant American style. Simply to list their names is to evoke a social history of the United States since World War II: Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Mel Tormé, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Doris Day, Sarah Vaughan, Peggy Lee, Joe Williams, Judy Garland, Patsy Cline, Willie Nelson, Tony Bennett, and many others. More than any other single form or sound, it was their voices that created a national soundtrack of longing, fulfillment, and forever-renewed hope that sounded like America to Americans, and then sounded like America to the world.



Doris Day.

Hulton Archive/Getty Images

September 1954 is generally credited as the next watershed in the evolution of American popular music, when a recent high-school graduate and truck driver named Elvis Presley went into the Memphis Recording Service and recorded a series of songs for a small label called Sun Records. An easy, swinging mixture of country music, rhythm and blues, and pop ballad singing, these were, if not the first, then the seminal recordings of a new music that, it is hardly an exaggeration to say, would make all other kinds of music in the world a minority taste: rock and roll. What is impressive in retrospect is that, like Armstrong's leap a quarter century before, this was less the sudden shout of a new generation coming into being than, once again, the self-consciously eclectic manufacture of a hybrid thing. According to Presley's biographer Peter Guralnick, Presley and Sam Phillips, Sun's owner, knew exactly what they were doing when they blended country style, white pop singing, and African American rhythm and blues. What was new was the mixture, not the act of mixing.



Sun Records label.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The subsequent evolution of this music into the single musical language of the last quarter of the 20th century hardly needs be told—like jazz, it showed an even more accelerated evolution from folk to pop to art music, though, unlike jazz, this was an evolution that depended on new machines and technologies for the DNA of its growth. Where even the best-selling recording artists of the earlier generations had learned their craft in live performance, Presley was a recording artist before he was a performing one, and the British musicians who would feed on his innovations knew him first and best through records (and, in the case of the Beatles particularly, made their own innovations in the privacy of the recording studio). Yet once again, the lines between the new music and the old—between rock and roll and the pop and jazz that

came before it—can be, and often are, much too strongly drawn. Instead, the evolution of American popular music has been an ongoing dialogue between past and present—between the African-derived banjo and bluegrass, Beat poets and bebop—that brought together the most heartfelt interests of poor black and white Americans in ways that Reconstruction could not, its common cause replaced for working-class whites by supremacist diversions. It became, to use Greil Marcus's phrase, an Invisible Republic, not only where Presley chose to sing Arthur ("Big Boy") Crudup's song ("That's All Right Mama") but where Chuck Berry, a brown-eyed handsome man (his own segregation-era euphemism), revved up Louis Jordan's jump blues to turn "Ida Red," a country-and-western ditty, into "Maybelline," along the way inventing a telegraphic poetry that finally coupled adolescent love and lust. It was a crossroads where Delta bluesman Robert Johnson, more often channeled as a guitarist and singer, wrote songs that were as much a part of the musical education of Bob Dylan as were those of Woody Guthrie and Weill.



Al Green.

© David Redfern—Redferns/Retna Ltd.

Coined in the 1960s to describe a new form of African American rhythm and blues, a strikingly American single descriptive term encompasses this extraordinary flowering of creativity—soul music. All good American popular music, from Armstrong forward, can fairly be called soul music, not only in the sense of emotional directness but with the stronger sense that great emotion can be created within simple forms and limited time, that the crucial contribution of soul is, perhaps, a willingness to surrender to feeling rather than calculating it, to appear effortless even at the risk of seeming simpleminded—to surrender to plain form, direct emotion, unabashed sentiment, and even what in more austere precincts of art would be called sentimentality. What American soul music, in this broad, inclusive sense, has, and what makes it matter so much in the world, is the ability to generate emotion



Kanye West and Taylor Swift at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards

Kanye West (left) interrupting an acceptance speech by Taylor Swift at the MTV Video Music Awards, September 13, 2009.

Brad Barket—PictureGroup/AP

without seeming to engineer emotion—to sing without seeming to sweat too much. The test of the truth of this new soulfulness is, however, its universality. Revered and catalogued in France and imitated in England, this American soul music is adored throughout the world. American music in the late 20th and early 21st centuries drew from all these wells to create new forms, from hip-hop to electronic dance music as new generations of musicians joined the conversation and artists as various as Beyoncé, Brad Paisley, Jack White, Kanye West, the Decemberists, Lady Gaga, Taylor Swift, Jay Z, Justin Timberlake, Sufjan Stevens, and Kendrick Lamar made their marks.

It is, perhaps, necessary for an American to live abroad to grasp how entirely American soul music had become the model and template for a universal language of emotion by the 20th century. And for an American abroad, perhaps what is most surprising is how, for all the national reputation for energy, vim, and future-focused forgetfulness, the best of all this music—from that mournful majesty of Armstrong to the heartaching quiver of Presley—has a small-scale plangency and plaintive emotion that belies the national reputation for the overblown and hyperbolic. In every sense, American culture has given the world the gift of the blues.

Adam Gopnik The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

Dance

Serious dance hardly existed in the United States in the first half of the 20th century. One remarkable American, Isadora Duncan, had played as large a role at the turn of the century and after as anyone in the emancipation of dance from the rigid rules of classical ballet into a form of intense and improvisatory personal expression. But most of Duncan's work was done and her life spent in Europe, and she bequeathed to the American imagination a shining, influential image rather than a set of steps. Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, throughout the 1920s, kept dance in America alive; but it was in the work of the choreographer Martha Graham that the tradition of modern dance in the United States that Duncan had invented found its first and most influential master. Graham's work, like that of her contemporaries among the Abstract Expressionist painters, sought a basic, timeless vocabulary of primal expression; but even after her own work seemed to belong only to a period, in the most direct sense she founded a tradition: a Graham



Lady Gaga

Lady Gaga, wearing a meat dress, after accepting the award for video of the year for "Bad Romance" at the MTV Video Music Awards in Los Angeles, September 2010.

Jim Ruymen—UPI/Landov

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dancer, Paul Taylor, became the most influential modern dance master of the next generation, and a Taylor dancer, Twyla Tharp, in turn the most influential choreographer of the generation after that. Where Graham had deliberately turned her back on popular culture, however, both Taylor and Tharp, typical of their generations, viewed it quizzically, admiringly, and hungrily. Whether the low inspiration comes from music—as in Tharp’s *Sinatra Songs*, choreographed to recordings by Frank Sinatra and employing and transforming the language of the ballroom dance—or comes directly off the street—as in a famous section of Taylor’s dance *Cloven Kingdom*, in which the dancer’s movement is inspired by the way Americans walk and strut and fight—both Taylor and Tharp continue to feed upon popular culture without being consumed by it. Perhaps for this reason, their art continues to seem of increasing stature around the world; they are intensely local yet greatly prized elsewhere.



Martha Graham in *Appalachian Spring*

Martha Graham dances in *Appalachian Spring* in 1954.

©Baron—Hulton Archive/Getty Images

A similar arc can be traced from the contributions of African American dance pioneers Katherine Dunham, beginning in the 1930s, and Alvin Ailey, who formed his own company in 1958, to Savion Glover, whose pounding style of tap dancing, known as “hitting,” was the rage of Broadway in the mid-1990s with *Bring in’Da Noise, Bring in ’Da Funk*.

George Balanchine, the choreographer who dominated the greatest of American ballet troupes, the New York City Ballet, from its founding in 1946 as the Ballet Society until his death in 1983, might be considered outside the bounds of purely “American” culture. Yet this only serves to remind us of how limited and provisional such national groupings must always be. For, though Mr. B., as he was always known, was born and educated in Russia and took his inspiration from a language of dance codified in France in the 19th century, no one has imagined the gestures of American life with more verve, love, or originality. His was an art made with every window in the soul open: to popular music (he choreographed major classical ballets to Sousa marches and George Gershwin songs) as well as to austere and demanding American classical music (as in *Ivesiana*, his works choreographed to the music of Charles Ives). He created new standards of beauty for both men and women dancers (and, not incidentally, helped spread those new standards of athletic beauty into the culture at large) and invented an audience for dance in the United States

where none had existed before. By the end of his life, this Russian-born choreographer, who spoke all his life with a heavy accent, was perhaps the greatest and certainly among the most American of all artists.



Gregory Hines (left) and Savion Glover facing off at the American Tap Dance Foundation’s New York City Tap Festival held on July 12, 2001.

Mario Tama/Getty Images

Sports

In many countries, the inclusion of sports, and particularly spectator sports, as part of “culture,” as opposed to the inclusion of recreation or medicine, would seem strange, even dubious. But no one can make sense of the culture of the United States without recognizing that Americans are crazy about games—playing them, watching them, and thinking about them. In no country have sports, especially commercialized, professional spectator sports, played so central a role as they have in the United States. Italy and England have their football (soccer) fanatics; the World Cups of rugby and cricket attract endless interest from the West Indies to Australia; but only in the United States do spectator sports, from “amateur” college (gridiron) football and basketball to the four major professional leagues—hockey, basketball, football, and baseball—play such a large role as a source of diversion, commerce, and, above all, shared common myth. In watching men (and sometimes women) play ball and comparing it with the way other men have played ball before, Americans have found their “proto-myth,” a shared common romantic culture that unites them in ways that merely procedural laws cannot.

Sports are central to American culture in two ways. First, they are themselves a part of the culture, binding, unifying theatrical events that bring together cities, classes, and regions not only in a common cause, however cynically conceived, but in shared experience. They have also provided essential material for culture, the means for writing and movies and poetry. If there is a “Matter of America” in the way that the King Arthur stories were the “Matter of Britain” and *La Chanson de Roland* the “Matter of France,” then it lies in the lore of professional sports and, perhaps, above all in the lore of baseball.

Baseball, more than any other sport played in the United States, remains the central national pastime and seems to attract mythmakers as Troy attracted poets. Some of the mythmaking has been naive or fatuous—onetime Major League Baseball commissioner Bartlett Giamatti wrote a book called *Take Time for Paradise*, finding in baseball a powerful metaphor for the time before the Fall. But the myths of baseball remain powerful even when they are not aided, or adulterated, by too-self-conscious appeals to poetry. The rhythm and variety of the game, the way in which its meanings and achievements depend crucially on a context, a learned history—the way that every swing of Hank Aaron was bound by the ghost of every swing by Babe Ruth—have served generations of Americans as their first contact with the nature of aesthetic experience, which, too, always depends on context and a sense of history, on what things mean in relation to other things that have come before. It may not be necessary to understand baseball to understand the United States, as someone once wrote, but it may be that many Americans get their first ideas about the power of the performing arts by seeing the art with which baseball players perform.

Although baseball, with the declining and violent sport of boxing, remains by far the most literary of all American games, in recent decades it has been basketball—a sport invented as a small-town recreation more than a century ago and turned on American city playgrounds into the most spectacular and acrobatic of all team sports—that has attracted the most eager followers and passionate students. If

baseball has provided generations of Americans with their first glimpse of the power of aesthetic context to make meaning—of the way that what happened before makes sense out of what happens next—then a new generation of spectators has often gotten its first essential glimpse of the poetry implicit in dance and sculpture, the unimitable expressive power of the human body in motion, by watching such inimitable performers as Julius Erving, Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan—a performer who, at the end of the 20th century, seemed to transcend not merely the boundaries between sport and art but even those between reality and myth, as larger-than-life as Paul Bunyan and as iconic as Bugs Bunny, with whom he even shared the motion picture screen (*Space Jam* [1996])—and Lebron James, who, as a giant but nimble man-child of age 18, went straight from the court at St. Vincent–St. Mary High School in Akron, Ohio, into the limelight of the National Basketball Association in 2003, becoming the youngest player in the league to win the Rookie of the Year award and score 10,000 career points on his way to becoming the game’s most dominant player.

By the beginning of the 21st century, the Super Bowl, professional football’s championship game, American sports’ gold standard of hype and commercial synergy, and the august “October classic,” Major League Baseball’s World Series, had been surpassed for many as a shared event by college basketball’s national championship. Mirroring a similar phenomenon on the high-school and state level, known popularly as March Madness, this single-elimination tournament whose early rounds feature David versus Goliath matchups and television coverage that shifts between a bevy of regional venues not only has been statistically proved to reduce the productivity of the American workers who monitor the progress of their brackets (predictions of winners and pairings on the way to the Final Four) but for a festive month both reminds the United States of its vanishing regional diversity and transforms the country into one gigantic community. In a similar way, the growth of fantasy baseball and football leagues—in which the participants “draft” real players—has created small communities while offering an escape, at least in fantasy, from the increasingly cynical world of commercial sports.

Adam Gopnik The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

Audiences

Art is made by artists, but it is possible only with audiences; and perhaps the most worrying trait of American culture in the past half century, with high and low dancing their sometimes happy, sometimes challenging dance, has been the threatened disappearance of a broad middlebrow audience for the arts. Many magazines that had helped sustain a sense of community and debate among educated readers—*Collier’s*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Look*—had all stopped publishing by the late 20th century or continued only as a newspaper insert (*Life*). Others, including *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, continue principally as philanthropies.

As the elephantine growth and devouring appetite of television has reduced the middle audience, there has also been a concurrent growth in the support of the arts in the university. The public support of higher education in the United States, although its ostensible purposes were often merely pragmatic

and intended simply to produce skilled scientific workers for industry, has had the perhaps unintended effect of making the universities into cathedrals of culture. The positive side of this development should never be overlooked; things that began as scholarly pursuits—for instance, the enthusiasm for authentic performances of early music—have, after their incubation in the academy, given pleasure to increasingly larger audiences. The growth of the universities has also, for good or ill, helped decentralize culture; the Guthrie Theater in Minnesota, for instance, or the regional opera companies of St. Louis, Mo., and Santa Fe, N.M., are difficult to imagine without the support and involvement of local universities. But many people believe that the “academicization” of the arts has also had the negative effect of encouraging art made by college professors for other college professors. In literature, some people believe, for instance, this has led to the development of a literature that is valued less for its engagement with the world than for its engagement with other kinds of writing.

Yet a broad, middle-class audience for the arts, if it is endangered, continues to flourish too. The establishment of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in the early 1960s provided a model for subsequent centres across the country, including the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., which opened in 1971. It is sometimes said, sourly, that the audiences who attend concerts and recitals at these centres are mere “consumers” of culture, rather than people engaged passionately in the ongoing life of the arts. But it seems probable that the motives that lead Americans to the concert hall or opera house are just as mixed as they have been in every other historical period: a desire for prestige, a sense of duty, and real love of the form all commingled together.



New York City Ballet

The New York City Ballet performing a revival of George Balanchine's 1949 staging of Igor Stravinsky's ballet *Firebird*, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York, 2012.

Andrea Mohin—*The New York Times/Redux*

The deeper problem that has led to one financial crisis after another for theatre companies and dance troupes and museums (the Twyla Tharp dance company, despite its worldwide reputation, for instance, and a popular orientation that included several successful seasons on Broadway, was compelled to survive only by being absorbed into American Ballet Theatre) rests on hard and fixed facts about the economics of the arts, and about the economics of the performing arts in particular. Ballet, opera, symphony, and drama are labour-intensive industries in an era of labour-saving devices. Other industries have remained competitive by substituting automated labour for human labour; but, for all that new stage devices can help cut costs, the basic demands of the old art forms are hard to alter. The corps of a ballet cannot be mechanized or stored on software; voices belong to singers, and

singers cannot be replicated. Many Americans, accustomed to the simple connection between popularity and financial success, have had a hard time grasping this fact; perhaps this is one of the reasons for the uniquely impoverished condition of government funding for the arts in the United States.

First the movies, then broadcast television, then cable television, and now the Internet—again and again, some new technology promises to revolutionize the delivery systems of culture and therefore change culture with it. Promising at once a larger audience than ever before (a truly global village) and a smaller one (e.g., tiny groups interested only in Gershwin having their choice today of 50 Gershwin Web sites), the Internet is only the latest of these candidates. Cable television, the most trumpeted of the more recent mass technologies, has so far failed sadly to multiply the opportunities for new experience of the arts open to Americans. The problem of the “lowest common denominator” is not that it is low but that it is common. It is not that there is no audience for music and dance and jazz. It is that a much larger group is interested in sex and violent images and action, and therefore the common interest is so easy to please.

Yet the growing anxiety about the future of the arts reflects, in part, the extraordinary demands Americans have come to make on them. No country has ever before, for good or ill, invested so much in the ideal of a common culture; the arts for most Americans are imagined as therapy, as education, as a common inheritance, as, in some sense, the definition of life itself and the summum bonum. Americans have increasingly asked art to play the role that religious ritual played in older cultures.

The problem of American culture in the end is inseparable from the triumph of liberalism and of the free-market, largely libertarian social model that, at least for a while at the end of the 20th century, seemed entirely ascendant and which much of the world, despite understandable fits and starts, emulated. On the one hand, liberal societies create liberty and prosperity and abundance, and the United States, as the liberal society par excellence, has not only given freedom to its own artists but allowed artists from elsewhere, from John James Audubon to Marcel Duchamp, to exercise their freedom: artists, however marginalized, are free in the United States to create weird forms, new dance steps, strange rhythms, free verse, and inverted novels.

At the same time, however, liberal societies break down the consensus, the commonality, and the shared viewpoint that is part of what is meant by traditional culture, and what is left that is held in common is often common in the wrong way. The division between mass product and art made for small and specific audiences has perhaps never seemed so vast as it does at the dawn of the new millennium, and the odds of leaping past the divisions into common language or even merely a decent commonplace civilization have never seemed greater. Even those who are generally enthusiastic about the democratization of culture in American history are bound to find a catch in their throat of protest or self-doubt as they watch bad television reality shows become still worse or bad comic-book movies become still more dominant. The appeal of the lowest common denominator, after all, does not mean that all the people who are watching something have no other or better interests; it just means that the one thing they can all be interested in at once is this kind of thing.

Liberal societies create freedoms and end commonalities, and that is why they are both praised for their fertility and condemned for their pervasive alienation of audiences from artists, and of art from people. The history of the accompanying longing for authentic community may be a dubious and even

comic one, but anyone who has spent a night in front of a screen watching the cynicism and proliferation of gratuitous violence and sexuality at the root of much of what passes for entertainment for most Americans cannot help but feel a little soul-deadened. In this way, as the 21st century began, the cultural paradoxes of American society—the constant oscillation between energy and cynicism, the capacity to make new things and the incapacity to protect the best of tradition—seemed likely not only to become still more evident but also to become the ground for the worldwide debate about the United States itself. Still, if there were not causes of triumph, there were grounds for hope.

It is in the creative life of Americans that all the disparate parts of American culture can, for the length of a story or play or ballet, at least, come together. What is wonderful, and perhaps special, in the culture of the United States is that the marginal and central, like the high and the low, are not in permanent battle but instead always changing places. The sideshow becomes the centre ring of the circus, the thing repressed the thing admired. The world of American culture, at its best, is a circle, not a ladder. High and low link hands.

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