

# AMERICANS | 1943

## REALISM AND MAGIC REALISM

The 75th Anniversary of the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, February 10 – March 21, 1943

### Hirschl & Adler Galleries, Booth A5

On the wintery evening of February 9, 1943, the very day that U.S. forces secured Guadalcanal in the southwestern Pacific and a week after the surrender of the German 6th Army at Stalingrad, The Museum of Modern Art launched the second in a series of exhibitions intended to survey and promote contemporary art of the United States. *American Realists and Magic Realists* opened quietly, but quickly spawned confusion and fanned the flames of controversy. MoMA director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the show's curator, Dorothy C. Miller, introduced a new style to the American art lexicon: "Magic Realism." Barr defined it as "the work of painters, who by means of an exact realistic technique try to make plausible and convincing their improbable, dreamlike or fantastic visions." Miller set the exhibition's parameters: "It is limited . . . to pictures of sharp focus and precise representation, whether the subject has been observed in the outer world—realism—or contrived by the imagination—magic realism."

The MoMA show introduced and promoted the work of 26 contemporary realists against a foundational context of 19th-century academic art—the "Retrospective" segment of the show—and the pioneering work of 20th-century masters Edward Hopper and Charles Sheeler.

When *American Realists and Magic Realists* opened on that February night in 1943, it immediately drew polarized criticism. Some critics complemented the show and acknowledged that the 19th-century pictures offered a strong argument for fine craftsmanship and polished technique that was demonstrated in the work of the contemporary painters. Other reviewers criticized the "crazy quilt" nature of the mixture of old and new. Everyone seemed to have a strong opinion.

Hirschl & Adler Galleries will recreate the spirit of *American Realists and Magic Realists* on the 75th anniversary of its opening at the Museum of Modern Art in February 1943. In contrast to the MoMA show, which segregated historical and modernist works and grouped pictures by artist, Hirschl & Adler will place "Retrospective," "Pioneer," and late 1930s–early 1940s "Contemporary" pictures in close proximity to one another, drawing parallels and identifying lines of inspiration between the realists of the 19th century and MoMA's new generation of Magic Realists. Paintings by American "Old Masters," including John James Audubon, Thomas Cole, Richard LaBarre Goodwin, William Michael Harnett, and

Raphaëlle Peale will provide historical context for nearby works by a range of clever practitioners of realism in the 1930s and early '40s, such as John Atherton, Clarence Carter, Louis Guglielmi, Vanessa Helder, Edmund Lewandowski, Louis Lozowick, Fred Papsdorf, Ben Shahn, and Andrew Wyeth.

In the winter of 1943, *American Realists and Magic Realists* was instrumental in returning realism, and its variant forms, to the spotlight at a time when most artists were moving inexorably towards abstraction. Seventy-five years later, the artists in Barr's controversial exhibition are attracting renewed scholarly attention from art historians who are intent on reassessing and reinterpreting the magic-realist impulse and their place in modern American art.