

Introduction

Come recall the pleasures of a familiar scene and simple story. For the August 11, 1945, *Saturday Evening Post* cover Norman Rockwell pictures a middle-aged man with thinning hair and faraway smile up to his chin in river water. He details the way that before taking the plunge this man carefully arranged his spectacles, matchbook, two-tone shoes, and cigar on the grass and neatly hung his tie, shirt, jacket, pants, and suspenders from the low bridge on which his company car is parked. *Salesman in a Swimming Hole* (plate 1) is, like much of Rockwell's postwar work, awash with nostalgia. But for what? It looks back to the salesman's youth when he and his buddies tore out of school and into the river for sure, and to some earlier America when such simple pleasures were the stuff of everyday life. But perhaps it is also nostalgic for an art that invites the viewer to follow the story from the hot car down the steep slope to the cool river, and that licenses them to think of the weary commercial traveler crossing the bridge and driving down the road a ways before turning back to park and abandon work and woes and car and clothes to the seductive water and its sweet memories. Perhaps *Salesman in a Swimming Hole* is nostalgic for genre painting.

Or perhaps it looks that way from a twenty-first-century perspective. Rockwell seems a lonely figure in his mid-twentieth-century moment, as, so the story goes, few other American artists were making works like *Salesman in a Swimming Hole* then. His contemporaries might have pointed to other *Post* cover artists like Mead Schaeffer or John Falter as acolytes or apprentices, or to the regionalist and American Scene painters of the 1930s as kindred spirits. But the line that American genre painting's antebellum heyday was followed by late nineteenth-century decline and then twentieth-century obsolescence has become so fixed that Rockwell appears to have few peers or proximate precedents. Recent commentators tend to liken him to Johannes Vermeer and other seventeenth-century Dutch painters or occasionally antebellum Americans such

as William Sidney Mount. It has even become possible to imagine him “a painter of the bourgeois social world in an American tradition that has almost no social painters and very few paintings that even portray *groups* of people.”¹ Nostalgia was a central theme in Rockwell’s art. Indeed, the “The Old Swimmin’-Hole” had been a freighted site of lost innocence at least since the last stanza of James Whitcomb Riley’s 1883 poem of that name: “Oh! the old swimmin’-hole! When I last saw the place, / The scenes was all changed, like the change in my face.”² But the form Rockwell’s art took might also be nostalgic, as, lacking a generic home, it is always casting back to some other time or place.

Re-envisioning the Everyday begins around 1905 with Jerome Myers, Edmund C. Tarbell, and Elizabeth Shippen Green. Genre painting then, as now, meant the painting of everyday life. It was and still is by convention associated with small paintings in a naturalistic idiom that show humble scenes of hearth and home, farm folk socializing, children at play, and servants about their chores, or, in its more rarefied form, bourgeois interiors and leisure pursuits. Such paintings tend toward gently humorous and sentimental types and motifs as well as moralizing messages and harmful stereotypes. Art critics in the first years of the twentieth century generally dismissed genre painting as an antiquated form and just occasionally tried to imagine a future for it. Were the street and interior scenes made by Myers, Tarbell, and Green pulled back into the genre painting tradition they invoke, or could they drag it into the new century? Could genre painting address city life, express the ideals of Progressivism, or find a new home on the pages of mass-market magazines? At its best, genre painting bears a close—if condescending, rose-tinted, or in other ways distorted—relationship to the everyday life it depicts, interprets, and constructs. Unlike Myers, whom he was friends with, and Tarbell, whom he disliked, the socially and politically engaged painter John Sloan made art avowedly of its moment that sought to capture the lived experience of Lower Manhattan in the years around 1910. Did his use of genre painting compositions and techniques in this period lead to insight into, or limit his interpretation of, the everyday lives of neighboring housewives? Did his shift from the quick glance of impressionism to the slow looking encouraged by genre painting steep him in the detail of domesticity or prevent him from seeing the interconnectedness and complexity of tenement housekeeping? The opening chapters of this book explore genre painting as a backward-looking art form in a progressive era.

Rockwell is central to *Re-envisioning the Everyday*, in that he takes up much of its middle chapter, but the aim is to decenter his art or at least relocate it within a living tradition of American genre painting that ran right through 1905–45. In the company of Green and Sloan, who both worked as illustrators and made scenes of everyday life for mass-market magazines, he already looks a little less lonely. Setting his early work within the discursive frame of these magazines, and in dialogue with other illustrators

as well as the editors and advertisers who commissioned them, reveals the way commercial art reproduced the school-like conditions of earlier genre traditions. Rockwell's mature paintings, like *Salesman in a Swimming Hole*, draw on motifs and types shared and elaborated with other artists and inhabit an everyday world built over decades of advertising commissions and magazine covers. Those advertisements and covers established a stock repertoire of cheeky schoolboys, careworn mothers, and perplexed "old codgers" from which they constructed a stable, white, middle-class everyday America. They thus came closer to the nineteenth-century American genre tradition in tone and theme than anything else made by early twentieth-century easel painters. But when the Whitney Museum of American Art and other institutions set out to establish a national genre painting canon in the 1930s, Myers and Sloan were part of the conversation and Rockwell and his colleagues were not; even at exhibitions that embraced Currier and Ives chromolithographs and John Rogers's painted plaster sculptures, contemporary commercial illustration remained beyond the pale.

The various artists that 1930s critics and curators did propose as contemporary contributors to that canon, including Molly Luce, Thomas Hart Benton, Edward Hopper, Raphael Soyer, Anton Refregier, Dorothy Varian, and Stuart Davis, proved problematic in other ways, calling into question genre painting's relationship to affect, narrative, politics, and form. The Whitney's 1935 *American Genre: The Social Scene in Paintings and Prints, 1800–1935* exhibition was the central event in what the fourth chapter identifies as a 1930s genre painting revival, which raised but rarely answered a range of searching questions. If some artists who took everyday life as their theme were not deemed to be genre painters, what were the grounds for their exclusion? Could abstract paintings or propaganda paintings be genre paintings? Or was genre painting bound to received realism, simple stories, and nostalgic moods? This book ends with the work Ben Shahn and Jacob Lawrence made after this 1930s revival, in which both artists sought to move beyond genre painting. Shahn and Lawrence expanded their vision of everyday life through murals, series, reference to photographic archives, prose-poetic captions, and elements of abstraction, while remaining at least in touching distance of the tradition. Surveying its waxing and waning fortunes, *Re-envisioning the Everyday* is a history of and reflection on American genre painting in the first half of the twentieth century.

It thus tells a story about a way of painting or seeing when it no longer meets the world, but also about the resilience of that way of painting and seeing. Genre painting took shape in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and became popular in America in the antebellum era; Vermeer conventionalized ways of depicting servants in Delft households, and Mount, farmers in their Long Island yards. But genre painting did not cease to exist as urbanization and industrialization swept aside its characteristic scenes and settings. Nor did it end because a post–Civil War generation of practitioners lacked Mount's subtle humor and lost the close connection to local audiences that he and his

peers enjoyed. Nor when it fell out of favor with critics in the 1890s or came up against photography or impressionism or abstraction. Forms live on in popular taste and vestigial trace. They are rediscovered, revived, and referenced—in appropriation, allusion, and pastiche—by subsequent generations. They are adapted to new modes of production and dissemination, as in Rockwell's mass-market magazine covers, and they are reworked in new idioms, as in Shahn's and Lawrence's paintings of the early 1940s. This book addresses works like *Salesman in a Swimming Hole* that reproduce the look of, and so directly call back to, earlier genre traditions. But it also considers paintings of everyday life that are, in look or form or function, unlike earlier genre paintings but that bear some relation to the tradition, that illuminate or are illuminated by it, that extend and expand and re-envision it.

Or critique it. Walter Benjamin observed that in their embrace of genre painting, the late nineteenth-century German bourgeoisie “captured and fixed the present moment, in order to be rid of the image of the future. Genre painting was an art which refused to know anything of history.”³ For twentieth-century American artists, taking up genre painting's form and content could mean taking on its connotations and perspective or seeking to do damage to them. The nostalgic vision of Rockwell's midcentury *Post* covers insists on a singular everyday life: an aging white man immersed in a golden-hued past. When, in Richard Wright's 1938 short story “Big Boy Leaves Home,” one of a group of African American boys suggests they head to the swimming hole, his friends' first response is “N git lynched? Hell naw!”⁴ Everyday life held radically different possibilities—different risks and different pleasures—for different groups of Americans. As an increasingly diverse range of artists began to picture everyday life, and as they did so in a broader range of styles and idioms and from a broader range of political and identity positions, so a more complex and multifaceted everyday revealed itself. As these artists came to a fresh reckoning with the everyday life of their changing world, some came to see it not only as a site of sentiment and nostalgia but also as a site of political oppression and resistance.

The Genre of Genre

This book is about genre painting. It considers what makes an object a genre painting not by looking at works by Vermeer or Mount at the center of the category, but by interrogating those at or beyond its margins. Other recent studies have taken a similar tack, interrogating landscape painting and sentimental art at or after the point at which they are said to end or become redundant or passé.⁵ In 1907 George Bellows painted a group of boys chatting, swaggering, stripping, pissing, diving, and swimming on, off, and around a dilapidated East River pier. When *Forty-Two Kids* (fig. 1) was shown



FIG. 1 George Bellows, *Forty-Two Kids*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 42 × 60 ¼ in. (106.7 × 153 cm); framed: 48 ⅞ × 66 ⅜ × 2 ⅞ in. (124.1 × 170 × 7.3 cm). Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund), National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 2014.79.2. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.

at the Carnegie Institute, a Detroit journalist observed that “all the characters of the ‘Old Swimming Hole’ were there, including Slim, Sliver, Slats, Spike, and Skinny. Only Fatty was missing.”⁶ The reference to Riley’s poem appears to misread Bellows’s painting, either in ignorance of its context or with humorous intent. For *Forty-Two Kids* has been understood, both by the artist’s New York peers and subsequent art historians, as a painting absolutely of its modern urban moment, of the newsworthy phenomenon of poor immigrant children running amok on New York streets and docks.⁷ To call it a genre painting feels like an affront—to Bellows and to the genre tradition. But why?

The absence of rustic nostalgia is one of many reasons Bellows, Sloan, and the other New York realists known as the Ashcan School make uncomfortable bedfellows for Rockwell in a twentieth-century genre painting tradition. Their art inhabits a different structure of feeling to that which he shares with poets like Riley and painters like Mount and Eastman Johnson, whose *The Old Stage Coach* (1871; see fig. 5) exemplifies nineteenth-century genre painting’s vision of innocent, bucolic childhood. Ashcan realism is urban where genre tends to be rural; in pursuit of novelty where it cleaves to the familiar; rough where it is smooth. When Sloan looked back to his early Ashcan School years, he recalled, “It was really [Robert] Henri’s direction that made us paint at all,



FIG. 2 J. C. Leyendecker, *Skinny Dipping Boys*, cover illustration from the *Saturday Evening Post*, August 19, 1911. Files licensed by Curtis Licensing Indianapolis, IN.

and paint the life around us. [Winslow] Homer and Eastman Johnson and Mount had painted the life around them, but we thought their work was too tight and finished.”⁸ The thick smears of paint, the sketch-like gestures that establish the boys’ bodies, and the murky backdrop of the nocturnal East River into which the figures recede all give *Forty-Two Kids* a sense of on-the-spot record and back-alley danger that distances it from the genre tradition. Bellows and Sloan surely painted the everyday, though: street kids at play and construction workers at rest; shoppers on busy city streets; tenement housewives hanging out their wash. As one critic put it in 1908, their art embraced the “ugly, sordid, or commonplace.”⁹ So what really sets it apart from genre painting? It is not the emphasis on the gritty city alone, as in the same period Tarbell and other Boston School artists made beautiful paintings of bourgeois life in modified impressionist idioms that similarly stick in the craw of the American genre tradition. Again, Boston School paintings do not feel like Mount’s, Johnson’s, and Rockwell’s; they are too aestheticized, perhaps, and too cold.

To try to put the preceding claims about what a genre painting feels like on surer ground, it might be argued that proximity to the “received realism” or “realism of recognition and reassurance” practiced by Vermeer and Mount and Rockwell is an essential element of genre’s generic repertoire.¹⁰ But why should a painting of everyday life look this way? After all, an impressionist landscape is still a landscape and a cubist still life is still a still life, though in form both make a more emphatic break from convention than a gritty-realist city scene does from the look of genre painting.

FIG. 3 Charles A. MacLellan, *No Swimming Here*, cover illustration from the *Saturday Evening Post*, July 15, 1916. Files licensed by Curtis Licensing Indianapolis, IN.



And isn't the fuzzy modifier "gritty" doing a lot of work here? Sloan's realism may have been ugly and sordid in 1908 but seemed staid when set against the social realism of the 1930s, and indeed in the moment of that decade's genre painting revival critics could claim that his paintings "continue with no disconcerting break . . . a genre tradition."¹¹ Moreover, somewhere between 1907 and 1912 Sloan's art slipped through the porous boundary between gritty and received realism so that it wound up looking less like Bellows's *Forty-Two Kids* and more like more like the paintings he dismissed as too tight and finished. But does looking like a genre painting make a painting a genre painting? Sloan never called himself a genre painter, and his work was not exhibited or sold as genre painting in the 1910s. If the status of an object is in part determined by the conditions in which it is produced, circulated, and received, then neither a Bellows nor a Sloan, nor indeed a Rockwell made to be photomechanically reproduced on a magazine cover, is much like a Vermeer or a Mount at all.

Maybe, though, conditions do not have to be identical for production and reception to work in similar ways. When Rockwell started making *Post* covers in the mid-1910s, he was not the *sui generis* figure remembered today but the best of a bunch of commercial illustrators who developed a repertoire of stock types and familiar scenarios, borrowing and adapting one another's work to create multiple variations on their themes. In August 1911 J. C. Leyendecker pictured boys preparing to dive from a rock (fig. 2); in July 1916 Charles MacLellan showed a wet, half-naked boy cowering behind a tree bearing the sign "No Swimming Here" (fig. 3); in June 1921 Rockwell had "Spike,"

“Skinny,” “Fatty,” and their dog running, in varying degrees of undress, past a “No Swimming” sign. These illustrations replicate the play on familiar types, layers of humorous storytelling, and sense of a common culture shared by artist and audience that characterized antebellum genre paintings. Like earlier genre paintings, both European and American, they are proximate to language, with advertising copy and editorials standing in for emblem books and proverbs or almanacs and political jokes. Also like earlier genre paintings, which in the Dutch Republic were made to be displayed in private homes and in nineteenth-century America circulated as woodcut and chromolithograph reproductions, magazine covers became a familiar part of everyday life, scattered on coffee tables or pinned to walls. If successful, their imagery folded into memories and commonsense constructions of the everyday. When Rockwell, a self-described “sissy” who grew up in a New York apartment, looked back to a swimming-hole boyhood, it was to rare summers in the country where he imagined himself a “barefoot boy” and to the world he and his peers had envisioned for those earlier *Post* covers.

This discussion risks becoming mired in the challenge to good prose style that is the meeting of genre theory and genre painting: the problem of genre as genre. As the art historian Thomas Crow points out, “The notion of genre painting contains an obvious ambiguity: how can one genre among several—history, portraits, animal and still-life subjects—assume the name of the category given to them all? What is it about scenes of contemporary human types in ordinary, everyday settings that defies their having a positive and exclusive descriptive term of their own?”¹² This uncertainty was apparent in the early twentieth century and even found its way into the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a volume committed to stable categories and fixed terms. The long “Painting” entry at first admits that “the term ‘genre’ is elliptical” but goes on to assert that it identifies “a picture of a scene of ordinary life without any religious or historical significance.” Uncertainty returns in the acknowledgment that genre painting is “something a little more special” than this initial definition implies and in the use of increasingly intangible and subjective terms: genre paintings must not be “large and showy” but instead “small in scale” and “finished with the most fastidious care”; they rarely carry “satiric or didactic purpose” but have “a sympathetic charm, that gives the masters of the style a firm hold on our affections.”¹³ Encyclopedic clarity quickly gives way to the fuzzy and subjective terms of vernacular usage. This discussion also risks becoming fixated on the terms of art history but blind to art; a book devoted to such categorizing and policing would be a small-minded thing. But, without getting too hung up, these terms and definitions do matter, or at least become significant under certain circumstances.

One way to think about genres is as, in the language of fluidity and porousness developed by literary theorists, “open sets endlessly dissolved by their own openness.”¹⁴ During the 1930s genre revival, the Whitney Museum curator Lloyd Goodrich, who knew of

and had written about Rockwell, did not include his *Post* covers in the landmark exhibition *American Genre*. Twenty-five years later the art historian S. Lane Faison Jr. was happy to assert that “Rockwell belongs to a line of humorous genre painters which originated at least as long ago as in seventeenth-century Holland.”¹⁵ Attitudes toward commercial illustration changed, Rockwell’s stock rose, and the category of genre painting dissolved and remade itself around him. An alternative way to approach genre is embodied by the critic Royal Cortissoz, who must by art-historical convention be introduced as an arch-conservative. When dismissing the modernist and social realist paintings Goodrich did include in *American Genre*, Cortissoz declared, “For most of us, at any rate, ‘genre’ suggests through ancient usage, homey, intimate life, life steeped in sentiment.”¹⁶ This approach is at once fixed in its certainty and fuzzy in its language. By not including Rockwell and other contemporary commercial illustrators in his genre survey, Goodrich omitted a seam of imagery that insisted on the continuities of middle-class life during the Depression. Cortissoz’s (conservative) objection was that, in rejecting genre painting’s hominess and intimacy, contemporary painters overemphasized breadlines and homeless shelters as defining the everyday life of the era.

This mix of certainty and fuzziness ran through critics’ and publics’ responses to genre painting. In 1939, four years after the Whitney Museum exhibition, Richard W. Stimpson, a “shut in” from Worcester, Massachusetts, wrote the organizers of the Fogg Museum’s *New England Genre* exhibition to ask if, as he could not visit the exhibition, they might direct him to inexpensive prints of “the old swimmin’ hole, Saturday night baths of youngsters ‘in the old wooden tub,’ or of certain warm episodes that generally took place in the woodshed.” Harvard Museum Class student Henry R. Hope apologized that “none of the pictures in our exhibition represents the amusing scenes that you asked about. If we had been able to find any, we certainly would have tried to borrow them.” He elsewhere noted that while one work in the exhibition, William Morris Hunt’s *The Bathers* (1878; fig. 4), did depict river swimming, this contemplative figure study, with its attention to the play of dappled light on water and distinct absence of high jinks, was probably not what Stimpson had in mind.¹⁷ In fact, swimming holes were rarely depicted in nineteenth-century genre painting and only became a popular motif in the early twentieth-century magazine illustration that looked back to it, but Stimpson and Hope share a clear sense of the kind of amusing swimming scene that should have been part of the American genre tradition. Like Hunt’s *Bathers*, Winslow Homer’s *Four Boys Bathing* (1880) and Thomas Eakins’s *The Swimming Hole* (1885) do not sit comfortably in that tradition. Indeed, these artists troubled 1930s efforts to establish an American genre painting canon, appearing at once as master painters of the everyday and at the same time to exceed genre in their seriousness and originality. Cortissoz’s know-it-when-you-see-it logic and appeal to vernacular aesthetic categories play a significant role in definitions of genre painting, and indeed most other genres.

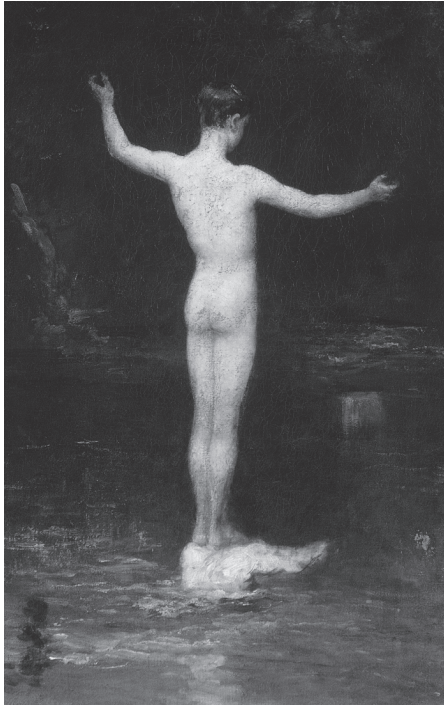


FIG. 4 William Morris Hunt, *The Bathers*, 1877. Oil on canvas, 38 × 25 in. (96.5 × 63.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Morris K. Jesup Fund, 1936, 36.99.

Everyday Life

Thinking about genre painting is thus a way of thinking about genres, and it is also a way of thinking about everyday life. Here ambiguity once more abounds. When commentators, whether the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or twenty-first-century art historians, seek to bring definitional clarity to the term “genre painting,” their glosses, such as “contemporary human types in ordinary, everyday settings,” are themselves unstable, even hollow. What does “ordinary” look like? Where does the “everyday” take place? Norman Bryson begins *Looking at the Overlooked*, a book that like *Re-envisioning the Everyday* takes a genre category as its organizing principle, with concern over the basic “assumption that still life *exists*.” Are “still life” or indeed “genre painting” not categories and relationships imposed on disparate images by “modern critical discourse”? Bryson’s quickfire response is to argue that art and its discursive frames are inseparable, that still life or genre painting is a construction within which artworks are made and viewed. He goes on to explain that individual paintings are contributions to “series (plural)” of like works and, against materialist objections that the history of a genre implies a transhistorical or universal conception of art, to emphasize the “materiality of series.”¹⁸ This book proceeds on a similar basis to offer a material history grounded

in early twentieth-century art discourse on genre painting and period conceptions of everyday life.

A materialist history of still life can confidently point to the matter depicted in such works: fruit and tableware and flowers are, surely, things in the world. The same might (optimistically) be said of everyday life. One recent theorist of the everyday observes that while it is often invoked in this way, as “the ultimate, non-negotiable reality, the unavoidable basis for all other forms of human endeavour,” there is a false confidence to such claims as “everyday life is the most self-evident, yet the most puzzling of ideas.”¹⁹ Assertions of this kind draw from a European intellectual tradition in which Georg Simmel, Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and others made the everyday the subject of critical inquiry. This diverse body of work often moves from close observation of mundane and routine activities such as shopping, cooking, or walking city streets to reflection on the aesthetic and experiential qualities of these activities, or analysis of their position within larger social and political structures. It tends to be attentive to the details and quirks of taken-for-granted phases of life and the particularities of spaces and routines so familiar that they slip into habituated background. It often emphasizes the way that hegemonic power is manifest in such moments and sites but also the small and informal tactics by which individuals and groups resist and subvert that power. Above all else it works to defamiliarize the everyday, making it strange, elusive, ever-present, and indefinable. It is fair to say that this everyday is rarely brought into dialogue with that invoked in glosses of genre painting as the painting of everyday life.

There are good, materialist reasons for not thinking about genre painting in relation to these theories of everyday life. Simmel’s and Benjamin’s Western Marxism and Lefebvre’s and Certeau’s interrogation of postwar Paris operate in frames of reference and experience unlike those accessible to genre painters in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic or antebellum or early twentieth-century America. To conflate these distinct encounters with everyday life risks appeal to some transhistorical or universal condition and raises the problem of discussing works of art in language inconceivable to their creators. But, equally, these theories of everyday life illuminate and are illuminated by many of the paintings discussed in this study. Moreover, several of the painters explored here, including Sloan in his intense encounter with rapidly modernizing Manhattan and Shahn through his wide-ranging experience of the New Deal, came close to the circumstances and politics out of which critical inquiry into the everyday arose. Specifically, like Lefebvre and Certeau, who were attuned to the meaning of everyday life by a period of flux as old Parisian routines and habits were eroded and erased, Sloan and Shahn saw a way of life passing before their eyes.

The paintings discussed in this book were all made within a period of transition in everyday life in America that can be broadly defined by the processes of modernization—including expanding cities, rapidly developing technologies, and increasing state

bureaucracy—and the politics of Progressivism. Dedication of the Mark Twain Memorial Bridge in September 1936, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt told residents of Hannibal, Missouri, that, “in place of the school house from which Huck Finn lured Tom Sawyer to truancy and the old swimming hole, you have eighteen modern grade schools, a high school, parochial schools and a fine library.” Clearly enjoying the contrast between Twain’s mythmaking and modern-day reality, Roosevelt set Tom Sawyer’s oil lamps against 1930s Hannibal’s “municipal electric light and power plants.”²⁰ The speech celebrates the technological progress that brought electric light to Sloan’s Greenwich Village studio in 1912 and then to the midwestern small towns Shahn photographed in the mid-1930s as well as the wider program of progressive social reform that ran from Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency to FDR’s New Deal. The arc of progressive thought and politics is roughly coterminous with the period 1905–1945 covered by this study, and each chapter addresses the way painters of everyday life engaged with forms of Progressivism. While it often functioned as a nostalgic mode with which to oppose progress of various kinds, genre painting in this period also registered changes as small as the adoption of American fashions in an immigrant neighborhood and as large as the Tennessee Valley Authority regional plan.

This history of everyday life in early twentieth-century America was told within and against the conventions of genre painting. Nineteenth-century genre paintings rarely pictured factory or city scenes, and so one challenge for twentieth-century artists was to bring the tradition into their urban, industrial world. Another was to negotiate a tradition shot through with both casual and virulent racism and other forms of conventionalized and stereotyped thought. Nineteenth-century genre painting was typically made by and for white men, taking the male-dominated public sphere as its setting and whiteness as a normative state. It explicitly acknowledged race and racism as facets of everyday life only on the occasions when it depicted nonwhite figures at its margins and marked them as other. Early attempts to establish a genre painting canon perpetuated these exclusions and otherings, for example by ignoring the important genre paintings made by Lilly Martin Spencer in the 1850s and Henry Ossawa Tanner in the 1890s. These practices extended into the twentieth century, where Ashcan School artists made white masculinity the normative urban identity in their work and Rockwell built his insistently white small-town world.²¹ All this worked to place African American experience outside the sphere of everyday life and to make genre painting a troubled undertaking for Malvin Gray Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, and other artists who, in engaging with its themes and practices, risked reinforcing, or making images that were pliable to, racist discourse. Genre painting as a practice at once accesses and occludes the everyday, encouraging artists to look slowly at and think carefully about common folk, everyday routines, and ordinary things but freighted those people, activities, and objects with the baggage and blind spots of a long and complicated history.

Histories of American Genre Painting

Thus far, the historiography of American genre painting has been presented in frustratingly vague terms, with references to how paintings seemed and felt and quotes from encyclopedia entries and newspaper critics, but only brief mention of more substantive histories of art. As in the use of Raymond Williams's phrase "structure of feeling," which identifies "meanings and values as they are lived and felt" as distinct from "formally held and systematic beliefs," the point has been to suggest the popular understanding of genre painting in the early twentieth century.²² That understanding is, at least with regard to period perceptions of the nineteenth-century genre tradition, reflected in the more formal and institutional histories of American art that emerged in the later decades covered by this book. The story of genre's late nineteenth-century decline was reiterated and embellished in a series of accounts from art critic and historian Frank Jewett Mather's 1907 article "Status of Genre Painting" through to curator Lloyd Goodrich's catalogue for the 1935 *American Genre* exhibition. "The tradition of the old American genre school was still carried on by its surviving members—painters of rural life like Thomas Waterman Wood, Eastman Johnson, and E. L. Henry, or anecdotalists like J. G. Brown," Goodrich explains. "Genuine as were the qualities of most of these men, they represented a survival rather than a new departure." More than half a century later, Elizabeth Johns concluded her groundbreaking 1991 *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* by observing, "In 1861, when the Civil War broke out, genre painting as a national enterprise had dropped to a low ebb." Surveying the relatively short-lived popularity of Mount, Spencer, and the other painters her study focuses on, Johns continues, "Genre painting had simply failed to meet the needs of new viewers in new times." These claims have been challenged and revised by recent scholarship, which finds more humor, nuance, and originality in later nineteenth-century genre paintings than Goodrich and Johns.²³ But there is little dispute that the antebellum decades were the heyday of artistic achievement and popularity for the form.

It is more difficult to make positive claims about histories of early twentieth-century genre painting, because they barely exist. This is not an exaggerated statement of this book's originality, but rather an acknowledgment that twentieth-century American genre painting as a named enterprise only occasionally registers in art-historical scholarship or museum practice. Goodrich's *American Genre* exhibition and the wider 1930s genre revival, encompassing newspaper and magazine articles and reviews, historical surveys like Alan Burroughs's *Limners and Likenesses* (1936), and other exhibitions such as the Fogg Museum's *New England Genre* and the Downtown Gallery's *Contemporary American Genre*, sought to make the genre tradition central to exhibitions and histories of American art and extend it into the twentieth century. This agenda was in some ways carried forward in Oliver Larkin's *Art and Life in America* (1949) and

Milton Brown's *American Painting: From the Armory Show to the Depression* (1955), books written during and out of that context that were published after the Second World War.²⁴ But the idea of an ongoing genre tradition was short-lived, gaining little traction in the postwar period. Its claims went against the grain of an emerging story of American art that emphasized landscape over genre painting as nineteenth-century precedent for twentieth-century painting. Postwar scholars and curators concerned with overturning the sense of cultural inferiority that cast American painting as parochial, derivative of European models, or lacking national roots and character had little use for a transatlantic tradition where nostalgia and conservatism were integral to its generic repertoire. Against that dominant narrative it was efficacious, for example, for champions of Ashcan School painting to locate Bellows and Sloan in established currents of modernist painting, even in the terms of Clement Greenberg's damningly faint praise as "a continuation, essentially, of [Édouard] Manet's phase of impressionism" rather than as heirs to William Sidney Mount and John George Brown.²⁵

Recent scholarship on Ashcan School realism, commercial illustration, regionalism, social realism, and related practices refers, with surprising frequency, to particular works as genre paintings or likens practitioners to earlier genre painters and schools. But the term is used in a relatively neutral manner to suggest everyday subject matter and a degree of "received realism" without implying critical disdain or taking up the baggage of the genre painting tradition. Thus, a painting by Sloan is "a practically timeless genre scene," Rockwell is "the Vermeer of this nation's domestic history," social realism is "a variety of genre painting," and Lawrence's early works are "Harlem genre scenes."²⁶ These are meaningful claims but do not come with a sustained consideration of what it is to place these artists in the same tradition as Vermeer, Mount, or Brown or the degree to which they really take up the generic repertoire, and thus the possibilities and limitations, of genre painting. Similarly, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2009 blockbuster *American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life, 1765–1915* included Mount, Johnson, Brown, and other genre painters but presented a survey of narrative art of everyday life that was careful not to tie itself to the particularities of genre painting. This was most apparent in the final section of the survey, demarcated by the 1876 Centennial and the First World War. In the galleries, wall color and hang signaled a more modern exhibition space, while in the catalogue cosmopolitanism, urbanism, and impressionism become the key terms as genre slips from the exhibition's vocabulary.²⁷

Re-envisioning the Everyday argues that American genre painting was a living tradition and practice in the first half of the twentieth century. It demonstrates that the influence of earlier genre paintings and an awareness of the genre tradition were an active presence in early twentieth-century art-making; that the conditions of production and reception of mass-market magazine editorial and advertising illustration reproduced, at least by analogy, those in which genre painting had previously thrived; and that in

certain moments—including specialized art-critical debates in the 1900s and the widespread genre painting revival of the 1930s—genre painting was important to the way art was made, displayed, and received. Seeing Myers, Tarbell, Green, Sloan, Rockwell, Hopper, Varian, Refregier, Shahn, and Lawrence as genre painters might mean as little as allowing more story into their work, and more stock types, or finding their paintings funnier, perhaps, but also more closely keyed to convention. Or it might mean as much as recognizing in them a counterweight to American art canons and narratives that lean toward landscape and abstraction and individualistic expression, and so turning the gaze from the distant horizon to look more closely at the kitchen sink, attending in that domestic vicinity to the small things that get swept aside by grand narratives.