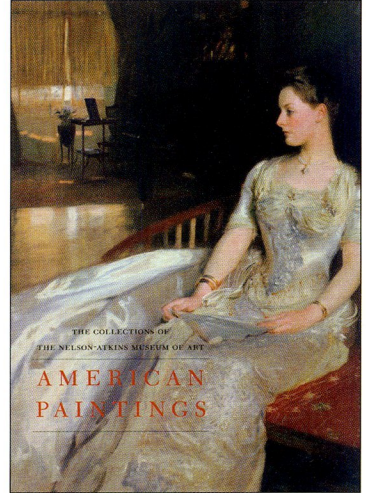


*American Paintings to 1945*, edited by Margaret C. Conrads.  
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 Volume II, 280 pages. All 266 works in the collection reproduced in color,  
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### Review by Gail Leggio

When the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art opened in 1933, it did not have a founding collection. But thanks to funds from the estates of William Rockhill Nelson and Mary McAfee Atkins, the museum had a budget of two million dollars, an extraordinary figure in the Depression, and acquired 5,000 works in its first year. The mission was to create an encyclopedic museum, and European and Asian objects initially outnumbered American works. But over time an impressive, if somewhat quirky, collection was built up, including strong holdings for two Missouri natives, George Caleb Bingham and Thomas Hart Benton. One of the museum's earliest acquisitions was Bingham's (1811–79) *Fishing on the Mississippi* (1851), an idyllic, rosy-lit pastoral that seems to embody Mark Twain's America. Bingham announced his intention to document his era: "that our social and political characteristics as daily and annually exhibited will not be lost...for want of an Art record rendering them full justice." Self-taught, Bingham was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker, then became an itinerant portrait painter. His efforts at visual reportage, such as *Canvassing for a Vote* (1852), produce solid mid-century genre paintings. But Bingham was also exposed to the burgeoning art culture, both through prints and exhibitions in St. Louis, Philadelphia and New York City; he had his first Manhattan show in 1838. His scenes of river life were popular, capturing a quality of frontier charm; they are also his most sophisticated pictures. The composition of *Fishing on the Mississippi* is very effective: the slender fishing poles form a tautly curved rectangular frame for a landscape within a landscape, at the same time connecting the three men on the rocky shore in the foreground with a three-manned boat in the distance.

The first work by Benton (1889–1975) to enter the collection was *The Sun Treader* (1934), a portrait of the avant-garde composer Charles Ruggles. The museum also owns ten paintings in Benton's American Historical Epic series,



unlikely to charm anyone not attracted to his rubbery figures and illustrational mode, along with two more persuasive images. The controversial nude *Persephone* (1938–39) is described in a lively catalogue essay as depicting “a Greek myth, albeit in the guise of a Rita Hayworth pinup plunked down in a Missouri hayfield,” and it’s a tart, juicy riff on a classical subject. *Hollywood* (1937–38) was originally commissioned—and ultimately rejected—by *Life* magazine; the editors didn’t know what to make of the scantily clad blonde starlet on a chaotic soundstage but clearly recognized the artist’s dyspeptic view of the movie industry.

This is the fourth volume in a series documenting the collections of the Nelson-Atkins, and it’s a substantial production, launched in 1985. Volume I features 125 signature works, each accompanied by a succinct but meaty essay discussing recent scholarship; Volume II contains technical notes on all 266 works in the collection. Editor Margaret C. Conrads, Curator of American Art at the Nelson-Atkins, offers an overview of how the collection was formed. The project must have been challenging, but Conrads says she enjoyed it: “Living with works and weaving together their stories has been an immeasurable pleasure. By opening the pages of history, we’ve uncovered hidden intrigues, synthesized existing scholarship and resolved speculation on a number of important works from this country’s artistic past.” The three primary authors—Conrads, Randall R. Griffey and Lauren Lessing—are joined by seventeen other scholars, providing readable, informative texts.

One of the most intriguing paintings in the collection is Raphaëlle Peale’s (1774–1825) *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception* (1822), acquired the year after the museum opened. This unusual work by a member of America’s first painting dynasty had been rediscovered in 1930 by an art dealer who hailed it as a forerunner of Surrealism. The accepted term for a trompe l’oeil painting in the early nineteenth century was a “deception.” The painting’s trompe l’oeil linen kerchief veils an image of Venus—only a lithe arm twined with golden tresses and a dainty foot are visible—based on James Barry’s 1772 *Venus Rising from the Sea*. Peale would most likely have known the somewhat scandalous nude from a popular mezzotint by Valentine Green. The catalogue essay authors explore the critical history of the work, including issues such as the prudery of Charles Willson Peale, Raphaëlle’s father, the Christian iconographic tradition of Veronica’s Veil and the visual game-playing of the Surrealist René Magritte. The discussion could easily be stretched to encompass meta-paintings and other exercises in conceptualism, as well as the extraordinary trompe l’oeil wrapped canvases of contemporary realist Claudio Bravo.

Another early acquisition was an iconic American landscape, Jacob C. Ward’s (1809–81) *Natural Bridge* (c. 1835). The site, one of America’s first tourist attractions, was described by its one-time owner Thomas Jefferson as “sublime”: “so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing as it were



to heaven: the rapture of the spectator is really indescribable.” Ward, who would later travel South America as an itinerant daguerreotypist, emphasizes the scenic beauty of the imposing arch in his horizontal-format work. Other artists would paint the scene, including Thomas Moran, Quaker artist Edward Hicks and Frederic Church, who used a narrow vertical canvas to a dizzying effect. The Nelson-Atkins, after this promising start, did not make landscapes a priority, however, and the genre is not represented in the depth seen at the National Gallery of Art, the Metropolitan Museum or the Brooklyn Museum.

Still, there are truly important American landscapes acquired in the last few decades, especially from the Hudson River School. Jasper Cropsey’s (1823–1900) *Stonehenge* (1876) is an imposing view in an unusually wide format, with a cropped foreground and a few sheep, for scale. The palette has an other-worldly quality. Cropsey made notes in his sketches about the “leaden” blue of the sky and used a salmon-colored ground for the canvas. Thomas Cole’s (1801–48) *The Mill, Sunset* (1844), a late, nostalgic work, features a boy and girl in the grassy foreground. The mill, the mountain in the background and trees are bathed in slanting light, and the oval format gives the image a keepsake look. The Nelson-Atkins owns two knockout pictures by John Frederick Kensett (1816–72) and Frederic Church (1826–1900). Kensett’s *A Woodland Waterfall* (c. 1855–65) depicts a spot in the Catskills known as Fawn’s Leap; a contemporary albumen print of the scene is included in the text. Kensett chooses a vertical format, exaggerating the site’s natural proportions, “to convey a sense of tightly enclosed space,” as the catalogue authors remark. Raking light strikes the rocky crags flanking the deep chasm; the slender cascade itself lies in deep, velvety shadow. The play of dark grey and white clouds in a wedge of sky is particularly fine. *A Woodland Waterfall* represents the home-turf aspect of the Hudson River School. Church’s *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives* (1870) epitomizes the exotic landscape. This monumental, 4½-by-7-foot canvas is the most important picture from Church’s only trip to the Middle East. The narrow silhouette of the city stretches across the horizon under a spectacular skyscape, with huge, rolling banks of clouds, on the left, clearing off to blue, on the right. A group of camels and riders in the foreground is dwarfed by knotty trees and swallowed up by the shadowy expanse yawning before them, making the city shimmering in the distance even more unreal. Among the Nelson-Atkins Museum’s other fine landscapes are Martin Johnson Heade’s *After the Rain in the Salt Marshes* (c. 1875); one of Winslow Homer’s coastal idylls, *Gloucester Harbor* (1873), with boys rowing under roseate clouds; and a trio of George Inness’s (1825–94) mysterious twilight farmscapes, tinged with the artist’s Swedenborgian spirituality.

The Nelson-Atkins has a diverse collection, and running through a particular genre is as good a way as any to sample its holdings. Portraits include John Singleton Copley’s (1738–1815) pair *John Barrett*, a substantial bourgeois shown at his writing table, and *Mrs. John Barrett*, in a conventional upscale-

Anglo picture space, with column, drapery and a bit of landscape backdrop. Both (c. 1758) reflect the pre-revolutionary society of Boston's mercantile elite. William Merritt Chase's (1849–1916) dark, handsome portraits *Baron Hugo von Habermann* (1875) and *Edward Steichen* (1903) were both acquired in the museum's first year. George Bellows's (1882–1925) much rowdier *Frankie, the Oregon Boy* (1907) does an Ashcan School take on Frans Hals. X-ray has revealed a study of a female nude underneath the present image. As so often, John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) demands attention (and the cover of Volume I) with *Mrs. Cecil Wade* (1886), a portrait of a society lady with a crisp profile, in the white satin dress she wore to be presented to Queen Victoria. The beautifully painted white satin sweeps diagonally across the canvas. Behind her a deep-recession drawing room takes up nearly half the composition. Table, chair, piano and polished floorboards that pick up glare from the partially shaded windows—are all enveloped in a sfumato glow. Museum collections should be appreciated not just for the big names, however, but for their oddities. *José Herrera* (1938), by New Mexico artist Peter Hurd (1904–84), is painted in egg tempera, a medium then being revived by artists such as Benton. Hurd picked it up during his apprenticeship to N.C. Wyeth, whose daughter he married in 1929. The mountains behind the figure will look familiar from Georgia O'Keeffe's landscapes, although Hurd's palette is duskier. The subject was a ranch foreman who worked for the painter, and Herrera bears an uncanny resemblance to Botticelli's *Portrait of a Man Holding a Medal* (1474); the authors point out that Hurd declared Botticelli one of his gods.

The publication of this catalogue is a milestone for the museum, which is having a very good year. On June 9, 2007, the Bloch Building, a striking addition to the Nelson-Atkins Museum campus, opened. Designed by Steven Holl Architects, the new building complements the original 1933 neoclassical "Temple to Art" with translucent glass walls that flow visually into the surrounding sculpture park. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 45th and Oak Streets, Kansas City, Missouri 64111. Telephone (816) 561-4000. On the web at [www.nelson-atkins.org](http://www.nelson-atkins.org)