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Blackness, the Ashcan School, and Modern American Art

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The essays in this In the Round contain language and images that readers may find disturbing or otherwise challenging to encounter.

The turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, when Robert Henri (1865–1929), William Glackens (1870–1938), John Sloan (1871–1951), George Luks (1867–1933), and Everett Shinn (1876–1953) formed the central members of a close-knit group of artists later dubbed the Ashcan School by contemporary critics, was a vibrant yet deeply fraught period in the United States. It was a time marked by both beauty and ugliness, as economic, racial, and ethnic conflict shaped the national landscape. Standard art-historical narratives often assert that Ashcan artists reckoned with the emerging urban environment—characterized by industrialization, migration, and immigration—by turning their attention to the "real" rather than the "ideal." Between 1897 and 1917, they captured the crowded public spaces of New York, where strangers jostled for space amid traffic and negotiated the densely populated streets and tenements. The term "ashcan" aptly described the dirt-smudged, often gritty scenes these artists produced, which critics celebrated for embodying the sublime vitality and dystopian beauty of the metropolis.

Many of these artists began their careers as illustrators for city newspapers (Glackens, Luks, Shinn, and Sloan). As Michael Lobel argues in *John Sloan: Drawing on Illustration* (2014), this journalistic training honed their observational skills and their ability to render quick, impressionistic sketches from memory.[1] Their work often reflected Henri's exhortation to paint the life around them, ideally in a single sitting. However, the demands of this working mode frequently relied on and perpetuated harmful racial and ethnic stereotypes. These stereotypes were central to the blackface minstrelsy practiced by Luks on vaudeville stages and the caricatures created by his contemporary Sloan in his early career as a newspaper illustrator.

The dangerous tendency of art-historical interpretations to project contemporary aspirations for racial equity onto early twentieth-century artworks underpins this issue's "In the Round." The essays gathered here interrogate how the writing and curating of American art history and the broader understanding of the Ashcan School have been shaped by scholarly projects consciously or unconsciously invested in upholding ideals of white, heteronormative masculinity and cultural dominance. By examining how Ashcan artworks and artists' biographies have been interpreted over the past 120 years, these

essays reveal how earlier scholarship has reified specific constructions of identity and difference while excusing this movement's critical role in perpetuating anti-Blackness.

For example, George Bellows's (1882–1925) 1909 painting *Both Members of This Club* (fig. 1) has often been celebrated as emblematic of the Ashcan School for its dynamic style and modern, interracial subject matter. However, scholars have frequently downplayed the racialized conflict at the painting's center, preferring to frame it as evidence of the artist's supposed social progressivism. In his 1965 monograph *George Bellows: Painter of America*, Charles H. Morgan dismisses the painting's original title, *A N****r and a White Man*, and instead interprets its revised title, *Both Members of This Club*, as a "wry commentary on what 'membership' meant at Sharkey's," the club depicted in the painting.[2] More recently, in September 2024, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, which holds the painting in its collection, promoted it on Instagram and Facebook as "a daring social commentary for its time that challenged prevailing notions about white supremacy at the height of the Jim Crow era."[3] In its multipage post, the museum described the work as a bold artistic prediction of Jack Johnson's legendary boxing victory in 1910, which occurred a year *after* the painting's completion. Such readings distort the actual historical timeline and the documented evidence of the work's reception. They overlook the likely interpretation by turn-of-the-century audiences and fail to address the systemic anti-Blackness embedded in the painting and its actual critical reception. In the moment of its creation and today, audiences of this work confront a grotesque and abject Black body rather than an image of a celebrated heavyweight champion whose face was quite remarkably never bloodied in the ring.

Fig. 1. George Bellows, *Both Members of This Club,* 1909. Oil on canvas, 45.25 x 63.2 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1944.13.1

Since the Ashcan School's ascendance in the early twentieth century, American art historians such as Charles H. Morgan and Bruce St. John have cast these artists as sympathetic realist documentarians of urban life.[4] This narrative obscures the ways their works often relied on popular stereotypes of ethnic groups, while claiming they offered unusually empathetic depictions. By contrast, the past three decades have seen a reevaluation of Ashcan art, beginning with Marianne Doezema's *George Bellows and Urban America* (1992), which positioned Bellows as an avant-garde painter addressing the

challenges of industrialization.[5] Rebecca Zurier's *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (2006) situated these artists within a broader cultural matrix, emphasizing their roles as participant observers.[6] Most recent, Alexis Boylan's *Ashcan Art, Whiteness, and the Unspectacular Man* (2017) critiqued these artists' depictions of urban life as reinforcing white male supremacy.[7]

Despite these interventions, the prevailing narratives of the Ashcan School remain focused on its shared commitment to representing the "real." This suite of essays calls for renewed interrogation of the archives and foundational sources that have shaped these narratives. We must apply contemporary critical frameworks, including critical race studies, urbanism, gender, and intersectionality, to reinterpret these works and their legacies.

Most of the essays that follow originated as part of a panel organized for the College Art Association annual conference in 2022. They reframe the Ashcan School within the intersecting histories of race, labor, and urban modernity. Meaghan Walsh's "Cakewalking the Color Line" examines Luks's reliance on minstrel caricature, arguing that his modernist self-fashioning was tied to racial parody. Jessica Larson's "The Real and Imagined Black-Built Environment of the Ashcan School" considers how Ashcan art depicted racially coded urban spaces while excluding Black labor and communities. In "Locating Blackness in John Sloan's Neighborhood Scene," Lee Ann Custer explores Sloan's rare depictions of Black subjects, highlighting how the artist's work reinforced segregation while offering alternative racialized narratives. John Fagg's "John Sloan's Slow Awakening" reevaluates Sloan's gradual reckoning with racial and social injustices while addressing the reluctance of previous scholarship to confront racism in his work. Finally, in "Can't Get Enough: The Logics of Evidence, Anti-Blackness, and American Art History," Alexis Boylan critiques art-historical methodologies that have erased Black narratives, calling for antiracist scholarship. Together, these essays illuminate the Ashcan School's entanglements with race, modernity, and visual politics, urging us to reconsider its historiography and the ideologies that underpin representations of the "real."

Note from the guest editors

As we prepared this suite of essays during the first half of 2025, the project became precarious and dangerous while also remaining especially urgent. The past five decades of laudable field expansion and methodological advancement in American art history has mainstreamed the work of scholars centering African American, Asian American, Latinx, and Indigenous American visual and material culture in their research and teaching. These essays could never have been written in the 1970s, and if current trends persist, they may be among the last of their kind. As National Endowment of the Arts and National Endowment of the Humanities grant cancellations abound and our universities scramble to address an onslaught of executive orders seeking to limit academic freedom, erase DEAI language and programs from their websites, and challenge the ability of international students to come to this country, we feel the very real threat that contemporary art history will soon be aggressively targeted by those who find the actual history of this country's art and artists too disturbing to confront. We hope that our courage to publish these works in increasingly dark times serves as a light for others in the field.

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Editors' Note: Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw's book *The Art of Remembering: Essays on African American Art and History* is reviewed in this issue of *Panorama* by James Smalls.

Notes

[1] Michael Lobel, *John Sloan, Drawing on Illustration* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2014).

[2] Charles H. Morgan, *George Bellows: Painter of America* (Reynal, 1965), 101.

[3] National Gallery of Art (@NGADC), "George Bellows, 'Both Members of This Club,'" series of eleven Instagram slides, September 19, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/DAHf5NLtLgC/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

[4] Bruce St. John, ed., *John Sloan's New York Scene: From the Diaries, Notes, and Correspondence, 1906*–1913 (Harper and Row, 1965).

[5] Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (Yale University Press, 1992).

[6] Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (University of California Press, 2006).

[7] Alexis Boylan, *Ashcan Art, Whiteness, and the Unspectacular Man* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).