

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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ART FOR EVERY HOME: ASSOCIATED AMERICAN ARTISTS, 1934–2000

Exhibition illuminates growth in art collecting by middle and upper-middle classes in United States.

April 19–July 9, 2016

In 1934, as the U.S. emerged from the Great Depression, an industrious businessman and arts patron named Reeves Lewenthal convened a group of artists, including Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood. He proposed that they produce prints for him to sell to the public at reasonable prices. Thus was born Associated American Artists (AAA), a highly influential commercial enterprise that brought art collecting to the middle and upper-middle classes in America. ***Art for Every Home: Associated American Artists, 1934–2000***, on view at New York University's Grey Art Gallery from **April 19 through July 9, 2016**, provides a fascinating survey of AAA, which inspired and cultivated American collectors over six decades.

Organized by Elizabeth G. Seaton and Jane Myers for the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University, *Art for Every Home* comprises about 150 prints, paintings, ceramics, textiles, and ephemera. Together, these create a rich portrait of Associated American Artists and the vision and strategy that enabled it to dramatically expand the market for art in the United States.

Best-known in its early years for publishing prints by Benton, Curry, and Wood, AAA—under Lewenthal's directorship—developed innovative marketing strategies to stimulate greater interest in owning art: producing mail-order catalogues; contracting with department stores to sell artworks; and advertising AAA's offerings in newspapers, magazines, and on the radio. In the late 1950s, Lewenthal's successor, Sylvan Cole Jr. began producing museum-quality exhibitions and catalogues for the company's eponymous New York gallery, which originally opened on Madison Avenue in 1936 and then relocated to Fifth Avenue in 1956. *Art for Every Home* traces AAA's trajectory from its beginnings as a renowned American print publisher, to its commissions of artworks for high-profile American corporations, to its eventual demise in 2000.



Signature Fabrics advertisement showing *Vogue* dress pattern (#8253) made from Anton Refregier's 1953 *Happy Harvest* design. *Vogue Pattern Book* (April–May 1954), inside cover. Inkjet facsimile. Museum purchase, American Textile History Museum, Lowell, Massachusetts, 2014.98

“The Grey Art Gallery is pleased to host this original and dynamic exhibition,” notes Grey director **Lynn Gumpert**. “The AAA was founded in New York City in 1934 and established and ran a significant gallery in Manhattan for more than 60 years. The Grey has always considered art in relation to its social and historical contexts. We look forward to deepening visitors’ experiences of the exhibition with a range of public programs that situate AAA’s pioneering efforts to get Americans to collect original artworks.”

The exhibition is organized in five chronological sections. **The Dawn of an Enterprise** opens the show with a focus on the 1930s, when Lewenthal’s business benefited from a lack of competition and from the popularity of American Scene imagery, which formed the core of its offerings. An outstanding example is Benton’s *Frankie and Johnnie* (1936), a lithograph based on a popular song and set in a tavern in the American heartland. Benton’s swirling, motion-packed scene—which reprises a theme treated in his Missouri State Capitol murals of the same year—represents the song’s pivotal moment, when the jealous Frankie shoots her lover Johnnie dead. With works like this, Lewenthal’s agreement with the American Scene artists—which began as an income opportunity for both artists and businessman—became an effective distribution opportunity for modern printmakers. Indeed, AAA continued to publish affordable prints, created by about 600 mostly American artists, for over fifty years.



James Chapin
Boy, That's Tobacco, 1942
Oil on canvas, 36 x 44 in.
Associated American Artists for
American Tobacco Company
Virginia Tech, Reynolds Homestead,
Critz, Virginia

Art for Commerce, the second section, details how, during the 1940s, a number of corporations commissioned AAA artists to create advertisements and other promotional materials. Notable companies, including Maxwell House and Standard Oil, among others, engaged artists who worked in the direct and accessible Regionalist aesthetic for which AAA was identified. This section includes a Lucky Strike cigarette ad by John Chapin, one of nineteen artists commissioned by the American Tobacco Company to create advertisements. Chapin’s *That’s Tobacco* (1942), a painting featuring a reassuring image of a muscular farmer holding a large tobacco leaf glowing in the sunlight, was part of the campaign that helped Lucky Strike sales shoot to number one in 1942.

The third section, **AAA and World War II**, illuminates how the company supported America’s war effort with art depicting combat and military life overseas as well as the home front. Lewenthal arranged for AAA artists to work for the War Department Art Advisory Committee and as war correspondents for *Life* magazine, where their images appeared as cover art and within spreads. This section showcases paintings made for AAA’s war bonds poster program, including John Steuart Curry’s widely praised posters representing the Midwestern farmer as a war hero.

The show’s fourth section—which takes its title, **Modern Art in Your Life**, from a 1949 Museum of Modern Art exhibition—examines how AAA reinvigorated its business in a newly prosperous

America at the end of World War II. Sales in home products, such as appliances, furniture, and decorative accessories, more than doubled 1945–1950. This vibrant market supported AAA director Reeves Lewenthal's efforts to expand beyond its reputation as a leader in fine art print sales, and to target the growing markets for decorative arts. AAA's first ceramics collection, introduced under the trade name Stonelain, debuted in 1950, with artist Julio de Diego's vibrantly colored platter *River Patterns* (1950). Although AAA built its reputation selling representational art, many AAA products of the 1950s reflected the vogue for abstraction in modernist art and design. Other profitable AAA collaborations, with Steuben Glass and Castleton China, produced high-end, artist-decorated ceramics and dinnerware.

Finally, **“Pretty as a Picture”: Fashion and Furniture for the Masses** concentrates on how AAA expanded its focus on design and the decorative arts with the launch of ambitious textile programs in the early 1950s. Early in the decade, the company teamed up with manufacturers to produce fabrics for interior decoration, home furnishings, and apparel, attracting the American fashion industry and those postwar consumers who looked closer to home for designs. Marketing for the line Signature Fabrics by M. Lowenstein & Sons—for example, an advertisement showing a dress made from AAA artist Anton Refregier's design titled *Happy Harvest* (1953)—emphasized the connection between designer and fabric. Titled and signed by the artists, such textiles carried the prestige of collectible studio art: “Works of art by world-famed painters ... make you pretty as a picture,” noted *Mademoiselle* magazine in 1955. Some advertisements for the line focused on models in dresses made from its designs in mock art gallery settings, with Signature Fabrics mounted on easels or hanging on the walls in drawn-on frames.

Exhibition Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a 288-page exhibition catalogue published by the Beach Museum of Art and distributed by Yale University Press. Its eight major essays include contributions by exhibition curators **Elizabeth G. Seaton** and **Jane Myers**. Other essayists are **Gail Windisch**, **Ellen Paul Denker**, **Bill North**, **Kristina Wilson**, **Karen Herbaugh**, and **Susan Teller**. The catalogue also includes six shorter essays, a checklist, and a general bibliography. An illustrated index of the hundreds of prints, ceramics, and textile designs by AAA artists will also be published as a free, searchable PDF in spring 2016.

Public Programs

Art for Every Home will be accompanied by a series of public programs featuring printmakers, artists, art historians, collectors, dealers and others concerned with the business of art. A full schedule is available at <https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/programs/>.

Exhibition Sponsorship, Venues

Art for Every Home: Associated American Artists, 1934–2000 has been organized by the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University, Manhattan, and is made possible in part by funding from the Henry Luce Foundation. Additional support is provided by Candyce Russell. The presentation at the Grey Art Gallery is made possible in part by the

IFPDA Foundation; the Abby Weed Grey Trust; and the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends.

The exhibition was previously on view at the Beach Museum of Art from September 15, 2015 to January 31, 2016. After its presentation at the Grey, it will travel to Syracuse University Art Galleries, where it will be on view from January 26 to March 26, 2017.

About the Grey Art Gallery

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on exploring art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information

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Hours

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

Admission: Suggested donation: \$3; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge