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# AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

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Top: Elizabeth Way Champlain (attr.), *Lyman Allyn*, ca. 1825, watercolor on ivory. Bequest of Mrs. Lucretia Allyn, 1934.1

Bottom: Gilbert Stuart, *Mrs. William Rawle (Sarah Coates Burge)*, ca. 1798, oil on canvas. Museum purchase, 2006.1

## American Perspectives

In 1926, lifelong New London resident Harriet Upson Allyn passed away, leaving funds to create a museum for the community in memory of her father, Captain Lyman Allyn (1797–1874). Lyman Allyn had commanded a whaleship by the age of twenty-one, founded a school for boys in New London in 1817, and subsequently found great success in business, with interests in whaling, banking, insurance, and the railroad. The Lyman Allyn Museum opened in 1932 in a beautiful neoclassical granite building designed by the renowned architect Charles A. Platt.

*American Perspectives* celebrates the arts of America from colonial times through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, often through the lens of Connecticut and specifically New London County. Exploring fine and decorative art through three centuries, *American Perspectives* highlights some of the Lyman Allyn's finest works and most intriguing stories, bringing focus to the unique character of the region and its place in the wider world.

## The Eighteenth Century

New London's deep water harbor has driven the regional economy since colonial times, connecting Southeastern Connecticut to the broader Atlantic world. In the 18th century, local shipping merchants specialized in the West Indies trade, exporting live-

stock and food to Caribbean plantations in exchange for sugar, molasses, and rum. Economic growth and stability in the second half of the century enabled colonists to acquire a greater range of household goods—textiles, silver, glass, ceramics, furniture, and paintings among them. Some goods were imported, while others were produced in the home or by craftsmen and artists, whose work and skill expanded to meet increasing demand. The *Tea Table* and the painting of Sarah Deshon (from the same family) tell a local story, showing how the Deshons of 18<sup>th</sup> century New London cemented their status and wealth from trade with objects that conveyed their social and economic standing.

Connecticut played a key role in the American Revolution, as political tension over taxation and colonial governance led to war with Britain. With the British headquartered in New York City, New London's harbor was an ideal site from which to initiate naval attacks on British loyalists. New London's privateering (the use of authorized private ships to attack and loot enemy ships) prompted British troops to retaliate, burning New London in the Battle of Groton Heights on September 6, 1781.

Daniel Huntington's portrait of *Abigail Dolbeare Hinman*, 1854–56, recreates an episode from this event, showing Hinman standing with her musket in hand, attempting to shoot Benedict Arnold, who can be seen through the window, sitting on horseback.



*Top:* *Tea Table*, Newport, Rhode Island, ca. 1740–60, mahogany and sycamore. Gift of Miss Ursula Mercer Grosvenor, 1948.68.6

*Bottom:* Daniel Huntington, *Abigail Dolbeare Hinman*, ca. 1853–56, oil on canvas. Gift of Mrs. Sara Day Rowe Hecksher, 1987.42





Top: Thomas Cole, *Mount Etna from Taormina, Sicily*, 1844, oil on canvas. Anonymous gift, 1943.466

Bottom: Lambert Hitchcock, *Side Chair*, ca. 1830, pine, rush seat, paint, and gilt. Gift of Lawrence W. Miner, 1935.3.17

## The Nineteenth Century

As the young nation sought to define itself in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artists created objects and paintings to unite Americans around common ideals of liberty, justice, and hope for the future. Some objects were overtly patriotic, while others were less direct. Hudson River School landscapes, for example, expressed pride in the nation's natural resources, with scenes from the woods, rivers, and mountains of the northeast standing in for all of America, suggesting the promise of land, the spread of civilization, and the unique, almost spiritual quality of the landscape.

Artists also traveled to Europe to study art and see the sights, painting mountains and classical ruins, as Thomas Cole did in his the majestic view of Mount Etna, drawing visual connections between the ideals of the newly minted American Republic and those of classical antiquity.

Steam power, the railroad, the telegraph, and improved roads and canals ushered in the age of industrialization, facilitating the mass production and transportation of goods. Whereas many objects had been crafted by hand in the previous century, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of goods made with machines. Connecticut mills and factories produced munitions, tinworks, clocks, furniture, and textiles, among other things. Early factories were fueled by whale oil, an important industrial

lubricant and lamp fuel supplied by whaling, the most significant part of New London's economy for several decades.

Isaac Sheffield, who painted portraits of many local whaling captains, portrayed five-year-old James Francis Smith shortly after his return from a long whaling voyage in 1837 with his father, New London whaling captain Franklin Smith. They had gone to Desolation Island in the South Seas, and his portrait shows him wearing a penguin skin coat, with the *Chelsea*, the ship his father had captained, in the background.

The United States grew dramatically over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, expanding westward and growing in population with waves of immigration. Regional differences and tension over slavery and states' rights erupted in the U.S. Civil War (1861–65). In New London County, a number of textile mills were built to supply the Union troops. After the war, New England's mills became an industrial powerhouse, employing and sustaining entire towns.



Top: Isaac Sheffield, *Portrait of James Francis Smith*, 1837, oil on canvas. Museum purchase, Frank Loomis Palmer Fund, 1943.467

Bottom: Winslow Homer, *Shepherdess*, 1878, paint on ceramic. Gift of Robert MacIntyre, 1945.155





Top: Guy C. Wiggins, *Church on the Hill*, ca. 1910–1912, oil on canvas. Gift of Mrs. Nicholas Pond, 1943.459

Bottom: Beatrice Cuming, *Chubb*, 1944, oil on canvas. Gift of General Dynamics Electric Boat Division, 1994.2

## The Twentieth Century

In a period of tremendous growth and change, artists looked forward and back, charting new terrain with abstraction, while revisiting their artistic roots through innovative approaches to traditional genres such as landscape, still life, and portraiture.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of rapid expansion and industrialization fueled in part by waves of immigration. A decade of exuberance followed World War I before the stock market crash of 1929 initiated the Great Depression of the 1930s. Abstraction and European modernism filtered into American art, while a realistic, regional style simultaneously held sway, resulting in a mix of subjects and styles.

Many artists were drawn to the energy and bustle of the modern city, awash in crowds and transformed by industry, skyscrapers and the automobile. The city could be intense, noisy, and oppressive, however, and some artists retreated during the summer to Connecticut art colonies to paint peaceful landscapes and scenes of leisure. Guy Wiggins drew inspiration from both the city and the country, painting impressionistic views of New York in winter, as well as scenes such as *Church on the Hill*, ca. 1910–12, showing country life in Old Lyme, Connecticut.

Beatrice Cuming's painting, *Chubb*, shows a sub-

marine being built in Groton, Connecticut during World War II. Cuming's canvas affirms New London's long connection to the sea and celebrates industry at a time when the nation was consumed with the war effort.

In the prosperity and growth of the post-World War II era, a multiplicity of artistic trends and styles arose, dominated by abstraction. New York emerged as the center of the international art world. The 1960s and '70s witnessed cultural upheaval as people of color and women sought equal rights and many protested the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. The prevalence of advertising and mass media led artists to explore new themes, performance, and technology, questioning the definitions of art and the idea of originality.

Since the 1980s, the postmodern art world has been in flux, and issues of gender, race, politics, and cultural identity have been at the fore in our globalized and technology-driven world. In *A.R.T. (in the new world order)*, 1994, African-American artist Willie Cole uses text on a blackboard to create an acrostic poem of sorts, using various word associations and erasure to define and comment on art and culture.



Top: Philip Guston, *Farnesina Garden (Roma Series)*, 1971, oil on paper mounted to masonite. Gift of Samuel Dorsky, 1988.1167

Bottom: Willie Cole, *A.R.T. (in the new world order)*, 1994, oilstick on blackboard. Gift of Anthony and Elizabeth Enders, 2015.10.19



*Above:* Larry Rivers, *Watermill Prospect*, 1953, oil on canvas. Bequest of James Merrill, 1995.5

*Cover (left to right):* Details of: Gilbert Stuart, *Mrs. William Rawle (Sarah Coates Burge)*, ca. 1798, oil on canvas. Museum purchase, 2006.1; Isaac Sheffield, *Portrait of James Francis Smith*, 1837, oil on canvas. Frank Loomis Palmer Fund, 1943.467; Walter Stuempfig, *Figures by a Fountain*, ca. 1950s, oil on canvas. Gift of James R. Good, 1968.137