

The background of the entire page is a painting titled "Wheat Field" by John Rogers Cox, circa 1943. It depicts a vast, rolling landscape of golden wheat fields under a dark, almost black sky. A single, large, white, fluffy cloud is positioned in the upper center of the sky. On the left side, a small, isolated red Gothic farmhouse sits atop a hill. The foreground shows the texture of the wheat stalks in more detail.

# RURAL MODERN

## AMERICAN ART BEYOND THE CITY

By Jessica Skwire Routhier

“Wheat Field” by John Rogers Cox, circa 1943. Oil on Masonite, 16 by 20 inches. The John and Susan Horseman Collection of American Art. The isolated Gothic farmhouse, the threatening cloud and the exaggerated colors of the sky and field contribute to a sense of the sinister in what, in another artist’s hands, might be an idealized view of rural life.

CHADDS FORD, PENN. — Visualize, for a moment, the ideal of autumn in America. Apple trees laden with fruit, trees aflame with color, squirrels skittering about, fields turning golden in the equinoctial sun. Somehow our fall visions always tend toward the rural. But fall is also election season in America, a season that comes with a very different kind of optics. One inescapable image in recent years has been the color-coded map of the USA, with Republican-leaning states in red and Democratic ones in blue. This shorthand way of categorizing us was popularized in the 2000 presidential election and has been used exhaustively for every election since.

Americans have become accustomed to viewing our nation in this disunited way. We have also, as a whole, accepted the apparent truism that divisions in political thought fall along rural/urban lines. The city and the country are wholly different worlds, one is led to believe, with different values, ideas and, it goes without saying, inhabitants.

And yet like most truisms, this one does not stand up to extended scrutiny.



“Spring Turning” by Dale Nichols, 1946. Oil on canvas, 25 by 18 inches. Private collection. The verdant landscape and hand-drawn plow represent an idealized rural past that Americans were eager to return to in the years following World War II.





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“Steel Foundry, Coatesville, Pennsylvania” by Ralston Crawford, 1936–37. Oil on canvas, 32-1/8 by 40 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art. Crawford’s view of Lukens Steel, like Demuth’s, elides the town’s much more rural setting in favor of industrial, architectural forms.

In the context of American art, it clearly falls short of the truth, for artists have historically divided their time between the cities that provided a market for their work and the rural areas that often inspired it. “Rural Modern: American Art Beyond The City,” at the Brandywine River Museum of Art through January 22, explores that point of intersection in the 1920s through the 1940s, a time when many Modernist artists were leaving their hometowns for the big city (even if their rural roots continued to inspire their work), just as others were quitting the city for the vistas and tranquility of the hinterlands.

Co-organized by the Brandywine River Museum and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the exhibition will be presented in an expanded form at the High Museum as “Cross Country: The Power of Place in American Art, 1915–1950,” February 12–May 7.

“Curators are often asked what their favorite paintings are,” notes exhibition curator, and Brandywine River Museum associate curator, Amanda C. Burdan. “One of my favorites has always been Charles Demuth’s ‘My Egypt.’” That Precisionist view of grain elevators near the artist’s hometown of Lancaster, Penn. — painted from a low vantage point so that the smooth, metallic cylinders recede into the sky — neatly encapsulates the blending of city and country that was such a feature of early Modernist painting in America.



We tend to think of Demuth as a New York artist, says Burdan, but in fact he had deeply rural roots and was just as connected to Lancaster as he was to the city. “He returned to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, after having all these amazing cosmopolitan experiences, and [he] applied these concepts he was exposed to” in the work he created while living in his

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“New Mexico Landscape” by Marsden Hartley, 1919–20. Oil on canvas, 30 by 36 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Hartley was fascinated with the Southwest and saw it and its people as exemplars of an authentic America, even as he remained dedicated to the Modernist principles he had learned in Europe. This Cezanne-inspired painting shows the synthesis of those interests.



family's Eighteenth Century farmhouse. The covetable "My Egypt," unfortunately, is not in the exhibition, but other Pennsylvania works like "End of the Parade, Coatesville, Pennsylvania" convey Demuth's fascination with what happens when the Machine Age meets the farm.

As Burdan began to look deeper into Demuth, she realized that, among his Modernist contemporaries, "I couldn't find a single artist who had only worked in the city." The practice of living and working in many different kinds of places brought artists multiple benefits. "They could bring more Modern styles to smaller art colonies," Burdan says, "and then they could also adopt the rural themes and subject matter to their paintings in Modernist styles." Subjects like grain elevators, freshly plowed fields, sugaring-off parties and, in the Southwest, buttes and adobe dwellings, were exciting to artists, critics and collectors...

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"Godly Susan" by Roger Medearis, 1941. Egg tempera on board, 27-5/8 by 23-5/8 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum. The subject here is the artist's own grandmother, and the work places him within the genealogy of American folk culture.

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