

Cite this article: Kaylin H. Weber and Christine Gervais, "American Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston," in "In the Galleries," edited by Elizabeth McGoey and Sara Picard, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2026), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.21081>.

American Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

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Combining a [Gothic Revival settee](#) (c. 1850–60), a [Severin Roesen \(1815–1872\) still life](#) (c. 1850–55), and an [H. Wilson & Co. pottery jar](#) (c. 1869) creates a sophisticated mid-nineteenth-century aesthetic for visitors to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), highlighting artistic skill as well as moments of unexpected beauty (fig. 1). This display combines the dramatic verticality of Gothic Revival design with the opulent naturalism of Victorian still life and the utilitarian beauty of Texas stoneware while also addressing more complex issues of race, class, and morality in the United States at the time of their creation. Such challenging and illuminating groupings of objects appear throughout the permanent American art galleries of the MFAH, offering a more complete and nuanced picture of American art.



Fig. 1. Installation view of the Hevrdejs Gallery in the Audrey Jones Beck Building, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Photo: Will Michels

The American art galleries were recently redesigned in an effort to rethink the traditional installation and interpretation of American art by bringing together its multifaceted expressions—painting, sculpture, photography, books, prints, furniture, ceramics, metals, textiles, and costume—as created by a diverse range of artists over a 250-year period. While the galleries include familiar highlights of the collection, they also feature works by artists not always represented in traditional narratives of American art. Drawn from across the museum’s collections, including seven curatorial departments and the library, the

displayed works represent the art of Native Americans and of creators from Mexico; the British, French, and Spanish North American colonies; and the United States of America.

Inscribed through hundreds of artworks across the expanded galleries are ideas about religion, national identity, the natural world, war, fashion, materialism, poverty, memory, pleasure, and achievement. Following a chronological order, these themes are threaded together across a series of six galleries in the MFAH's Audrey Jones Beck Building. Two of the museum's foundational collections of American art are featured in the first orientation gallery: the Hogg brothers' collection of works by Frederic Remington and their sister Ima Hogg's collection of Native American art, both given to the museum in the first half of the twentieth century. The contemporaneous works here are intentionally in dialogue and lay out the aim of understanding both mythmaking and the rendering of the real in American art. The five subsequent galleries highlight other masterworks from the permanent collection as well as many notable recent acquisitions that reflect the MFAH's commitment to an expansive understanding of American art: [Paul Bennett's pair of tortoiseshell combs](#) with a case from 1670; Antonio de Torres's [Virgen de los Remedios de Naucalpan with Donors](#) of 1724; Joshua Johnson's [Lady on a Red Sofa](#) of around 1820; Rembrandt Peale's [pair of Niagara Falls landscapes](#) from 1831; Cecilia Beaux's [Mother and Son](#) of 1896; and Greene & Greene, [Music Cabinet for the Blacker House](#) from around 1909.

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