

TO MAKE A WORLD

GEORGE AULT AND 1940s AMERICA

The painter George Ault (1891–1948) moved from Manhattan to the small town of Woodstock, New York, in 1937, seeking to escape personal misfortune and the increasing instability of a world verging on war.

The paintings Ault made in Woodstock show his desire to make “order out of chaos,” wrote his wife, Louise, who accompanied him there. If the world was uncertain, at least the slope of a barn roof was a sure thing. The beautiful geometries of Ault’s paintings make personal worlds of clarity and composure to offset a real world he felt was in crisis.

Yet melancholy pervades Ault’s darkened scenes. Standing at a lonely crossroads, he could sense the wide world tipping and dropping to strangeness and sadness. In his paintings, night poises on wires and eaves.

This exhibition focuses on Ault’s Woodstock paintings and those of other American artists in the 1940s who shared his dreamy vision, if not always his radiant pleasures and dark soul.

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The Road to Stony Clove, 1940
gouache on paper
George Ault
born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948
Manhattan Art Investments, LP

The rugged Catskills were the space of Ault's solitary path in Woodstock—the mountain wilderness of a person retreating from Manhattan to make a world of his own, and with no prospect for certain success.

December 8, 1941, 1941
oil on canvas
Rockwell Kent
born Tarrytown, NY 1882--died Plattsburgh, NY 1971
Plattsburgh State Art Museum, State University of New York, Gift of Sally Kent Gorton

Painting at his Adirondack farm in Au Sable Forks, New York, some two hundred miles north of Woodstock, Kent showed the day after Pearl Harbor as a glorious vision, full of optimism and promise. For him, Americans could already see a time when "Victory will be ours!" as Kent proclaimed a few days later.

Studio Interior, 1938
watercolor and pencil on paper
George Ault
born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from The Museum of Modern Art

Each day before starting to paint, Ault made his studio as neat as possible. Only after everything was in place did he sit down at the easel. In this watercolor made soon after he moved to Woodstock, Ault made order two times: once in the actual studio, and again in the painting recording it.

Black Night: Russell's Corners, 1943
oil on canvas
George Ault
born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948
The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, John Lambert Fund

The first of five paintings Ault made of a rural crossroads near his house in Woodstock, Black Night is quiet and calm, a small place of order in a world at war.

Nude and Torso, 1945
oil on canvas
George Ault
born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948
Courtesy Zabriskie Gallery

Louise Jonas met Ault in 1935 and married him in 1941. She posed for this painting the year after she spent time away from him, hoping to recover her health and peace of mind after several years of the couple's difficult and impoverished life in Woodstock. Turning away, she is a cooperative but reticent muse. After her husband's death in 1948, Louise worked tirelessly to promote his art.

The Artist at Work, 1946
oil on canvas
George Ault
born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. George Ault

In this self-portrait Ault shows his precise method for detailed passages: he steadies his painting hand on his non-painting hand, which in turn he steadies on his crossed left leg. That leg rests on his right leg, which channels the weight to the right foot, creating a precarious but perfectly controlled balance. Obscuring his face, Ault merges with the scene he paints.

January Full Moon, 1941
oil on canvas
George Ault
born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust

Painting the same nearby Woodstock barn by night and day, Ault gave it different moods and powers. In January Full Moon, perhaps his greatest painting, he made it the Barn of all barns, a universal structure divining the sky and resting on clouds of snow.

The Rick's Barn, Woodstock, 1940
oil on canvas
George Ault
born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Vanderwoude

Louise wrote of walking with Ault up "the undulating road rising to the Rick's farm," where the barn (the same one shown in January Full Moon) so entranced him. The Rick's barn was an old weather-beaten building, but in Ault's painting it conveys the "immediate experience" he found to be a life-affirming pleasure.

Dawn in Pennsylvania, 1942
oil on canvas
Edward Hopper
born Nyack, NY 1882--died New York City, NY 1967
Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collections

The melancholy stillness of Hopper's painting is like that in Ault's works, a hushed setting of angles and planes. Hopper's nameless station has the unreal smoothness of a dream.

Public Sale, 1943
tempera on panel
Andrew Wyeth
born Chadds Ford, PA 1917--died Chadds Ford, PA 2009
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Bequest of Margaret McKee Breyer

Wyeth's painting of bidders at a country auction buying the personal items of a farmer fallen on hard times tells a sad tale, dry as the tempera-painted blades of grass. The sadness of Ault's country scenes is similar, but he told no stories in his art.

New Haven Green, 1944
tempera on panel
Dede Plummer
born -- died?
New Haven Museum and Historical Society

In this painting included in an Artists for Victory exhibition during the war, Plummer shows the town green of New Haven, Connecticut, bustling with activity, the citizenry making its ordered daily round amid the civic designs of path and fence. Ault stayed away from wartime crowds, finding his own geometric order in solitude.

Fourth of July, 1944
oil on gessoed masonite
Constance Coleman Richardson
born Indianapolis, IN 1905--died place? 2002
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, John Lambert Fund

Painted in upstate New York, Richardson's picture of an elderly man on a park bench shows one person's private reflections on a public holiday in wartime. She had been able to make the work because the local ration board gave her twenty gallons of gasoline to travel around the area to find patriotic scenes to paint.

Enemy Action over American Bomber Station, 1942
tempera on board
Peter Hurd
born Roswell, NM 1904--died Roswell, NM 1984
Army Art Collection, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.

In Hurd's painting, made while on assignment for Life magazine in England, flares and searchlights make a pattern in the night sky—a momentary order in the chaos of warfare. The glittering lights anticipate the glow in the work of Hurd's brother-in-law, Andrew Wyeth, whose Night Hauling is shown elsewhere in this exhibition.

The River Tay at Perth, 1944
oil on canvas
Byron Thomas
born Baltimore, MD 1902--died Woodstock, VT 1978
Army Art Collection, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.

Thomas, a painter-correspondent for Life, made this work while in Scotland early in 1944. When it appeared as a color reproduction in Life on October 9 of that year, many Americans dared imagine Allied victory, a postwar world of dreams.

Movies---Canton Island, 1943
oil on canvas
Paul Sample
born Louisville, KY 1896--died Norwich, VT 1974
Army Art Collection, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.

Working for Life as an artist-correspondent in the Pacific, Sample made paintings such as this one of American soldiers watching a Hollywood movie on a makeshift screen that anticipate the frolics, hijinx, and romance of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical South Pacific, which premiered on Broadway in 1949.

Late November in the Catskills, 1940

watercolor and gouache on paper

George Ault

born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948

Woodstock Artists Association and Museum Permanent Collection, Gift of Louise Ault

“I, a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made”—the poet A. E. Housman’s lines deeply affected Ault.

I Dream of the Day, 1944

bound book

Caleb Milne

born Woodstock, NY 1911--died North Africa 1943

Frontispiece to, “I Dream of the Day . . . : Letters from Africa, 1942--1943” by Frederica Milne

Woodstock, like other American communities, was deeply affected by the war. Many of its residents enlisted in the military, serving around the globe and making this small town—like so many American villages and hamlets—a place newly related to the wide world. Some of the town’s residents never returned from those faraway places. Robert Oren Russell (lower right) was killed in North Africa on December 24, 1942, seven months after he enlisted. The ambulance driver Caleb Milne, shown in the frontispiece to a posthumous book of his letters published by his mother, was killed while helping a wounded soldier on May 11, 1943, also in North Africa.

Brook in the Mountains, 1945

oil on canvas

George Ault

born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948

Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Gift of Myron and Anita Kunin

The Aults regarded this painting of a small waterfall off the beaten path in Woodstock as a symbol of their life together, an icon of their personal world. The fall is gushing and tearful but also tidy and composed—a form of crying without crying.

Daylight at Russell’s Corners, 1944

oil on canvas

George Ault

born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948

Collection of Sam Simon

Unified in tones of winter gray, softened in snow, Ault’s only daytime painting of Russell’s Corners shows in greater detail the humble crossroads he found so magical at night.

Summer of ’45, Woodstock, N.Y., about 1945

oil on canvas

Louis Bouché

born New York City 1896--died Pittsfield, MA 1969

Collection of Jason Schoen, Princeton, NJ

One of many artists living and working in Woodstock (most of whom Ault kept at a distance), Bouché painted this picture showing architecture similar to the kind in Ault’s pictures but without the same order: here the thick summer forest and woodland dwellers intrude.

Pine Trees, 1946

oil on canvas

Byron Thomas

born Baltimore, MD 1902--died Woodstock, VT 1978

The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Joseph E. Temple Fund

Thomas, returning from his wartime work overseas for Life, painted these moonlit pine trees in upstate New York the year after the war ended. His wood of bending trees, their boughs in backlit revelation, is a world disclosed in a pause, a hush.

Amoskeag Canal, 1948

oil on canvas

Charles Sheeler

born Philadelphia, PA 1883--died Dobbs Ferry, NY 1965

Currier Museum of Art, Museum Purchase: Currier Funds

Commissioned to portray the abandoned mills of Manchester, New Hampshire, Sheeler painted a scene where the clarities of powdered air and reflective water reveal no human presence, least of all his own. Like Ault, Sheeler was a poet of empty places.

The Kite Flyers, 1945

oil on artist's board

Kelly Fearing

born Fordyce, AR 1918

Collection of Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Leonard Brothers Prize Award

In this painting by Fearing, who worked for Consolidated Vultee Aircraft during the war, the man and children flying the kite suggest a first tentative sign of peace and innocence, floating in the still gray skies, the year the war ended.

Going Home, 1944

oil on artist's board

Bror Utter

born Fort Worth, TX 1913--died Fort Worth, TX 1993

Charles and Karen Harris Cerulla Collection

Inspired by master American regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton, Utter's scene is a jaunty wartime counterpart to Ault's lonely country roads and buildings.

Cloud Trails, 1944

oil on canvas

John Rogers Cox

born Terre Haute, IN 1915--died Louisville, KY 1990

St. Louis Art Museum, Friends Fund and funds given by Jeanne and Rex Siquefield and Eleanor J. Moore

Cox, painting in Terra Haute, Indiana, sought to connect daily life to the universe. An old barn plastered with advertisements rises slightly above the horizon, relating the circus entertainments of one spot on earth to the eternal swirl of clouds and moon.

White Cloud, 1943
oil and acrylic on canvas
John Rogers Cox
born Terre Haute, IN 1915--died Louisville, KY 1990
Swope Art Museum Collection, Terre Haute, Indiana

A lone cloud hangs over a drought-stricken land, portending a rain that may never come. Cox shows a place vulnerable to the winds, even as the cloud sits, windless, unblown, like a wreath or halo hung on a hook in the sky.

Memories of the Coast of France, 1944
oil on canvas
George Ault
born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948
Manhattan Art Investments, LP

Ault, who vacationed on the French coast as a boy and traveled there as an adult, wept when he heard news of the French surrender to the Nazis in 1940. Several years later he made this picture, half hopeful, half melancholy, of the country whose wartime fate he lamented. At low tide, amid fantastic rocks, a woman (his wife, Louise) sits below a brilliant sky of aggressive shapes, clouds resembling cockscombs and arrowheads.

The Cable Station, 1944
oil on canvas
George Ault
born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948
Weatherspoon Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Museum purchase with funds from the Blue Bell Foundation and NCNB

Ault based this painting on a newspaper photograph of a defense installation on the French coast. Here he showed, according to Louise, the “disintegration of our times”—an isolated building and abruptly terminating lines of communication. The lone backlit cloud, appearing where the wires end, is an otherworldly presence in the scene.

Cloud Study (from Sketch Book), 1944
graphite on paper
George Ault
born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948
Collection of Donald Lokuta

Ault loved clouds, often pointing out ones he especially liked to Louise. Both he and Louise regarded them superstitiously, as symbols and premonitions.

Old House, New Moon, 1943
oil on canvas
George Ault
born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948
Yale University Art Gallery, Anonymous gift

During the war, ghost stories and horror movies were popular. Here, in a work painted to recall nineteenth-century American folk art, Ault portrayed a haunted house reminiscent of Charles Addams’s cartoons of the 1940s.

Untitled (Bridge and Town), 1946
oil on canvas mounted on board
Raphael Gleitsmann
born Dayton, OH 1910--died 1995
Collection of Helen and Mark Neithercut, Courtesy of Lusenhop Fine Art

Gleitsmann, who served in the war, finished this painting thirteen months after being seriously wounded in Germany. Working in Akron, Ohio, he was one of many American artists and writers from those years to value stillness—the moments when a deserted American place offers up some secret it never explains.

Flag Station, 1945
oil on canvas
Harry Leith-Ross
born Mauritius 1886--died Pinesville, PA 1973
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, John Lambert Fund

Amid the bustle of wartime life, a pause might disclose an emotion or mood otherwise imperceptible. Leith-Ross, painting in New Hope, Pennsylvania, portrayed a quiet others discerned in those years—“the rare beauty of stasis,” the British journalist Alistair Cooke called it on his tour of home front America in 1942.

Bituminous Coal, Blueprint of the Future, To Make Dream Houses Come True, 1945
oil on board
Rockwell Kent
born Tarrytown, NY 1882--died Plattsburgh, NY 1971
Plattsburgh State Art Museum, State University of New York, Bequest of Sally Kent Gorton

Bituminous Coal, Power for the Wheels of Progress, 1945
oil on board
Rockwell Kent
born Tarrytown, NY 1882--died Plattsburgh, NY 1971
Plattsburgh State Art Museum, State University of New York, Bequest of Sally Kent Gorton

Kent's commercial work, such as his illustrations for Benton and Bowles's advertising campaign for the coal industry, aimed to give Americans a reassuring image of industrial might at war's end. The herculean giant of wartime production turned now to peaceful enterprise.

Eclipse, 1946
oil on board
Charles Rain
born Knoxville, TN 1911--died New York City 1985
Collection of Jason Schoen, Princeton, NJ

With its haunted gate, eerie statue, and celestial phenomena, Rain's painting marks the postwar shift from ghost stories to science fiction as signs of the nighttime occult in American culture.

Night Hauling, 1944

tempera on masonite

Andrew Wyeth

born Chadds Ford, PA 1917--died Chadds Ford, PA 2009

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Ernestine K. Smith, in memory of her husband, Burwell B. Smith

In Wyeth's otherworldly painting, the midnight lobster thief lifting another man's traps amid showers of ocean phosphorescence seems like a mythological god surveying sparkling galaxies far below.

August Night at Russell's Corners, 1948

oil on canvas

George Ault

born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948

Joslyn Art Museum, Museum Purchase

Darker than the other Russell's Corners paintings—Louise likened it to a “void”—August Night has a quality of outer space, the lone streetlight, a sun beheld from the curving surface of a remote planet.

Bright Light at Russell's Corners, 1946

oil on canvas

George Ault

born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Lawrence

The radiant light at Russell's Corners forms the center of the mysterious world Ault painted there. Louise chose a quotation from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to describe her husband: “Unless there be chaos within, no dancing star is born.”

Night at Russell's Corners, 1946

oil on canvas

George Ault

born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948

Collection of C. K. Williams, II

Returning to paint the same set of buildings from different angles, Ault treated Russell's Corners as though it were the special center of a personal universe. In this place of lucid calm amid the darkness, the telephone wires extend into the night like the scratches of a cat.

Mildred Pierce production design drawings, about 1944

charcoal on paper mounted on illustration board

Anton Grot

born Kelbasin, Poland 1884--died Stanton, CA 1974

Leo “K” Kuter Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Anton Grot's production drawings for Mildred Pierce, depicting the Santa Monica pier sequence also shown in the large film still in this gallery, create a far more emotionally turbulent atmosphere than in the movie. Flying clouds, windswept clothes, and bold gestures dramatize the crises of the characters. Ault's paintings, like Mildred Pierce and other noir movies of the era, lack signs of florid emotion but contain worlds of feeling.

Mildred Pierce film still, 1945

Photographer unknown

Warner Bros./Photofest

Mildred Pierce (Joan Crawford) and Wally Faye (Jack Carson) in Warners Brothers' grand film noir-melodrama, *Mildred Pierce* (1945), directed by Michael Curtiz. Hollywood's noir movies of the 1940s shared not only Ault's emphasis on darkness but also his detailed portrayals of exact locations. Here Mildred and Wally meet on the Santa Monica pier, in an elaborate studio set that, like Ault's pictures, portrays a convincing genius of place.

Tear Gas and Water Hoses, about 1945

oil on canvas

Edward Biberman

born Philadelphia, PA 1904--died Los Angeles, CA 1986

Collection of Jason Schoen, Princeton, NJ

Showing a strike at Warner Brothers Studio in October 1945, Biberman suggests the postwar crossroads confronting not just Hollywood but all of America—the conflicts that came with peace and prosperity.

The Three Guardians, about 1943

lithograph

Veronica Helfensteller

born Fort Worth, TX 1910--died Tucson, AZ 1964

Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas Art Museum League Prize, Third Annual Texas Print Exhibition, 1944

Helfensteller transformed the St. Ignatius Academy in Fort Worth, Texas, into a haunted house in one of the era's many portrayals of ghosts.

Night Wind, 1946

etching, engraving, and aquatint

Karl Schrag

born Karlsruhe, Germany 1912--died New York City 1995

Yale University Art Gallery, Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Fund

The wind—the darkness—the bending limbs and shaking leaves of the trees—evoke Schrag's feelings about having escaped the Holocaust when he emigrated from his native Germany to the United States in the 1930s.

Universal Symphony, 1947

oil on canvas

George Ault

born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948

Barney A. Ebsworth Collection

After the war Ault began searching for new directions in his art. *Universal Symphony*, which hung in the Woodstock town hall at a memorial service for Ault following his death late in 1948, asserts his ongoing efforts—more abstract now—to create a strangely personal yet universal vision.

Festus Yayple and His Oxen, 1946

oil on canvas

George Ault

born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Hinman B. Hurlbut Fund

Ault's painting of a legendary Catskill pioneer moving through a quiet cold land invites us to think of the artist's pleasure sitting at his easel, making secure and enclosed worlds of lonely calm.

Port Jefferson, 1949

oil on canvas

Leonid Berman

born Saint Petersburg, Russia 1896--died New York City 1976

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Gift of William T. Kemper Jr. through the Friends of Art

Berman was conscripted to help build Hitler's Atlantic Wall coastal fortification system while living in France in 1942. The Russian-born artist painted a different kind of coast after emigrating to the United States and becoming an American citizen following the war: a vista of open possibility for the barefoot dreamer atop the dune.

Moon and Clouds, 1945

graphite on paper

George Ault

born Cleveland, OH 1891--died Woodstock, NY 1948

Manhattan Art Investments, LP

The sky was an ocean for Ault—teeming with unfathomed life, as in these clouds forming an open-mouthed whale with the moon for an eye.