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- TITLE:** **VARIATIONS ON AMERICA**
Masterworks from American Art Forum Collections
- AUTHORS:** **George Gurney, Eleanor Jones Harvey, Virginia M. Mecklenburg. With a Foreword by Elizabeth Broun, Director, Smithsonian American Art Museum**
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- ILLUSTRATIONS:** 91 colour illustrations
- TEXT:** 46,000 words, including Foreword by the Director; Introduction; six thematic sections; backmatter, including Selected Bibliography
- MARKET:** Nineteenth- and twentieth-century American art and design lovers; students and scholars of fine art, decorative art and sculpture; specialist dealers and collectors; nineteenth- and twentieth-century social historians; decorators and designers.
- SALES POINTS:**
- Presents colour plates and details of over 70 paintings by the leading names in 19th- and 20th-century American art
 - Includes works by Sanford Robinson Gifford, Mary Cassatt, Louis Comfort Tiffany, George Bellows, Willem de Kooning, Georgia O'Keefe, James Earl Fraser, John Marin, Andrew Wyeth and David Hockney
 - Publication accompanies an exhibition opening at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Spring 2007

advance information



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The American Art Forum, a small group of collectors from across the United States, was begun twenty years ago by Charles C. Eldredge while he was director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. By founding this group, he put the museum in touch with many of the finest collectors of American art.

The Forum plays a vital role in introducing collectors to each other and to the rich variety of public museums across the United States. It is an informal conference for the exchange of news and ideas, held in the far-ranging and ever-fascinating regions of a vast country. The Forum has visited all the biggest cities in the United States and explored public and private collections from all points of the compass.

Now, as part of the Forum's twentieth anniversary celebrations, the Smithsonian American Art Museum is proud to offer *Variations on America*, an exhibition and accompanying volume of seventy-two treasured artworks collected by members of the Forum and selected for the exhibition by the Museum's curators. Chief curator Eleanor Jones Harvey, deputy chief curator George Gurney, senior curators Virginia M. Mecklenburg and Joann Moser, former Luce Foundation Center curator George Speer, and curatorial assistant Elaine Yau present significant and lively contributions about these works.

Fine landscape masterpieces in the Hudson River tradition, including Sanford Robinson Gifford's *The Marshes of the Hudson* (1876); light-filled impressionist canvases, such as Mary Cassatt's *Reading "Le Figaro"* (1878); dazzling Gilded Age glass by Louis Comfort Tiffany and paintings by John Singer Sargent; gritty Ashcan records from a dynamic New York City, such as George Bellows's *Noon* (1908); vivid aesthetic creations of the modern age; the triumphant abstract expressionism of Willem de Kooning; and resonant contemporary works by Andrew Wyeth and David Hockney are shared here. During the twenty years of the Forum's existence, art of the American West has achieved a major place among art historians and collectors. This is reflected in the inclusion of major canvases by Georgia O'Keefe, such as *Black Cross with Red Sky* (1929), John Marin's *Taos Canyon, New Mexico* (1929), and James Earl Fraser's moving bronze sculpture, *End of the Trail* (1918).

Winslow Homer 1836–1910

In 1873, Winslow Homer traveled to Gloucester, Massachusetts, thirty miles northeast of Boston, on the Cape Ann peninsula. The Gloucester *Edgworth* sailed on August 23 that “Winslow Homer, the artist, has been spending the summer at the Marine House, and the pages of *Harpers’ Weekly* have been brightened by his wistful sketches.” Homer sent his sketch that first summer’s work to the 1874 exhibition of the American Society of Painters in Water Colors. Critics praised these forthright images, in which Homer looked to nature rather than to “some other man’s picture.” His “understanding that and exclamation point” of color led his critics “almost without fail to ask Mr. Homer for a finished piece.” In subsequent seasons at Gloucester, the tight drawing of his maritime illustrations blossomed confidently, and he painted confidently with large brushes and bold strokes.

Temperament calm and bright areas of white granite in *Watching Ships, Gloucester* captures the effortless atmosphere of the coast and the spontaneity and freedom

of the hard-fort boys who look out to sea. Still, there is a sense in this painting of a kind of rest that passes, perhaps too quickly. Soon enough, the sea will cast longer shadows, and the ships will pass out of the harbor and beyond the horizon. The boys will wait, as families of fishermen always did, for their fathers’ safe return.

Watching Ships, Gloucester represents an ideal of childhood that occurred after the Civil War. These boys represent a younger America, a more innocent time before the film is ready given too great to negotiate peacefully. In the decades to come, the Gilded Age would present its own difficulties, when the “hardness of heart” that Walt Whitman witnessed in modern culture, led many Americans to look back to the more comforting moment Homer immortalized here.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴Quoted in David S. Downes, “Introduction,” *Winslow Homer at Gloucester: The Marine House Sketches* (Chicago: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), p. 10.

¹⁰⁵Quoted in John G. Cope, *Winslow Homer: The American Scene* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1964), p. 104.

¹⁰⁶Quoted in John G. Cope, *Winslow Homer: The American Scene* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1964), p. 104.

¹⁰⁷Quoted in John G. Cope, *Winslow Homer: The American Scene* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1964), p. 104.



Watching Ships, Gloucester
1875, watercolor and gouache on paper, 8 1/2 x 14 in.
Collection of Nina Tucker Melroy

Wayne Thiebaud b. 1920

Wayne Thiebaud painted cakes, pies, and hot dogs because these familiar things were in one restaurant across America, a reminder that “one generation and how close we really are.” Whether in Pasadena or in Madison Avenue, he said, “it’s the same damn pie,” but the little differences of color, light, and shape made him think of how rarely people bother to look for distinctions among themselves.¹⁰⁸ In *Meringues*, each carefully calibrated dice vibrates with “delicious,” intense shades in complementary colors that seduce the eye. Rich drapings of paint were laid on the bottom and flared of the meringue themselves. The counterpane looks like pink icing, but there we notice the black horizon line at the top, and this too brings across the party case but a knowledge of Post-Action America.

Thiebaud confesses that the exact symbolism of his work continues to elude him, but he admits that, like the customer before the pie counter, he wants to hold on to “just a piece” of that visual experience: “When he made his first pie paintings in the early 1960s, Thiebaud could tell that his dice are a restaurant and a pie counter for the movie studios had latched to his surface. “Now I have flipped out,” he remembers thinking, “that’s really crazy, but no one is going to look at these things anyway, so what the heck.” On the contrary, Thiebaud’s iconic images have remained iconic and adoring friends of Joan Semons’ Chardin’s masterful eighteenth-century still life of Charles Messer’s impressionist genre scene, and of the best American pop art.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸Quoted in Robert Rauschenberg, *Wayne Thiebaud: The Pasadena Art Museum, 1962*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁹James A. Meehan, “Introduction,” *Wayne Thiebaud: The Pasadena Art Museum, 1962* (Pasadena: The Pasadena Art Museum, 1962), p. 14.

¹¹⁰Quoted in Robert Rauschenberg, *Wayne Thiebaud: The Pasadena Art Museum, 1962* (Pasadena: The Pasadena Art Museum, 1962), p. 14.

¹¹¹Quoted in Robert Rauschenberg, *Wayne Thiebaud: The Pasadena Art Museum, 1962* (Pasadena: The Pasadena Art Museum, 1962), p. 14.



Meringues
1988, oil on canvas, 30 x 30 in.
Private Collection, Washington, DC

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