Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art, Auburn University
September 8, 2012–January 5, 2013

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma
March 1–June 2, 2013

Indiana University Art Museum
September 13–December 15, 2013

Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia
January 25–April 20, 2014

Art Interrupted
ADVANCING AMERICAN ART AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY
IN 1946, AMID A “COLD WAR” CONFLICT that emerged between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II, the Department of State embarked on an innovative program of cultural diplomacy. At the heart of this initiative was a project known as Advancing American Art. The program called for the acquisition of modernist paintings by contemporary American artists with the intention of traveling the art through the Latin American republics, Eastern Europe, and Asia. Its objective was to exemplify the freedom of expression enjoyed by artists in a democracy while demonstrating America’s artistic coming of age.

Within months after Advancing American Art began its exhibition tours, controversy over the program erupted in the American media, government forums, and public discourse. Many observers lambasted the paintings selected for the project, and the artists themselves, as un-American and subversive. Several of the artists had left-leaning political views, and the collection, by design, largely avoided representational styles. Facing intense disapproval by Congress with the prospect of losing all funding for its cultural programs abroad, the State Department chose to recall the exhibitions, and the paintings were soon sold at auction.

Art Interrupted: Advancing American Art and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy examines the development and swift demise of this ambitious but ill-fated instrument of foreign policy. The story of Advancing American Art offers important clues to a better understanding of the unsettled period in American history immediately following World War II. The public debate the project engendered—on the value of modern art, government’s role in art patronage, and what constitutes a truly American art form—addressed issues that are still worthy of discussion today. The curtailed tour in 1947 prevented a full consideration of what the paintings had to say about the artists and the period in which they were created. Nearly seventy years after the paintings were first assembled, the organizers of the present exhibition—the Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art at Auburn University, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma, and the Georgia Museum of Art at the University of Georgia—have worked together to give the artists and the original State Department organizers their due acknowledgement. From a checklist of 117 oils and watercolors sold as war surplus in 1948, Art Interrupted reunites all but ten paintings, for which there are no known locations, in an exhibition that demonstrates again the great worth in freedom and diversity.
“This is what the communists and other extremists want to portray...that the American people are despondent, broken down or of hideous shape—thoroughly dissatisfied with their lot and eager for a change in government.”

—Rep. Fred Busbey

O. LOUIS GUGLIELMI
Subway Exit, 1946, Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art, Auburn University; Advancing American Art Collection, 1948.1.17
Tenements, 1939, Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia; University purchase, GMOA 1948.197
Around the Lighthouse, n.d., Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art, Auburn University; Advancing American Art Collection, 1948.1.35

“only in a democracy where the full development of the individual is not only permitted but fostered could such an exhibition be assembled.”
—William Benton, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs

exhibition

After an inaugural viewing of Advancing American Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, October 4–27, 1946, the exhibition was split into two touring groups and sent to regions considered political and intellectual battlegrounds between democracy and communism: forty-nine oils were slated for Eastern Europe and the remaining thirty for the Caribbean and Latin America.

The Eastern Hemisphere exhibition traveled from New York to Paris, where it opened November 18 at the Musée d’Art Moderne as part of an exhibition celebrating the creation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The same group of paintings then traveled to Prague, Czechoslovakia, for exhibition at the Umlecka Beseda, a cooperative fine art forum. Advancing American Art was a tremendous success in Prague, receiving popular and critical attention including accolades from President Eduard Beneš. Posters illustrating Robert Gwathmey’s *Worksong* advertised Advancing American Art to the Prague public. The opening on March 6 reportedly attracted more than a thousand visitors. It was then scheduled for additional Czechoslovak venues in Brno and Bratislava. The planned itinerary included Budapest, Hungary, and an undetermined venue in Poland, although political controversy in the United States prompted Secretary of State George C. Marshall to recall Advancing American Art in May 1947.

The Caribbean and Latin America section of Advancing American Art premiered in Havana in late 1946 at the Club Fotografico de Cuba. After the exhibition closed in January 1947, it moved to the Buscardi Museum in Santiago de Cuba, and then the Centre d’Art in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. When it closed in Haiti, it was likely intended for Caracas, Venezuela.
“so far advanced that it’s completely out of sight and no one in his sane mind is ever going to try and catch up to it.”

—Fulton Lewis Jr.

BYRON BROWNE
Still Life in Red, Yellow, and Green, 1945,
Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art,
Auburn University;
Advancing American Art Collection, 1948.1.4.
Courtesy of Stephen Bernard Browne
reaction

“if that’s art, then I’m a Hottentot.”
—President Harry S. Truman

Initial favorable reviews in the New York press followed Advancing American Art’s showing at the Met. However, they were soon replaced by negative coverage in national media and in publications with a more conservative readership. William Randolph Hearst’s newspaper *New York Journal–American*, for example, ran a scathing series of full-page photo essays, illustrating the collection alongside sarcastic captions such as “Lunatic’s Delight.” Syndicated radio commentator Fulton Lewis Jr. pronounced the art “so far advanced that it’s completely out of sight and no one in his sane mind is ever going to try and catch up to it.” Even the more moderate *Look* magazine printed a mild rebuke with “Your Money Bought These Paintings,” though they “will never be shown in America.”

Meanwhile, legislators in Washington began to receive impassioned letters from their constituents, asking why taxpayers’ money was used to support such a program. As the public clamor increased, Congress called a formal hearing to review the appropriateness of Advancing American Art. President Harry S. Truman penned perhaps the most damning critique in a letter to Benton in which he decried modern art as “merely the vaporings of half-baked lazy people.” Two days later the State Department suspended the exhibitions. Congress voted to cut funding for the art program, and Davidson’s position at OIC was dissolved.

Not all assessments of Advancing American Art were negative. When the exhibition was recalled, numerous groups of American artists convened to hold an “Artists’ Action Meeting,” in which they agreed the recall was “a step backward in our cultural relations with other countries.” The Association of Art Museum Directors concurred and endorsed “the recent programs of the Department of State in furthering the cause of international understanding by disseminating American art in foreign countries.” Additionally, scores of private citizens wrote letters to their elected representatives, praising the program and protesting its cessation. Ultimately, these statements of support had little effect on the government’s decision.
After the program was discontinued, Benton decided to sell the collection to recoup expenses and save political face. A legal proviso stemming from the original source of appropriations required the works be declared government surplus and sold through the War Assets Administration (WAA). In addition to the seventy-nine paintings in Advancing American Art, thirty-eight watercolors that were intended for an Asian tour, also canceled in the wake of the scandal, were thus scheduled for public auction via sealed bids on June 19, 1948. Announced in government publications and metropolitan newspapers, the lot of “117 Oil and Water Color Originals by Leading American Artists” went on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art for a month prior to the sale.

Bidders from twenty-six states plus the District of Columbia and the Territory of Hawaii submitted offerings. The WAA gave preference to publicly funded museums and educational institutions. Among the 148 bidders in the sale, Auburn University (then Alabama Polytechnic), the Georgia Museum of Art, and the University of Oklahoma were the most successful, together acquiring eighty-two lots. Adding to their good fortune, a little known regulation granted tax-exempt institutions a 95% discount off the selling price. Unfortunately for the State Department, instead of reaping a large profit from the sale, after subtracting the original purchase costs the government realized little more than $5000, due to the number of purchasers qualifying for the discount.

“you, in reaction to protests of untutored and technically deficient laymen, have killed the most progressive governmental art project of our time.”
—Daniel Defenbacher, Director, Walker Art Center

Despite its brief life, Advancing American Art served as an important example of State Department policy in the postwar period. Its emphasis on freedom of expression and individualism as key democratic values helped Benton and his staff challenge communist ideology in Eastern Europe and Latin America. The plurality Davidson attempted offered an accurate picture of American art in the 1940s and the racial and political diversity of the United States. His exemplars of American modern painting were perhaps fittingly dispersed among the very people they represented. Extending to the far corners of the nation, the strong interest directed toward these 117 works belied the exaggerated outrage that accompanied their short-lived mission. Its diplomatic purpose abroad was curtailed by the need for domestic self-examination. In this regard, Advancing American Art perhaps had its greatest utility.
The traveling exhibition *Art Interrupted: Advancing American Art and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy* is organized by the Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art, Auburn University; Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma; and the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia.

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