‘America in the Making’ at the Addison Gallery of American Art is a big attempt to comprehend our national narrative

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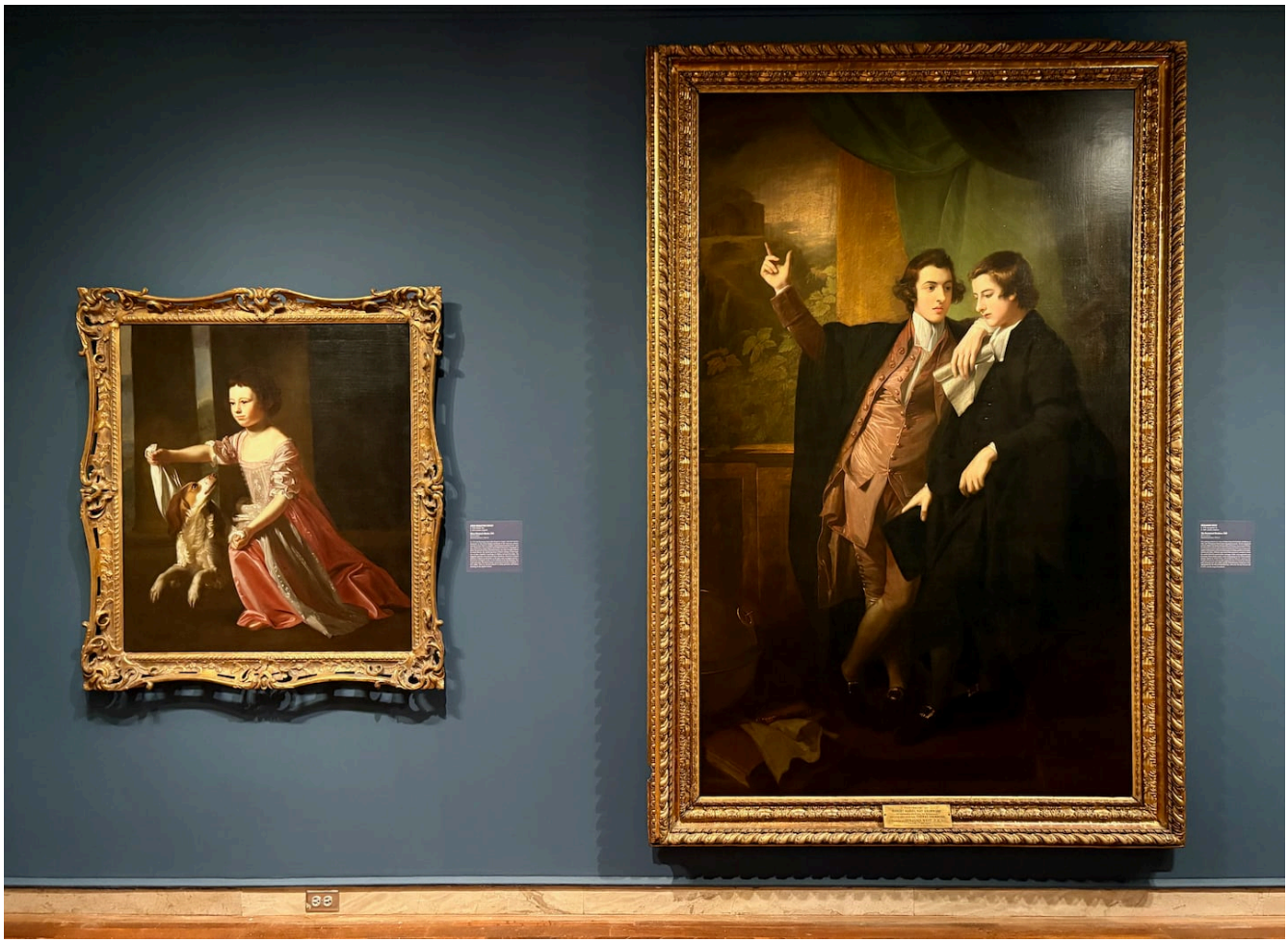
ANDOVER — “THINK” reads the bright white block font in the familiar blue window at the upper left of the American flag, typically studded with 50 stars. It hangs in the foyer of the Addison Gallery of American Art, a gem of a museum camped out on the campus of Phillips Academy in Andover. The piece, by William N. Copley, was made in 1961 amid simmering national tensions: the Civil Rights movement, an intensifying Cold War. But it’s a pitch-perfect emblem of its current offering: “America in the Making,” a semiquincentennial affair deliberately forestalled from the July 4 flashpoint of an outrageously fractious summer. The Addison, wisely, chose to take a breath. “America in the Making” is its long exhale, and a sober, contemplative, thoughtful view of the ever more contentious reality of America itself.

This is really just true to form. The Addison was founded in 1928, with the pioneering mandate that it should pursue “all that is best in American painting not only of past generations but of the present one as well,” in the words of Robert G. McIntyre, one of the gallery’s founding committee members, writing in the Phillips Bulletin that year. The dedication to the *now* was notable, particularly in a time of art world upheaval as the rising tide of Modernist experimentation was creating fractures in conventional wisdom.

Installation view, "America in the Making" at the Addison Gallery of American Art.Julia Featheringill

The Addison, from the outset, committed to be anything but conventional. “America in the Making,” pulled exclusively from its own remarkable collection, maps the museum’s long arc of consistent, progressive iconoclasm — much of which has proved, years later, to be the foundation of an American canon. We’ll get to that. But in tracking the Addison’s sidelong view of American art, what emerges is a picture of the crosscurrents and upheavals of American culture itself.

The curators have opted for what might seem the simplest of plans: A straight chronology, starting in the 18th century on the main floor and then climbing the stairs to this very moment, consuming the entire building top to bottom. But really, in the Addison’s savvy collecting, it’s a way to counterpose competing currents not just in the collection but the country itself, decade by decade.



John Singleton Copley's portrait of Mary Elizabeth Morris, 1771, left, next to Benajmin West's "The Drummond Brothers," 1767, in "America in the Making" at the Addison Gallery of American Art.Murray Whyte/Globe Staff

It makes for a few off moments. The embarrassment of riches that is the Addison collection means that, in one case, remarkable later paintings by John Singer Sargent hang in a hallway passage from one gallery to the next. But mostly, the curators use the timeline to reveal the frictions of American life as old as the country itself. “Model for the American Flag,” in the foyer, is the only one among the hundreds here left unstuck in time, but it’s as much a guide — or an exhortation — as it is an artwork, and an invitation to make connections.

The earliest works here miss the 17th century by a moment: A pair of portraits by an unnamed artist of the Reverend Samuel Treat and his wife, Abigail Willard Estabrook Treat, dating from 1700. Crude but compelling, they capture the political necessity of marital alliance in the early colonies. Abigail was the daughter of a renowned Boston preacher, and her marriage to Samuel cemented his standing in the faith hierarchy while assuring her place in society. They’re a conventional pair of paintings for the time — powerful people, with their power reasserted and confirmed in art. That dynamic descends directly from their European forebears, where portraiture was a luxury afforded only by the moneyed and empowered.

Portraits L to R: Jeremiah Pearson Hardy, "Abraham Hanson," c. 1828; Martin Johnson Heade, "Portrait of a Man Holding a Cane," 1851; Henry Inman, "Petalesharo," c. 1830s' Thomas Sully, "Tom Wharton," 1820s-30s. "America in the Making" at the Addison Gallery of American Art.Murray Whyte/Globe Staff

There's plenty of that here — portraits by celebrated 18th century American artists like Benjamin West. and John Singleton Copley, whose unmissable 1771 portrait of Mary Elizabeth Martin, the young daughter of Josiah Martin, the colonial governor of North Carolina, is haunting in its weirdly static perfection. Notable in the frame is the cocker spaniel, the favored breed of British royalty, a knowing symbol of allegiance, status, and power.

But the counterpoint comes quickly, and a different America emerges. A few strides away, a neighboring gallery features a wall of portraits that mixes works by Thomas Sully, a prominent 19th century artist, with Jeremiah Pearson Hardy's engagingly frank and inviting 1828 portrait of Abraham Hanson, a Black barber in Bangor, Maine. A rare depiction of a working class subject, let alone one who was Black, it shares space with Henry Inman's "Petalesharo," from the 1830s, of a tribal leader of the Skidi Pawnee people who campaigned in Washington for tribal sovereignty. The portrait captures power of a different kind. Commissioned by the Department of Indian Affairs for a publication meant to preserve "whatever of the aboriginal man can be rescued from destruction which awaits his race."

L to R: Alvin Fisher, “Covered Wagons in the Rockies,” 1837; George Catlin, "Battle Between Sioux, Sauk, and Fox," 1846-48; Joshua Shaw, “The Coming of the White Man,” 1850"America in the Making" at the Addison Gallery of American Art.Murray Whyte/Globe Staff

The tension is clear: Painting had always been about not just who wielded the power of representation, but who didn’t. The space drives home its point with a piece by George Catlin, best known for his paintings of Indigenous people in the American west as savages for a market rapt by the violent stereotype. “Battle Between Sioux, Sauk, and Fox,” 1846-48, a cartoonishly grostesque scene of warring tribes, would be a cringeworthy cliche if it hadn’t been partly responsible for crafting the cliche in the first place. Nearby, its companions complete the picture; Alvin Fisher’s “Covered Wagons in the Rockies,” 1837, is standard-issue propaganda for Manifest Destiny, the doctrine urging westward expansion by divine right to an unpeopled earthly paradise (which, of course, it was not); Joshua Shaw’s “The Coming of the White Man,” 1850, a scene of Indigenous people cowering in submissive awe at the arrival of colonial tall ships.

Winslow Homer, "The West Wind," 1891. Addison Gallery of American Art

“America in the Making” spills over with these tensions. It probably deserves an academic thesis more than a review; this is one pocket of inquiry amid more than half a dozen. But the show lives in its foils. Two paintings hung side by side portend the coming of American Modernism, and the social upheaval that took place alongside it: Winslow Homer’s iconic “The West Wind,” 1891, an emblem of radical seaside tumult at once luminous and dire, and George Inness’s “The Monk,” 1873, a landscape at day’s end, sombre and still, that, in its fading light and expressive departures from realism, is an emblem of transformation from old world to new.

Edward Hopper, "Manhattan Bridge Loop," 1928. Addison Gallery of American Art

In another space, the vibrant, socially-conscious early 20th century work of John Sloan and George Bellows captures a newly-cosmopolitan, rapidly-urbanizing America teeming with immigrant communities. But itrubs up against the desolate isolation of some of Edward Hopper’s most iconic city scenes. (His “Manhattan Bridge Loop,” 1928, sun-bleached and bone dry, will never not leave me in at least partial awe.) Upstairs, the bright wonder of a Sol Lewitt wall drawing — the pater familias of conceptualism, a thoroughly American midcentury invention whose DNA still runs through all strains of contemporary art — signals the unbridled ingenuity of a nation that would come to dominate world culture, high and low, for decades.

Georgia O'Keeffe, “Wave, Night,” 1928. Addison Gallery of American Art

The creative explosion of American genius all but bursts from the walls. Georgia O’Keeffe’s shadowy “Wave, Night,” 1928, is symbolic of the genesis of American Modernism fomented by Alfred Stieglitz’s Gallery 219. (One of her compatriots, the brilliant Arthur Dove, hangs across the room with the soft genius of “Autumn,” 1935, hanging next to one of her charcoal drawings.)

Pillars of European Modernism were robustly, unapologetically transformed to fit the American story by artists like Jacob Lawrence, who co-opted Cubist techniques to tell the story of Black American life. “Kibitzers,” 1948, captures a rigid clutch of men, sharp, pole-straight and ebony skinned, hunkered around a neighborhood chess match.

Jacob Lawrence, Kibitzers, 1948. Egg tempera on Masonite, 20 x 24 inches. Gift from the Childe Hassam Fund of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1951.3.Addison Gallery of American Art

It's worth noting here that the Addison, a small museum attached to a prep school, was in the vanguard of the American moment from the outset, while its much larger peers played catch-up years later. It was the first museum in America to present an Abstract Expressionist solo exhibition, in 1947, of the work of Hans Hofmann, and showed Bauhaus leader Josef Albers in 1935 before anyone else, too. A bracingly austere scene comes with the pairing of Morris Louis's "For Karen," from 1962 — vertical bands of color crowded together on a slim bare canvas — with "Argos," 1949 by Barnett Newman, the long-acknowledged big dog of late American abstraction.

L to R: Morris Louis, “For Karen,” 1962; Barnett Newman, “Argos,” 1949, in "America in the Making" at the Addison Gallery of American Art.Murray Whyte/Globe Staff

It culminates as a powerful counterpoint, with the Addison’s “New Moon,” 1951, by Norman Lewis, hanging nearby. A Black abstract painter properly acknowledged in the AbEx canon only years later, Lewis’s piece was acquired in nearly the same moment it was made: 1952, before most acknowledged his significance. Lewis faced complications his white peers did not, as the struggle for Civil Rights raged as the detached form of aesthetic purity he pursued inched ever further away from political reality.

Moments like these are too many to count, through every American movement and its less-celebrated parallels: Pop, Minimalism, Conceptualism, and all that followed. Once you pick your jaw up off the floor at the abundance of riches here — Walker Evans, Andy Warhol, Philip Guston, Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Frank Stella, the list goes on — you grasp that the Addison’s story is the one we of optimistic minds see for the country: Pioneering, provocative, risk-taking, and enabling of experiment – and even failure – to break through stolid convention to allow innovation, inspiration, and even genius, to blossom. That we now live in a moment when these foundational principles of American culture are under assault puts “America in the

Making” in an urgent cast, leavened with hope that America never truly lives in any given moment, but always in what comes next.

AMERICA IN THE MAKING

Through Jan. 31. Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, 3 Chapel Avenue, Andover. 978-749-4015, addison.andover.edu

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