## Lecture 5. Cultural life of Americans. Customs and traditions.

**Plan:**

1. Music and theatre in America.
2. Cinema world of America.
3. Unusual customs and traditions of USA.

Historical Review

American culture history can be divided into three broad stages.

The first stages stretches from colonial times until about the Civil War. In this period American art, architected, music, literature and fashion were strongly influenced by European ideas, traditions and trends. This did not mean, of course, that America only imported its art or artists. The American painter Benjamin West, who was called the “American Raphael” in England, was a founder of the Royal Academy in London, and beginning in 1792, was its president for 26 years. The art of other American painters, among them John Singleton Copley, Gilbert Stuart, also found favor and fame in Europe.

Soon American writers such as James Fennimore Cooper or Edgar Allan Poe became widely real and praised throughout Europe.

The second stage, from the Civil War era until around World War I or so, is marked by tension. Writers, architects and painters of the 19th century still considered themselves largely part of the European tradition. Yet, by this second stage, America had developed a cultural style of her own. One feels clear American accents in the voices of the 19th century writers such as Cooper, Whitman, or Twain. Obviously a strong national culture had been established. European influences were still strong but no longer dominant.

The third and present stage is marked by a tremendous surge of American creativity in all areas, by a growing international influence, and by a steady self-confidence.

Although this vitality and creative experimentation can be seen in art, architecture, music, dance, film and fashion, it is most clearly apparent in literature. The first American to be honored by a Nobel Prize in literature was Sinclair Lewis, in 1930. He was then followed by Eugene O’Neill, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Joseph Brodsky, Tony Morrison and others. A large number of names of American writers, such as Anderson, Asimov, Walker, Williams, Wright, etc., are read in most corners of the globe today.

Check your comprehension.

1. What is the first stage of the cultural history of America?

2. What was Benjamin West?

3. What are American Nobel Prize Winners in literature?

**1.Music and theatre in America.**

Music in America

Classical Music

Until the end of the 19th century, there really was no distinctive classical music, e. g. symphony, opera, chamber music, sonata etc., in America. As late as 1895, the composer Antonin Dvorak felt the need to urge American composers to look to their native sources for inspiration and material. He offered his "New World" Symphony as an example of what could be achieved.

With the beginning of the 20th century, American composers started to create a great variety of distinctively American classical music. Composers such as George Gershwin and Aaron Copland incorporated homegrown melodies and rhythms into forms borrowed from Europe.

Many early American operas took classical or European stories for their subjects, but by the end of the 19th century, composers increasingly turned to American themes. Nowadays, opera old and new - is flourishing.

Music produced in the last forty years used extremely new and experimental styles. Some composers, like Edgar Varese, completely rejected traditional melody and harmony while others, like John Cage for example, experimented with electronic music and natural sounds from real life.

Blues and Jazz

Blues is a native American musical and verse form, with no direct European and African antecedents of which we know. When the two musical traditions began to merge to create what eventually became the blues, the slaves sang songs telling about their extreme suffering and privation. The blues was mostly sung in the South and only spread northward in the 1930s and 1940s with the migration of many blacks from the South. The mixture of blues and spirituals gave birth to soul music, the founder of which was the legendary black composer and singer Ray Charles. This talented blind musician composed the song "Georgia on My Mind", which became the hymn of the state.

Jazz originated in New Orleans early in the 20th century, bringing together elements from ragtime, slave songs, and brass bands. One of the distinguishing elements of jazz was its fluidity: in live performances, the musicians would almost never play a song the same way twice but would improvise variations on its notes and words. Jazz was the reigning popular American music from the 1920s through the 1940s. In the 1930s and 1940s, the most popular form of jazz was "big band swing".

In the late 1940s, a new, more cerebral form of mostly instrumental jazz, called be-bop, began to attract audiences. Rhythm and blues was a combination of jazz and other "race" music with the lyrical content, sonic gestures and format of the blues. The epoch of rhythm and blues spans the late 1940s to the early 1960s. The melding of rhythm and blues with country and western music in the mid-1950s gave birth to rock and roll. In the mid-1960s, rhythm and blues would become soul music. In the 1970s, many jazz musicians experimented with electronic instruments and created a blend of rock and jazz called fusion.

Country and Folk Music

Folk music was based largely on ballads brought over from Scotland, England, and Ireland. This music, mixed with the blues, became more popular, it was called country music. The original form of country music, called "old-time" and played by string bands, can still be heard at festivals held each year in many southern states. Country songs are sad stories of love and broken hearts. Workers expressed their troubles in the folk music. Folk songs are like country songs but they are more traditional and more serious. They don't just talk about love, they tell about the lives of ordinary people. Martin Luther King wanted to improve the lives of black Americans. He led peaceful marches to change the laws in the United States. The marchers sang old folk songs, such as "We Shall Overcome".

In the 1960's many people were against the war in Vietnam. Bob Dylan, a folk singer, accompanied himself on electric guitar and sang anti-war songs, like "Blowing in the Wind", and other songs about the problems of American society, especially the denial of civil rights to black Americans. Folk music continued to be the most political of all music in America.

Rock-and-Roll

By the early 1950s jazz had lost some of its appeal to a mass audience. Teenagers wanted to dance music with a good beat, and so they began to listen rhythm and blues on the black radio stations. A new form of pop music, rock-and-roll, evolved from rhythm and blues. It was in 1954 that the disc-jockey Alan Freed started playing the Negro rhythm-and-blues, music that derived from jazz, combined with aspects of country and western mu sic. The music was based on electric guitar and drums. Freed called it Rock-and-Roll, a name he took from the old blues "My Baby Rocks Me with a Steady Roll". Until that time rhythm and-blues records were aimed exclusively at blacks.

The first white rhythm and-blues number ever recorded was Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock". His group, the Comet, followed the black style almost to the letter. Rock-and-roll music had a strong dance beat. The musicians played electric guitars and the music was loud and fast. American teenagers loved it. The big white stars of this moment were Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry. Elvis Presley, the king of rock-and-roll, became a new American hero and young people copied his hair style, his dress and his music.

Contemporary Music

The history of popular music in the 1970s and '80s is basically that of rock music which has grown to include hundreds of musical styles. New styles such as folk, salsa, new wave, funk, reggae, heavy metal, acid rock, punk rock, rap, hip hop, acid jazz and world music have developed. Country rock, a fusion of country and western and rock 'n' roll, grew popular in the 1970s.

Soul music was always dance music, but in the 1980s a new type of dance music became popular-disco. Disco is a kind of soul music, often with Latin rhythms. Discos opened up all over America. Many of the disco musicians were black, but disco dancing was popular with most Americans. In the 1980s a lot of black musicians became superstars, for example, Prince, Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston.

Rap, a very skillful kind of fast street talk, with a strong rhythm, developed in 1980s among African-American and Hispanic performers in New York City. The 1990s saw the birth of alternative music or grunge. Techno, a style of dance music that gained popularity in the 1990s, combines computer-generated, discolike rhythms with digital samples.

In contemporary music, there is a strong crossover phenomenon. Cultural influences are much more readily available. The trend is not towards one big homogeneous style, but rather an interesting meeting of different influences in projects here and there. Whereas in the past jazz, blues and country all came out of the roots of black society and Appalachia, nowadays there are influences from farther away. Musicians have become much more globally aware of other kinds of music. A whole genre called "world music," a sort of mix of ethnic music adapted to modern western styles, has developed. It includes any ethnic music that isn't big enough to have its own category.

Music brings the people of the world together, and perhaps with music we can also change the world and make it a better place.

Check your comprehension.

1. Who were the first American composers of classical music?

2. Where did jazz originate?

3. What did Bob Dilan, a famous American folk singer, sing about?

American theatre

American theatre is traditionally dated from the arrival of Lewis Hallam’s English troupe in Williamsburg in 1752. After the end of the Revolutionary War, the Republic witnessed a slow expansion of the dramatic arts. Theatres were built in Charleston, Philadelphia, Newport, New York, and Boston.

Theatre became a more spread part of American life during the early 19th century and the first decades were golden years were golden years for theatre. In the second half of the 19th century, vaudeville emerged. Its fast-paced collage of music, comedy, dance, novelty, and skits appealed to a large audience.

The American theatre reflects the variety of the American scene. The characters of Eugene O’Neill have grown on American soil; Thornton Wilder represents the life of an American family; Tennessee Williams characters are genuine Southerners. Modern American drama was born in Provincetown, South East Massachusetts, where in 1915 a small group of theatre enthusiasts gathered. Later in Greenwich Village (now a center for artists and authors in Manhattan of New York City) they put on dramatic pieces by young American playwrights and also staged plays by European writers.

Today many thousands of performances of old and new plays are presented annually. The center of the U.S. theatrical world is in a section of New York City on and near Broadway. In New York City alone there are about 50 new professional productions a season. In addition, many performances by professionals and semiprofessionals are given in clubs, universities and drama schools. America's most important playwrights are considered to be Eugene O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, Thornton Wilder and William Saroyan. Of the younger dramatists Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller are the most prominent.

Eugene O'Neill is generally considered America's greatest playwright. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936, and he was the only dramatist to win the Pulitzer Prize in drama four times. His best known plays "Anna Christie" and "Long Day's Journey into Night", a semiautobiographical tragedy, are always of great success on the stage.

The musical stage of the twentieth century proved to be the country's most popular theatrical export. Music had accompanied theatricals since colonial days. But only in 1886 American musical was born with the appearance of "The Black Crook". American musicals, where song, dance and spectacle were introduced into an existing melodrama, contributed greatly to theatre art. "The West Side Story" created a furor on American stage in 1957 and is still being produced in American the actress. Frank Sinatra, a famous American singer and film actor starred in several films and musicals. His distinctive style of singing made him famous as a performer all over the world.

Check your comprehension.

1. When is American theatre dated from?

2. Where were the first American theatres built?

3. How did modern American drama begin?

**2. Cinema world of America.**

CINEMA in AMERICA

Movies, or the cinema, have been an integral part of American culture throughout the twentieth century.

In 1908 a group of people from Chicago came to Los Angeles to shoot a film. Since that time a lot of directors, producers, actors and thousands of other workers have been coming to Los Angeles. In 1911 the first studio appeared in Hollywood, a part of Los Angeles.

The 1920's was the great era of the silent film with stars like Mary Pickford, Rudolph Valentino, Greta Garbo, Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers. Some famous movies of the 20's were "The Gold Rush", "City Lights". Hollywood made 80 per cent of the world's films. Silent and black-and-white films of those early years were forced out by sound films in the middle of the 1920's. Full-length films came up to take place of short films.

There appeared a lot of studios that grew very quickly and combined in large corporations. A U.S. film production and distribution company, Paramount Pictures, founded in 1912, was a major studio from the silent days of the cinema. Warner Bros, a U.S. film production company became one of the major Hollywood studios after releasing the first talking film, "The Jazz Singer" in 1927. Columbia Pictures, founded in 1927. Columbia Pictures, founded in 1924, grew out of a smaller company founded by Harry Corn.

Walter Disney, a U.S. film maker and animator, a pioneer of family entertainment, established his own studio in Hollywood and his first Mickey Mouse cartoons appeared in 1928. In addition to short cartoons, the made feature-length animated films, including "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", "Pinocchio", and "Dumbo". Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, one of the most powerful Hollywood film-production company of the 1930s-1950s produced such prestige films as "David Copperfield" and "The Wizard of Oz". Twentieth Century Fox, formed in 1935, made high quality films and is still a major film-production studio. Recent successes include the "Star Wars" trilogy. Major American writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner did screen plays for many films.

The first genres of American films were melodrama, western and comedy, later appeared adventure and historical films. But now the range of genres is much richer. Hollywood got the name of the factory of dreams. It is associated with wealth and paradise of sun and palm trees.

Check your comprehension.

1. When did the first film studio appear in America?

2. Where is Hollywood situated?

3. What were the first famous movies in the U.S.

1. **Unusual customs and traditions of USA.**

Every part of the world has its own customs and traditions. Some are rooted in the historic values held by certain cultures, while others are born from social patterns. These are the traditions that have been bred from the American way of life.

**Unusual customs:** Pumpkin chucking, [Delaware](https://www.roughguides.com/usa/delaware/)

Not only are pumpkins used as an ingredient in a dizzying array of seasonal dishes, with total disregard for the sacred division between sweet and savory, but these huge orange squashes are also ceremoniously lobbed into the air as far as possible as part of a time-old ritual.

The country’s original and largest pumpkin chucking contest, [Punkin Chunkin](https://www.punkinchunkin.com/), is held annually in the state of Delaware. Contestants use trebuchets, catapults, torsions and air cannons to make those pumpkins fly. The furthest has travelled 4694 feet (1.4km).

Presidential turkey pardons

Since the 1940s, US presidents have been presented with a Thanksgiving turkey at a special ceremony and, occasionally, have spared the bird’s life by officially pardoning it. (It’s not clear what crime the birds committed in the first place to warrant a pardon.)

In 1989, George Bush Senior made the turkey pardon a permanent part of the ceremony, so it’s now an annual event. The happy turkeys are returned to a farm to live out the rest of their lives – which, unfortunately, usually last less than a year, as the birds have been so overfed that they contract heart disease and other obesity-related illnesses.

And if you’re wondering whether there’s some deeper meaning or symbolic reasoning to this ritual – there isn’t.

With so much wildlife roaming around in the US and so many SUVs cruising on the highways, there’s bound to be some unfortunate collateral damage.

But every September, people in Marlington, West Virginia, have a Roadkill Cook-off, where you can try such delights as biscuits covered in squirrel gravy, teriyaki-marinated bear or deer sausage, all scooped up from the side of the road after an unfortunate accident.

Celebrating the Fourth of July

To commemorate the United States’ birth and newfound freedom, Americans celebrate on July 4th. On that date in 1776, the [Declaration of Independence](http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/) granted the United States freedom from the British Empire. The [4th of July](https://theculturetrip.com/?s=fourth%20of%20july) is often celebrated with parades, cookouts, concerts, and most notably, fireworks. It is a federal holiday where many display American flags and dress in red, white and blue to honor the colors of the flag. Some even incorporate the colors into holiday food, drinks, and decor.