



**SOUTHERN/MODERN**

Having arisen in cities like Paris, Berlin, Moscow, and New York, modern art spread globally throughout the twentieth century. For artists around the world, employing styles associated with modernism—abstraction, cubism, expressionism, surrealism—became a way to assert their own sophistication and embrace new ways of responding to a changing world.

The American South had its own modern artists, whose work has not been deeply studied before this exhibition. Focusing on the years between 1913 and 1955, *Southern/Modern* includes paintings and works on paper that reflect a period of change and upheaval across the region.

The exhibition opens with the Southerners section, showing people posing for portraits, shopping, singing, chatting, or just out for an evening stroll—activities common everywhere. While most offer a view of people relaxing without clear indicators of place, works in this gallery also reflect the racial divide that has marked this region and nation for centuries. There are paintings showing Black people, like William H. Johnson's *Evening* (fig. 1) and paintings showing white people—but only rarely are they depicted together.

After the people comes the land—the South has long been known for its rural and agricultural identity. The section Landscape as Metaphor shows sites of great natural beauty, human perseverance, and survival. We see fertile cornfields near the Ozarks; the peaks, hollows, and dense foliage of the Appalachians; the fertility of the Carolina low country; and the red clay of Georgia (cover). Other images depict depleted land, marking the impact of extraction and overuse with gloomy overtones linked to the people who still live and work on the land.

For the artists in the exhibition, the land was not simply topography—it was a stage for memory, legend, and history. Exemplifying this is Carroll Cloar's *A Story Told by My Mother*, illustrating family lore in which a dreamlike landscape is the setting for an encounter between a woman and a panther.

This otherworldly quality extends to the section Religion and Ritual, which focuses mostly on the experiences of Black Christians. Several works visualize Black spirituals, such as John McCrady's *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* and Malvin Gray Johnson's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. A portrait by Eldzier Cortor, *Sea of Time*, honors the strong women of the Gullah community in the Georgia Sea Islands, who have sustained religious practices carried from West Africa since the transatlantic slave trade.

The exhibition does not turn away from the region's darkest histories. Artists in Segregation and Jim Crow vigorously attacked overt and systemic racism. On view are indictments of segregation and inequality in the military, at the beach, in the prison farm, and in the town square. The most horrific works illustrate the threat and reality of racist violence, as in Lois Mailou Jones's devastating portrayal of a man about to be lynched. While they represent events of the past, these emotionally wrenching works are reminders that racial inequality is still woven deeply into the nation's fabric.

The Labor section features images of people planting cotton and gleaning coal, mending fishing nets, and working in factories. Thomas Hart Benton's *Ploughing it Under* shows a sharecropper destroying a landowner's crops as part of a federal program to keep food costs high; the landowner will receive a government subsidy, and the sharecropper won't eat. Such subjects reflect

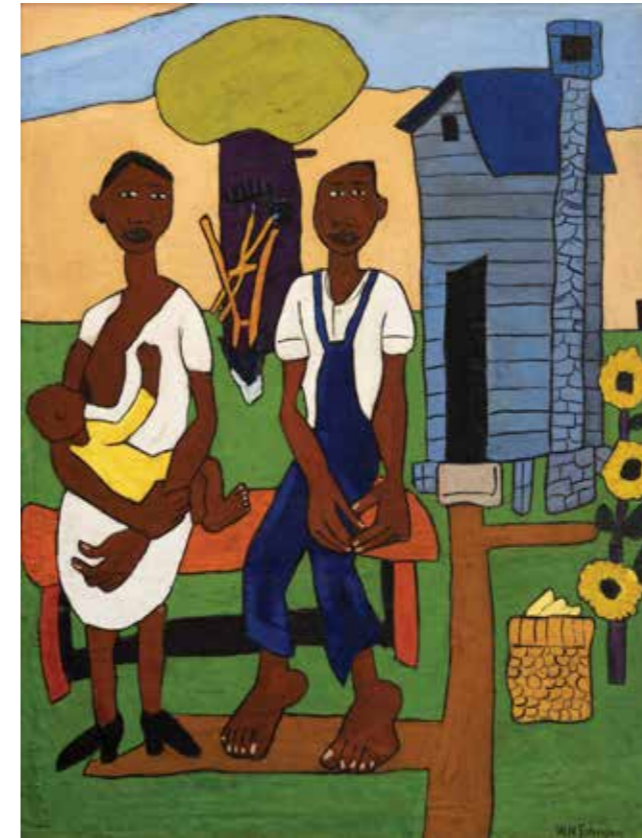


Fig. 1: William H. Johnson. *Evening*, 1940–41. Oil on burlap; 49 x 38 in. Florence County Museum, Florence, SC, Gift of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, 1344.2

the regionalist movement that arose during the Great Depression, when many artists sought to bring the dire conditions of working people to wider public attention.

As the South shifted from a largely agricultural economy to a more industrial one, many people who had worked on farms moved to cities and towns to take jobs in steel mills, furniture plants, and textile factories. Responding to these changes, some artists captured the billowing flames of steel production in Birmingham, while others depicted the new sawmills and textile factories popping up around the region.

In the last two sections, *Planting New Seeds: Colonies and Schools and Many Modernisms*, works reflect trends artists learned about in cities like New York, Philadelphia, or Paris, where paintings by such leading figures as Wassily Kandinsky, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso could be viewed firsthand. Many came south to spread the ideals and techniques of modernism in the region's colleges and universities. Perhaps the most renowned institution dedicated to new art was Black Mountain College near Asheville, where an international faculty, including the famous color theorist Josef Albers, attracted national attention for its interdisciplinary approach to modernist practices. Art colonies began to form as well, offering a supportive environment for progressive-minded artists.

Works in these last two sections move away from representation toward near or total abstraction, either through geometry or in loosely applied gestures and patches of color. While these abstractions might subtly reflect aspects of the region, their subjects are often so generalized that they could be from anywhere—modernism in the South was truly part of an international phenomenon, as seen in Charles Walther's Bauhaus-inspired painting *Reversible Image*. Nevertheless, *Southern/Modern* makes it clear that art in the South—as everywhere—has the potential to introduce receptive viewers to new ways of expressing truth and discovering beauty. The message is profound: for artists of conviction, seeds of creativity can take root wherever they are planted.

Mark Scala  
Chief Curator

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Cover: Nell Choate Jones. *Georgia Red Clay*, 1946. Oil on canvas; 25 x 30 in. Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, GA, 1989.01094