

THIS IS AMERICA

hidden histories in American Art

This tour takes place in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. A nation's art is its history and identity– but though the museum is called the American Art Museum, it is disproportionately a white American art museum. It's located by Chinatown, yet features only a few Asian American artists and nothing on Chinese American history– so we'll be looking at pieces not explicitly about Chinese Americans, while exploring the broader context of the work and the concurring history.

The inspiration behind this tour is that this summer, as I've learned about Chinese American history, I found myself constantly wondering, "Why did I not know any of this before? Why was this not taught in my history classes?" People shouldn't have to take an Asian American history course to learn Asian American history because it is also just American history– which is why I've titled this tour *This is America*. Along the same vein, I've chosen the American Art Museum because while there is a need for dedicated Chinese American museums (and I'm really excited for the Chinese American Museum in DC!), Chinese American art and history should not be segregated to only Chinese American spaces. Those spaces attract people who are already interested in that history. I want everyone to learn about Chinese American history, even those who don't care– because they *should* care.

presentation link: [x](#)

presentation video link: [x](#)

MAP

FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



THIRD FLOOR





[Julian Scott, *Surrender of a Confederate Soldier*, 1873, oil on canvas](#)

Who do you see?

- A Confederate man waving a white flag, his wife and child, and presumably his slave looking away

Who do you not see?

- [Chinese Americans who fought in the Civil War](#)
- Joseph Pierce from Guangzhou: Pierce fought in Gettysburg in a traditional Manchu queue (official records state him fighting "pig-tail and all"). Later, fearing expulsion from the army, he was forced to deny and conceal his Chinese heritage.
- Christopher and Stephen Bunker from Siam: Christopher and Stephen were sons of Chinese Siamese twins Chang and Eng Bunker. Chang and Eng became wealthy in the US, lived in the South, and owned slaves. So while most Chinese Americans fought for the Union, Christopher and Stephen fought for the Confederacy. Chang and Eng toured around the US and were so popular that their image served as a metaphor for both the North vs. South and the split in the Democratic Party on the issue of slavery.
- Edward Day Cahota from Shanghai: The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited Chinese Americans from being naturalized as citizens. When Cahota tried to buy land, he was told he could not because he was not a citizen. His response: "I have fought in the country's service as a soldier, and I have served in its regular army from which I was retired for continued honorable service of over 30 years, and I believe that I, if anyone, have earned the right to be pronounced a citizen of the United States and enjoy all of its rights and privileges." His protest was ignored, and he was never granted citizenship.

Scott, a Union soldier, portrays his Confederate counterpart with respect, but the Chinese American veterans of the Civil War were discriminated against and forgotten.



[Agnes Tait, *Skating in Central Park*, 1934, oil on canvas](#) [from the Experience America exhibit]

- cf. Bruegel's *The Hunters in the Snow*, 1565
 - Tait draws upon the Old Masters, saying that America is influenced by European excellence and even exceeds it. This painting has the beautiful scenery and joyful skating of Bruegel, with the addition of the cityscape in the background.

This exhibit, Experience America, is meant to capture the 1930s, Great Depression era America. Whose America are we experiencing?

- It is certainly not the America of the African Americans who founded [Seneca](#), a village of 1600. Seneca was destroyed in order to build Central Park.
- It is not the America of the Chinese Americans– New York City's Chinatown was hit the hardest by the Great Depression, with [unemployment rates considerably higher than the state and national average](#). One reason for this was because racist employment practices excluded college educated Asian Americans from professional, white collar careers. A frustrated Asian American at the time commented: "They go to college, learn a heterogeneous body of facts relating to anything from art to architecture and end their days in a fruit stand."

We are experiencing Tait's America– Tait was able to create this piece because of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA excluded many Chinese Americans because only US citizens were eligible, and again, the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited Chinese Americans from becoming naturalized citizens.



[Kenjiro Nomura, *The Farm*, 1934, oil on canvas](#) [from the Experience America exhibit]

How does this painting make you feel?

- The farmhouse and green trees suggest a beautiful American dream, but the dark clouds and the emptiness bring a more ominous tone.

Now whose America are we experiencing?

- Nomura was an established Japanese American painter in 1934. Less than a decade later, his family was forced to relocate to Minidoka, the largest Japanese internment camp. Perhaps this farm, devoid of life, foreshadows that reality. The dark skies convey a pervasive injustice that denies the beautiful American dream to so many.



Malcah Zeldis, *Miss Liberty Celebration*, 1987, oil on corrugated cardboard

How does this painting make you feel?

- Zeldis refers to this painting as an “exultation of survival.” Bright colors exude celebration.

Who do you see?

- Elvis, Miss America, Lincoln, Einstein, immigrants– but it’s hard to tell where the immigrants are from. Everyone has the same orangey skin tone, everyone is coming together, celebrating under the Statue of Liberty as one homogenous nation.

Lurking under the celebration, this painting speaks to the dangerous myth of the [melting pot](#). While the idea of a culturally blended America may seem appealing, the idea of the melting pot actually goes against cultural acceptance. The melting pot requires immigrants to assimilate to the “American way,” and assimilation requires people like Joseph Pierce to deny their heritage. Even when immigrants try to assimilate, they are driven away. While some today view Chinatowns as a failure to assimilate, they actually formed because [anti-Chinese racism deterred assimilation](#). In the 1885 Rock Springs massacre, white miners (many of them members of the Knights of Labor) attacked Chinese miners and forced them out of town. Similar incidents happened throughout the West, driving Chinese immigrants to form Chinatowns on the East Coast. Those who stayed on the West Coast found safety only in Chinatowns. During the Chinese exclusion period, Chinese immigrants could not live or work outside of Chinatowns due to housing and labor laws. Chinatowns became de facto segregation. Yet, to end on a more hopeful note, the story of Chinatowns is not all injustice and suffering. It is overwhelmingly a story of resilience. Zeldis’ inscription below the Statue of Liberty reads: “Give me your hungry masses longing to be free.” In response to exclusion, as Chinatowns longed to be free from discrimination, community organizations formed to protect and provide services to immigrants. Many of these organizations still operate today. This tour is my longing to be free from the institutional barriers that prevented me from learning this history in school. Longing to be free– that is America.