

# Southern expressionism

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New American **Southern expressionism** is the movement begun in the late 20th century by a group of painters from the American southeast. It is a form of expressionism that fits within the broader category of Southern art.

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*Woman in Yellow Hat*  
by Catherine Clark Ellis

## Movement defined

Paintings of this style are typically imbued with broad strokes and bold colors, rough surfaces and ambiguous figures. All subject matter tends to be subjective and figurative or non-figurative and inspired by the personal experience of the artist. The common thread is observation and expression as formed by the parochial focus of growing up in the 20th century American South.

## Example

A scene that might be totally unexceptional when witnessed by someone of a Northeastern urban or Midwestern rural background may be the inspiration for a Southern expressionist painter. The painting titled "Woman in Yellow Hat" by Catherine Clark Ellis provides an excellent example of this. The subject of the painting was a woman of the evening seen on a street in Manhattan by the artist coming home early on a Sunday morning. The woman's style of dress seemed so out of context for the day and the time of day it caught the artist's attention in a way that inspired the artist, but probably would not have inspired a native of Manhattan. The artist's perceptions were formed by her upbringing in the American South.

## American South influences

Painters who grew up in the 20th century American South have a common set of cultural experiences that form their unique prism. Elements unique to the culture of the American South include:

- More traditional male-female roles within the family and social structure.

- A heightened awareness of racial relations, stemming from a history of slavery, the American Civil War, the Jim Crow laws, and the civil rights movement of the 1960's.
- Strong and continuing Christian religious mores and traditions that include regular Sunday church attendance as well as attendance on one, sometimes two other regular days in the week.
- An appreciation of uniquely Southern literature and stories, as personified in the works of William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, Willie Morris, Fannie Flagg, and Winston Groom.
- Distinctly Southern foods such as moonpies, RC Cola, okra, fried chicken, grits, goo goo clusters, and "meat and three" restaurants.
- An appreciation for the comedy of uniquely Southern performers, such as Jeff Foxworthy and Jerry Clower.
- An appreciation of bluegrass and 'country music, both of which are rooted in the music of early Scotch-Irish immigrants to the re~on.
- Exposure to and participation in a society in which high school and college football games are the social highlight of every week in the fall, and the topic of passionate conversation throughout the year.

## Artists

Artists who are generally considered to be representative of the Southern expressionism style include:

- Ida Kohlmeyer
- Randy Moberg (<http://www.randymoberg.com>)
- David Arms (<http://www.sheldonfineart.com/id137.htm>)
- Catherine Clark Ellis (<http://www.catherineclarkellis.com>)
- Paul Dygas (<http://www.pauldagys.com/south/index.shtml>)
- Kris Prunitsch (<http://www.bennettgalleriesnashville.com/krisprunitsch.htm>)
- Tom McNease (<http://members.tripod.com/tommnease/id47.html>)
- Pamela Kelso Craig (<http://www.pakcraig.com>)
- **Chris Cook** (<http://www.chriscookartist.com>)

## References

- Dijkstra, Bram, *American Art Expressionism: Art and Social Change, 1920-1950*, Harry Abrams, 2003.
- Behr, Shulamith, *Expressionism (Movements in Modern Art)*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Laufer, Marilyn *Modernism in the South: Mid-Twentieth Century Works in the Morris Museum Collection*, Morris Museum, 2002.

## External links

- The Ogden Museum of Southern Art (<http://www.ogdenmuseum.org>)

- Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi (<http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/south/info/info.htm>)
- The Center for the Study of the American South at the University of North Carolina (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/csas/>)
- The Morris Museum: A Southern Collection (<http://www.themorris.org>)

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