



ARTY STORIES

Book 5

THE AMERICAN DREAM
Depression to Optimism

**Art and life
across the centuries**



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for
Noko

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A Dash for the Timber', Frederic Remington, 1889

'No Swimming', Saturday Evening Post cover, Norman Rockwell, 1921

‘ARTY STORIES’

Art & Life across the centuries

‘Seeing people’s lives brings their art to life’

An introduction for art lovers and students alike into the stories behind individual works of art and their evolution over centuries. This series of six books tells the stories of events and lives and the influence of art on these changing societies. How art evolved from primarily a tool to shape society, into a purely artistic expression.

Together they provide a sweeping framework in which to follow and understand the struggles and triumphs of people in the evolving changes through peace and war from 3,000BC until today. Produced in a new and accessible introduction celebrating the myriad lives and wonderful art over the centuries.

This holistic approach is also designed for younger students to create an interest for complementary studies in both art and history and contributes to the UK Educational targets of Key Stage 3:

‘know how art and design both reflect and contribute to the culture, creativity and wealth of our nation’.

This also contributes to the educational debates in the USA on the benefits of art to the health of society.

Supported by the Arts Council, England as: *‘creative and engaging for young people’ - ‘the opportunities to stimulate young people’s interest and imagination are evident’.*

Centuries of great art are a gift to us all

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Book 5

THE AMERICAN DREAM

From depression to optimism

CONTENTS

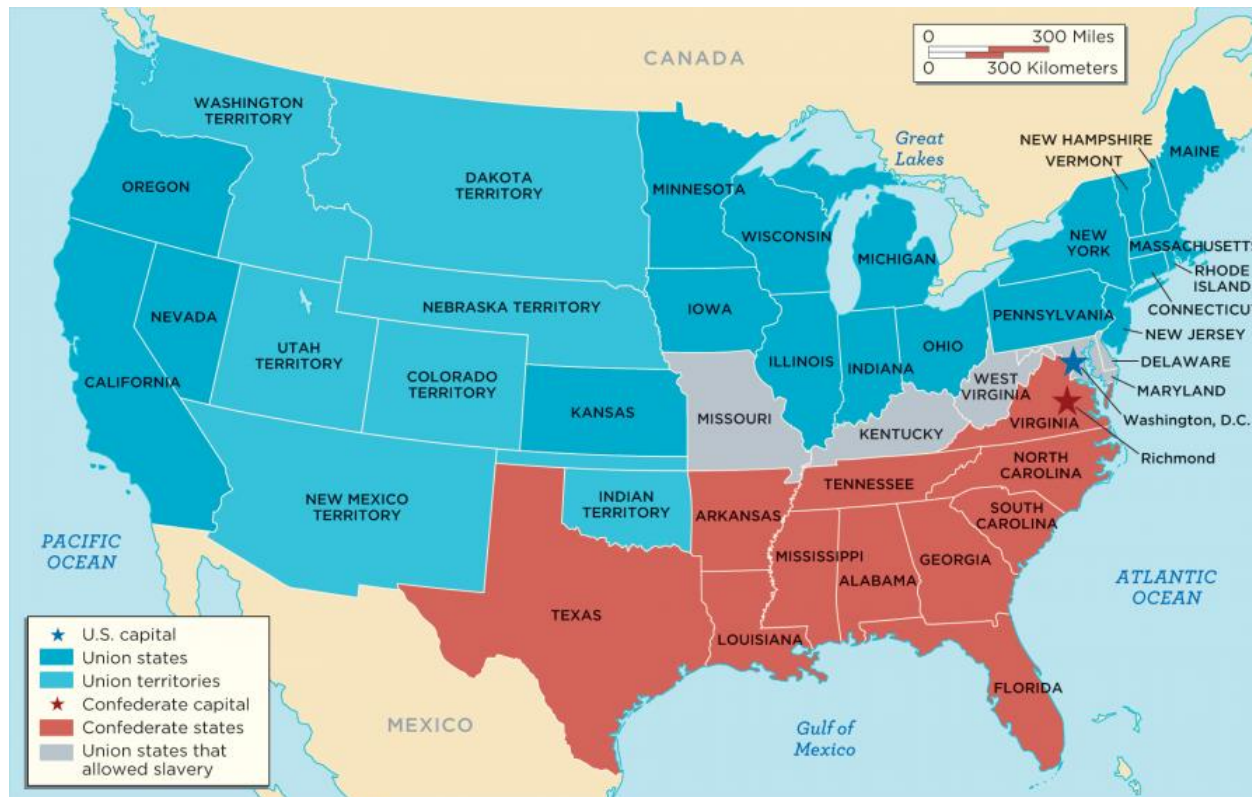
- The Civil War
- The Great American West
- The 20th Century
- The Great Depression
- Steps into optimism
- A post-war boom

- Summary
- Sources of information

The Civil War

A new country, America was to have a long and difficult birth.

The first settlers came to America some 400 years ago in 1607, escaping religious persecution in England where only 'one true Protestant religion' was tolerated. A situation that was to contribute to the English Civil War of 1642-1651. Catholics, Puritans and Quakers left to find a new world - a new utopia, the *American Dream*. They came to build new colonies for their native countries and it was to be a further 170 years before they gained independence from Great Britain in 1783.



But 80 years later; as new states were formed; differences began to emerge, primarily on the enslavement of black slaves from Africa who toiled in the lucrative fields of cotton and tobacco of the South. In 1861 eleven southern states out of the 34 formed, seceded from the country to form the Confederate States and set the ground for the American Civil War.

The question of black slavery was such that in 1862 President Lincoln proposed to a Committee of coloured leaders that 'it is better for us both to be separated', suggesting that they emigrate to Central America.



Battle of Antietam, 1862, Library of Congress

Both sides immediately introduced conscription, raising armies from civilians and setting the North-South divide. The Confederate armies gained the early victories, destroying larger Northern 'Union' armies. But the Southern Confederacy lacked the resources of the North and the tide began to turn with the Union General, Ulysses Grant engineering gains in the west. At the bloody battle of Gettysburg in 1863 General Robert E. Lee's Confederate army was defeated and the South fell into retreat.

Across both sides, casualties at Gettysburg totalled 50,000 men. Surgeons were to be avoided with a reputation for incompetence and laziness. The North had virtually no medical facilities at the outset and at the earlier Battle of Bull Run in 1861, 3,000 wounded still lay injured in the field 3 days after the battle. (1)

As the Union armies battled south, they set out to destroy what resources the Confederates still held, setting fire to homes and fields, ravaging the countryside and towns and cities. Hungry women in the towns protested in 'bread riots' and in Richmond 5,000 broke into shops to steal provisions. The army were called in to restore order, but resistance to the war was mounting as the suffering increased.

As the Union armies swept down the Mississippi river, they cut the Confederate army in two. Depleted by the mounting casualties and deserting conscripts, Lee had a smaller army to confront the well equipped Northern Union and defeat was inevitable.

Finally, at the Confederate's last stand at the capital of Richmond, Virginia, Lee was surrounded with the city in ruins and he finally surrendered; humiliated; to a corps of black troops.

Four years of intense and bloody battles had left up to 700,000 people dead. More than the total losses from the four 20th century wars, (World wars 1 & 2, Korea and Vietnam). The South was devastated with political power now in the North, but in a divided country.

This was the first war to be recorded by camera and the immediacy and unvarnished dreadful truth was depicted in 7,000 photos. The immediacy and stark truth of these photos, brought the war into every home.

Richmond Virginia, 1865. Final days of the Confederacy.

'The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down', 1969 ballad



The savagery of the young men of America killing each other hit Americans hard, as if their New World had been lost. Many Southern plantation owners lost their land with devastated cotton and tobacco farms. They now had a worthless Confederate currency and the new crippling land taxes, drove these 'Southern Gentlemen' into bankruptcy. Northerners (termed 'carpetbaggers') seized the opportunity to purchase these farms. Whilst they provoked great resentment, they restored the plantations, employed both white people and black ex-slaves and established schools and banking systems. In short, resentment was to turn to relief as the country looked to a slow reunification and rebuilding. The deep depression of war began to recover some optimism and although America had lost its innocence, it was eventually to emerge stronger and become truly 'The United States of America'.

From these losses people looked to the new lands of the west and a drive west grew. Landscapes of a vast unspoilt and beautiful wilderness fed the vision of a wonderful new country waiting with a new history.

The Great American West

A country free of war again looked to the untapped riches of the West and landscape painting was to encourage the westward expansion. One famous wagon trail opening these new lands, was the Oregon Trail - a 2,170-mile trek over mountains and across plains to the Pacific.



One artist Albert Bierstadt portrayed a sense of majesty and divine beauty, drawn from his homeland in Germany and the romance of their art.

His immense luminous canvases were inspired by his early travels along the wagon trail. A master of self-promotion, he held exhibitions across Europe. He glorified the American West as a land of promise and is credited with 'fuelling European emigration' (2)

'The Oregon Trail', Albert Bierstadt, 1869

Another artist to celebrate the great outdoors was Winslow Homer who also rose from magazine illustrator at *Harpers Weekly*, to world renowned artist. In this respect the media acted in supporting artists, like the art patrons of old.



His love of outdoor 'pursuits' embraced mountain scenes, but he is best known for his seascapes that capture the 'Wild Coast of Maine' and children riding the waves in a new spirit of freedom.

Through the magazines his paintings reached the masses, celebrating the national ownership of America's exceptional beauty, instilling a shared bond across society, promoting:

'America the beautiful'.

Breezing Up, (A Fair Wind), 1874, Winslow Homer

But the lure of the West still held appeal and one artist typified these iconic images - Frederic Remington, for whom the cowboy was his focus saying 'With me cowboys are what gems and porcelain are to others'. A restless individual, Remington was not suited to the academia of Yale University and instead took his inheritance monies west where he invested in cattle, mining and finally a saloon. As his money dwindled, he began to sell his sketches and also became an artist-correspondent for *Harpers Weekly*, specialising on the Apache leader Geronimo. Although he never caught up with Geronimo, his artistic prowess grew and his work appeared on the front cover in 1886.



Remington ventured west to experience the Apache wars and from his brief and unsuccessful attempt at ranching, became the authentic 'pseudo cowboy'. This at a time when the early West was inevitably disappearing. He preferred 'action' works and here we see the iconic cowboys fighting off a chase from Apaches. He went on to produce 2,700 paintings. The excitement, speed and adventure sweep out towards a viewer

A Dash for the Timber', Frederic Remington, 1889

These 'heroes' masked the true cost of the adventure west.

To most Americans the Indians were considered a threat to be overcome and the land to be 'settled'. These 'new Americans' looked to conquer this vast continent, often at the expense of the estimated 5-15 million Native Indians who had lived there for thousands of years, before the arrival of any settlers. The continent was not to be shared, but to have new owners, more powerful than the indigenous tribes. These Native Americans endured epidemics of diseases brought from Europe with measles and smallpox decimating 90%. Then war and forced relocation as the US Government sought to destroy their culture, religion and way of life. (3) Akin to a genocide, the European settlers replaced the Native Indians and by 1900 just 250,000 Indians remained and just 500 of the 60 million buffalo. Their tragic history up to the final massacre, is set out in the book: *Bury my heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown. (4)

America was moving towards the 20th Century and a new society was developing in the new cities.

The 20th Century

As the world opened up, artists travelled to Europe and Paris, seen as the cultural centre of art.



There they found impressionism that had first come to New York in 1885. (Book 4).

An early advocate was Mary Cassatt who became a friend of Degas and in 1891 the only American to have her work exhibited in Paris, alongside the Impressionists. An unusual achievement in those un-liberated times. Her subjects were domestic scenes mostly of women as she did not enjoy the outdoor artistic freedom of her male counterparts.

Mary Cassatt, 1844-1926

Mary strongly criticised the Parisian Art Establishment and when her works were refused display in their Salon, she found a common cause with the similarly refused Impressionists, joining their exhibitions. (Book 4)

Japanese art was currently attracting interest in Paris as in the oriental carpet, wall hangings, chest of drawers and water pitcher in this domestic scene of a mother tenderly washing her daughter's feet. The absolute concentration of them both is caught seen from above, as if by someone entering the room.

Mary made her home in France, but her work was exhibited in America and she did much to encourage American art dealers to buy Impressionist works, that had found so much favour after their earlier introduction in 1885. (Book 4)

'The Child's Bath', Mary Cassatt, 1893



At the same time another 'illustrator', Maxfield Parrish, was realising great success with his vibrant paintings incorporating classical themes that were popular in the Art Nouveau fashion between 1890-1910. Starting with illustrations for children's books, he went on to design a cover for *Harpers Weekly* and became particularly popular for his annual calendars, which became collectors' items, with some selling more than 200,000 copies.



'Morning Spring', Maxfield Parrish, 1922

Parrish had a very precise technique, applying layer after layer of thin oil paint to the paper, with coats of varnish in between. The effect was highly detailed, producing luminous pictures, with his popular skies being termed 'Parrish blue'. The whimsical nature of his work chimed with the social themes of the time in the sinuous curves of Art Nouveau and the imagined settings. These also reflected the current fascination with a spiritual life conjured up in his works.



'Daybreak', Maxfield Parrish, 1922 (200,000 prints)

By the start of the 20th Century this pre-war art nouveau interior and architectural style, was to be superseded by the new art deco. An Italian immigrant Joseph Stella was fascinated by the geometric quality of the architecture springing up in 1920's New York.



Joseph Stella, Brooklyn Bridge, 1919-20

Here he captures the soaring spirit of America in the strength of the supporting cables of a new bridge sweeping up and imitating the skyscrapers in the background. The bridge was a new feature further connecting the island of Manhattan to the mainland, displaying the energy and pace of modern life.

Skyscrapers were themselves becoming artistic structures in their own right, reflecting the Art Deco fashion of the time. The architecture brought a romantic theme to the city, to provide an image of New York as a city to rival Paris. Art Deco followed the earlier decorative style of Art Nouveau and was a grander, more opulent design that caught the spirit of invincibility at the end of the First World War.

A new vibrant society and culture was emerging. An aspiration soon to die.

New York, Chrysler Building, Art Deco style, 1930



The 20th Century was to herald rapidly increasing immigration bringing a cocktail of cultures. America needed to redefine itself, but it would take a further war and economic collapse before a proud and optimistic America would again emerge. The First World War of 1914-18 and the ensuing worldwide economic depression waited around the corner and a new American 'realism' caught the agony.

The Great Depression

The depression in the USA came from an over-optimistic and over-heated economy, with excessive corporate speculation matched by consumer debt that was often used for stock market speculation. A vicious spiral, shattering American's faith in the future. As people rushed to withdraw their savings, money dried up and confidence was lost, instigating a sharp decline in manufacturing and agricultural production. The economic boom of the 1920's was to lead to a sudden and steep fall into recession and in 1929 the Wall Street stock market collapsed, losing 90% of its value, bringing down the 'whole pack of cards'. Bankruptcies, suicides and destitution followed with unemployment of 25%. In the mid-west an agriculture that had boomed during the good times of World War 1 army contracts, now saw crop failures. With no crops to hold the soil, farms fell into 'dust bowls' where topsoil blew away and nothing grew.



The 'dust bowls' blew into people's lungs and suffering was widespread with 60% of rural families classified as 'impoverished'. Unemployment and falling wages drove many into homelessness, living in cardboard 'shacks' where a lack of sanitation resulted in disease and illness. Farm prices fell and as they were then hit in 1931 by one of the worst droughts in history, farmers lost their farms.

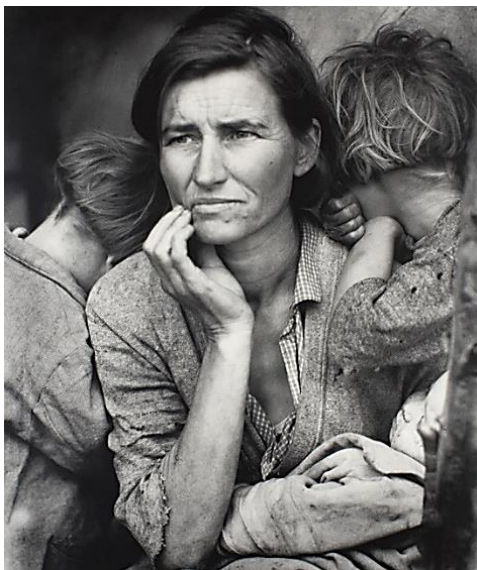
One child later said *'You get used to hunger. After a while it doesn't hurt, you just get weak'*. Family members swapped clothes, each taking turns to go to church in the one dress they owned. (5) One child told by her teacher to go home and get food said *'I can't. It's my sister's turn to eat'*.

Bread lines and soup kitchens were a common sight, serving 85,000 people daily in New York alone, as remembered in this bronze sculpture.

The end only came with a new President in Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) in 1933. He introduced the 'New Deal' as he delivered a massive injection of public monies to invest in infrastructure, supporting farmers and regulating banks. Dams and roads kickstarted employment and the moribund economy. This programme ran to 1936 and restored much of consumer confidence and although not immediately restoring jobs long term, realised a spirit of optimism.



'The Bread Line', George Segal, 1991, FDR Memorial Washington DC



The depression brought a cultural reflection on the importance of family life and concern for the community as a whole. This famous photo holds the gaze of the woman beaten into despair, looking out with nowhere to look, while her family seek protection around her. But a US culture of self-reliance came to be born. A respect for the self-made man ran through society as the Depression ironically forged the foundation of modern America. This was to reach its zenith in the Second World War, when American armies swept enemies aside and then helped restore their battered economies in democratic societies. The US held a moral and economic standing that would provide a worldwide power and influence for the next 50 years.

'Migrant Mother', Dorothy Lange, 1936, (Florence Owens-Thompson, aged 32)

Movies reflected this cultural shift providing an escapism to better times and Hollywood entered its golden era, with an image to the world of a vibrant, successful life in distinct contrast to the hard times experienced in Europe.

Steps into Optimism

The decade started with songs such as 'Brother can you spare a dime', but recognising people's thirst for happier times, films moved to musicals and glamorous sets with songs such as 'We're in the money' & 'Happy Days are Here Again'. People wanted to forget their worries and Hollywood became the entertainment centre of not just America, but of the World.



Cinemagoers were happy to pay a precious 25 cents to see the madcap escapades of the Marx Brothers or the dazzling dances of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The 1930's were to end with the musical 'The Wizard of Oz' where 'good' overcomes 'bad'. Followed by the community tear jerker 'It's a Wonderful Life', where a family business owner succeeds against an unscrupulous banker. Once the scourge of the Depression, but now firmly in the past.

The Arts again reflected life and were again to shape not only the national culture, but the national mood. The vision and morals of Americans were to guard their democracy and the freedoms that all men should enjoy.

Original Movie Poster from 1939

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