A Companion to American Art
Edited by John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill and Jason D. LaFountain
A Companion to American Art
These invigorating reference volumes chart the influence of key ideas, discourses, and theories on art, and the way that it is taught, thought of, and talked about throughout the English-speaking world. Each volume brings together a team of respected international scholars to debate the state of research within traditional subfields of art history as well as in more innovative, thematic configurations. Representing the best of the scholarship governing the field and pointing toward future trends and across disciplines, the Blackwell Companions to Art History series provides a magisterial, state-of-the-art synthesis of art history.

1. *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*  
   edited by Amelia Jones
2. *A Companion to Medieval Art*  
   edited by Conrad Rudolph
3. *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*  
   edited by Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton
4. *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art*  
   edited by Babette Bohn and James M. Saslow
5. *A Companion to British Art: 1600 to the Present*  
   edited by Dana Arnold and David Peters Corbett
6. *A Companion to Modern African Art*  
   edited by Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà
7. *A Companion to Chinese Art*  
   edited by Martin J. Powers and Katherine R. Tsiang
8. *A Companion to American Art*  
   edited by John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain
This publication is made possible through support from the Terra Foundation for American Art and the Wyeth Foundation for American Art.
Contents

List of Figures xi
Notes on Contributors xvii
Acknowledgments xxiii

Introduction: American Art History Now: A Snapshot
John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain 1

Part I Writing American Art History 13

Dialogue 15

1 A Conversation Missed: Toward a Historical Understanding of the Americanist/Modernist Divide
Joshua Shannon and Jason Weems 17

2 Response: Setting the Roundtable, or, Prospects for Dialogue between Americanists and Modernists
Jennifer L. Roberts 34

3 A Time and a Place: Rethinking Race in American Art History
Tanya Sheehan 49

Dialogue 69

4 On the Social History of American Art
Alan Wallach 71

5 Response: Our Cause Is What?
Robin Kelsey 85
6 The Maker’s Share: Tools for the Study of Process in American Art 95
   Ethan W. Lasser

Dialogue 111

7 The Problem with Close Looking 113
   Martin A. Berger

8 Response: Look Away 128
   Jennifer A. Greenhill

9 Looking for Thomas Eakins: The Lure of the Archive and the Object 146
   Kathleen A. Foster

Dialogue 165

10 The Challenge of Contemporaneity, or, Thoughts on Art as Culture 167
    Rachael Z. DeLue

11 Response: Writing History, Reading Art 183
    Bryan Wolf

Part II Geographies: Rethinking Americanness 191

12 Teaching Across the Borders of North American Art History 193
    Wendy Bellion and Mónica Domínguez Torres

13 An American Architecture? 211
    Dell Upton

14 The Pacific World and American Art History 228
    J.M. Mancini

15 “Home” and “Homeless” in Art between the Wars 246
    Angela Miller

16 Pueblo Painting in 1932: Folding Narratives of Native Art into American Art History 264
    Jessica L. Horton and Janet Catherine Berlo

17 US American Art in the Americas 281
    Mary K. Coffey

18 Geography Lessons: Canadian Notes on American Art History 299
    Frances K. Pohl
19 Only in America: Exceptionalism, Nationalism, Provincialism
   John Davis

20 Monolingualism, Multilingualism, and the Study of American Art
   Jason D. LaFountain

Part III Subjectivities

21 Painters and Status in Colony and Early Nation
   Susan Rather

22 Pantaloons vs. Petticoats: Gender and Artistic Identity in Antebellum America
   Sarah Burns

23 Male or Man?: The Politics of Emancipation in the Neoclassical Imaginary
   Charmaine A. Nelson

24 Drawing Boundaries, Crossing Borders: Trespassing and Identity in American Art
   Randall R. Griffey

25 Lookout: On Queer American Art and History
   Richard Meyer

26 From Nature to Ecology: The Emergence of Ecocritical Art History
   Alan C. Braddock

27 Art History as Collage: A Personal Approach
   David M. Lubin

Part IV Art and Public Culture

28 Material Religion in Early America
   Louis P. Nelson

29 Issues in Early Mass Visual Culture
   Michael Leja

30 Patrons, Collectors, and Markets
   John Ott

31 Historicism in the American Built Environment
   Kevin D. Murphy
32 The Painting of Urban Life, 1880–1930
   *David Peters Corbett*

33 Photography and Opium in a Nineteenth-Century Port City
   *Anthony W. Lee*

34 Value in the Vernacular
   *Leo G. Mazow*

35 Realism under Duress: The 1930s
   *Andrew Hemingway*

Index
List of Figures

1.1 Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five*, 1947. 24
3.1 Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Daniel in the Lions’ Den*, 1907–18. 52
3.2 Rea Irvin and Seth, *Eustace Tillatorbama*, New Yorker cover, February 11 and 18, 2008. 58
3.4 Blinky Palermo, *Untitled* (wall painting), 1970. 63
6.1 Chest of drawers with doors, Boston, 1650–70. 96
6.2 Chest of drawers with doors, Boston, 1650–70, detail. 97
6.3 Bonnin and Morris, picklestand, 1770–72. 101
6.4 Drawer fronts, high chest, Philadelphia, 1760–65, detail. 104
6.5 Carved box, New England, 1660–90. 107
7.1 Andy Warhol, *Pink Race Riot*, 1963. 121
7.2 Andy Warhol, *Collage*, source for Warhol’s 1963 Race Riot series. 122
8.1 Thomas Danforth II or Thomas Danforth III, teapot, 1755–1800, detail. 131
8.2 Glenn Ligon, *Stranger #21*, 2005. 139
9.1 Thomas Eakins, *Self-Portrait*, 1902. 147
9.2 Thomas Eakins, *The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake*, 1873. 149
9.3 Thomas Eakins, *Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross (The Gross Clinic)*, 1875. 150
9.4 Circle of Eakins, Thomas Eakins nude, holding nude female in his arms, looking at camera, ca. 1885. 153
9.5 Thomas Eakins, *Swimming*, 1885. 155
10.1 Asher Brown Durand, *Kindred Spirits*, 1849. 170
10.2 Richard Caton Woodville, *War News From Mexico*, 1848. 171
12.1 John Hesselius, *Charles Calvert and His Slave*, 1761. 194
12.2 José de Ibarra, *From Spaniard and Indian, Mestizo*, ca. 1725. 194
12.3 Herman Moll, *A new map of the north parts of America claimed by France under ye names of Louisiana, Mississipi, Canada, and New France with ye adjoining territories of England and Spain*, 1720. 197

12.4 Bench, 1750–1800. 205

13.1 H.H. Richardson, Sever Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1878–80. 212


14.2 Perley Fremont Rockett, *Soldiers Entering Pasig Church after Capture*, 1899. 235

14.3 Strohmeyer & Wyman / Underwood & Underwood, *Pasig from the Church Tower—after its capture by the Americans—Philippine Islands*, 1899. 235


14.6 Strohmeyer & Wyman / Underwood & Underwood, *The bones of Tenants whose burial rental was not renewed—Santa Cruz Cemetery, Manila, Philippines*, 1899. 239

14.7 Dean Conant Worcester and Penoyer Levi Sherman, *Paco Church*, 1899. 240

14.8 Church at Paco, Luzon. 241

15.1 Arthur Dove, *Cow*, 1911. 251

15.2 Gerald Murphy, *Boat Deck*, 1924. 254

15.3 Gerald Murphy, *Villa America*, 1924. 256

15.4 Georgia O’Keeffe, *Series I, White and Blue Flower Shapes*, 1919. 257

15.5 Man Ray, *Minotaur*, 1933. 258

16.1 Awa Tsireh, *Koshares on Rainbow*, cover of John Sloan and Oliver La Farge, *Introduction to American Indian Art*, 1931. 266

16.2 Installation view of Gallery of American Indian Art, 18th Venice Biennale, 1932. 269

16.3 Tonita Peña, *Basket Dance*, 1932. 270

16.4 Velino Herrera, *Antelopes Running Under Rainy Skies*, plate 50 from *Pueblo Indian Painting*, 1932. 273

17.1 José Clemente Orozco, *Epic of American Civilization*, 1932–34, view of entire West Wing. 282

17.2 José Clemente Orozco, *Epic of American Civilization*, 1932–34, view of entire East Wing. 282

17.3 José Clemente Orozco, *Epic of American Civilization*, 1932–34, view of “Anglo” and “Hispano” America from the East Wing. 283

17.4 José Clemente Orozco, *Modern Industrial Man, Epic of American Civilization*, 1932–34. 294

17.5 José Clemente Orozco, study of Eleazar Wheelock with Indians for *The Epic of American Civilization*, 1932–34. 295

17.6 José Clemente Orozco, figure study for *Modern Industrial Man* for *The Epic of American Civilization*, 1932–34. 295
18.1 Map of North America. 301
18.2 Allan Sekula, permanent installation of Canadian landscape paintings by the Group of Seven, 1924, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, from Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes, 1985–86. 306
18.3 Allan Sekula, Sudbury, from Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes, 1985–86. 307
18.4 Allan Sekula, Ottawa. Looking west along Wellington Street from Parliament Hill. Second building on left, Bank of Canada, from Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes, 1985–86. 308
18.5 Allan Sekula, Border Station, Buffalo, New York, from Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes, 1985–86. 311
19.1 Hiram Powers, Eve Tempted or Eve Before the Fall, modeled 1842. 319
19.2 John Singleton Copley, Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait (Elizabeth Lewis), 1771. 320
19.3 James Barry, The Phoenix or the Resurrection of Freedom, 1776. 325
19.4 John Singleton Copley, Daniel Crommelin Verplanck, 1771. 326
19.5 Frederic Edwin Church, Heart of the Andes, 1859. 328
20.1 Jésus est mis dans le sépulcre (Christ being laid in the tomb), Station of the Cross number XIV with French caption, St. John’s Catholic Church, Keeseville, New York. 337
20.2 Kate K. Van Duzee’s contribution to A Steamer Packet, 1903. 342
20.3 Installation view of RETNA’s Los espiritus de la calle van a sobrevivir, 2011. 343
20.4 Samuel Mather, “Epitaphium,” in Cotton Mather, Parentator, 1724. 344
21.1 Benjamin West, Self-Portrait, ca. 1762–63. 360
21.2 Benjamin West, Portrait of Angelica Kauffmann, 1763. 363
21.3 John Singleton Copley, Boy with a Flying Squirrel (Henry Pelham), 1765. 365
21.4 Matthew Pratt, The American School, 1765. 369
21.5 Gilbert Stuart, Washington Allston, ca. 1819–20. 373
22.1 Anonymous, Four New American Pictures, from Harper’s Weekly Magazine, April 18, 1857. 380
22.2 Mathew Brady, Thomas Cole, ca. 1844–48. 381
22.3 Anonymous, This Is Young Dawdlemore, the Artist, from Harper’s Weekly Magazine, December 31, 1859. 382
22.4 Daniel Huntington, Asher B. Durand, 1857. 385
22.5 Lilly Martin Spencer, Self-Portrait, ca. 1842. 389
23.1 John Quincy Adams Ward, The Freedman, 1863. 396
23.2 Thomas Ball, Emancipation or Lincoln Memorial, ca. 1866. 397
23.3 Edmonia Lewis, Morning of Liberty/Forever Free, 1867. 398
23.4 Wedgwood Jasper medallion, Am I not a Man and Brother?, ca. 1787. 401
24.1 Luis A. Jiménez, Jr., Border Crossing, 1989. 417
24.2 Eastman Johnson, A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves, 1862. 420
24.3 Eastman Johnson, Negro Life at the South (or Old Kentucky Home), 1859. 421
24.4 Edward Williams Clay, The Fruits of Amalgamation, ca. 1839. 425
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>Jacob Riis, <em>5 Cents a Spot</em>, ca. 1890.</td>
<td>426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.1</td>
<td><em>Sex Terms Mobile</em>, mid-1960s.</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>Paul Cadmus, <em>Horseplay</em>, 1935.</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>Agostino Veneziano, <em>Soldier Attaching His Breeches to His Breastplate</em>, 1517.</td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>Jared French, <em>Cavalrymen Crossing a River</em>, 1939.</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>Jared French, <em>Boys on a Dock</em>, 1938.</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>George Platt Lynes, <em>Chester Nielson with J. Ogle (behind glass)</em>, 1937.</td>
<td>444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>Thomas Cole, <em>View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)</em>, 1836.</td>
<td>448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>Thomas Eakins, <em>William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River</em>, 1876–77.</td>
<td>451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>Subhankar Banerjee, <em>Caribou Migration I (Oil and the Caribou, Coleen River Valley, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge)</em>, 2002.</td>
<td>455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>Joseph Beuys, <em>I Like America and America Likes Me</em>, 1974.</td>
<td>462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>Laura Brey, <em>Enlist: On Which Side of the Window are YOU?</em>, 1917.</td>
<td>475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>Lilly Martin Spencer, <em>This Little Pig Went to Market</em>, 1857.</td>
<td>476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy smile at the crowds lining their motorcade route in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963.</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.4</td>
<td><em>The Beverly Hillbillies</em> (CBS), 1962–71.</td>
<td>479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>Howard Pyle, <em>Marooned</em>, 1909.</td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>St. Michael’s Church, Charleston, South Carolina, 1752–61.</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>Benjamin Seabrook gravestone, ca. 1720, former St. Paul’s churchyard, South Carolina.</td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>John Blake White, interior of St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina, 1835.</td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>Exterior of St. James, Goose Creek Church, Goose Creek, South Carolina, begun 1714.</td>
<td>492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>Interior of St Michael’s Church, Charleston, South Carolina, 1752–61.</td>
<td>494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.6</td>
<td><em>The Description of a Musick-Room Uniforme</em>, from Thomas Mace, <em>Musick’s Monument (or A Remembrance of the Best Practical Musick, both Divine and Civil)</em>, 1676.</td>
<td>497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>Anna D’Harriette gravestone, 1754, St. Philip’s churchyard, Charleston, South Carolina.</td>
<td>498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>William Langenheim, <em>Frederick Langenheim Looking at Talbotypes</em>, 1849–51.</td>
<td>508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>Thomas Doney and Edward Anthony, <em>United States Senate Chamber</em>, 1843–46.</td>
<td>510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>Nathaniel Currier, Napoleon Sarony, and William Hewitt, <em>Awful Conflagration of the Steam Boat Lexington</em>, 1840.</td>
<td>511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Image Description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>John Rogers, <em>Taking the Oath and Drawing Rations</em>, 1865.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>Three photographic reproductions of sculpture by John Rogers, <em>Taking the Oath and Drawing Rations</em>, all ca. 1866–68.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>New York City sale of the Stewart Collection of paintings at auction, at Chickering Hall; “Sixty-six thousand dollars and—sold!,” from Frank Leslie’s <em>Illustrated Newspaper</em>, April 2, 1887.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>H.H. Richardson, Watts-Sherman House, Newport, Rhode Island, 1875–76, façade detail.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>Interior view of Indian Hill, colonial kitchen, West Newbury, Massachusetts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>Walter D. Gillooly, sketch of Halle-Salem House reconstruction (façade), Pound Ridge, New York, 1930s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>Paul Revere House, Boston, Massachusetts, photograph ca. 1900.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>Childe Hassam, <em>Lower Manhattan (View down Broad Street)</em>, 1907.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>George Bellows, <em>River Rats</em>, 1906.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>Edward Hopper, <em>Automat</em>, 1927.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>Edward Hopper, <em>Manhattan Bridge Loop</em>, 1928.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>Isaiah West Taber, <em>Opium Den underground, by Flash-light. The hat in foreground represents Detective who guarded the door while the Flash-light Photographer did the work</em>, 1892.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>Isaiah West Taber, <em>Opium Den underground, by Flash-light. The face of one smoker was caught in the flash, the others concealed themselves</em>, 1892.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>Frank Davey and Isaiah West Taber, <em>Underground Opium Den, smoker caught in the act by the flash light. The keeper in the door had extinguished the lights</em>, 1892.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.5</td>
<td><em>White Women in Opium Den, Chinatown, S. F.</em>, n.d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>Jesse B. Cook, <em>Photo of Chinese opium smokers in there dens in China Town</em>, 1889.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>Jesse B. Cook, <em>Photo of Chinese opium smokers in there dens in China Town</em>, 1889.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>Robert Arneson, <em>Scale</em>, 1965.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
34.2 Robert Arneson, _John Figure_, 1965. 604
34.3 Russell Lee, _Grain Elevators, Caldwell, Idaho_, 1941. 607
34.4 Ralston Crawford, _Buffalo Grain Elevators_, 1937. 608
34.5 Edward Hopper, illustration for cover of _Hotel Management_, May 1925. 612
35.1 John Sloan, _South Beach Bathers_, 1907–08. 622
35.2 Reginald Marsh, _Coney Island Beach_, 1935. 623
35.3 Reginald Marsh, _Wonderland Circus Side Show, Coney Island_, 1930. 624
35.4 Reginald Marsh, _The Park Bench_, 1933. 625
35.5 Philip Evergood, _Dance Marathon_, 1934. 627
35.6 Reginald Marsh, _Zeke Youngblood’s Dance Marathon_, 1932. 629
Notes on Contributors

**Wendy Bellion** is Associate Professor of American Art at the University of Delaware. Her scholarship takes an interdisciplinary approach to American visual and material culture, focusing on the late colonial and early national United States within the cultural geographies of the British Atlantic world and the early modern Americas. She is the author of *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America* (2011) and co-editor, with Mónica Domínguez Torres, of *Objects in Motion: Visual and Material Culture across Colonial North America* (Winterthur Portfolio, 2011).

**Martin A. Berger** is Professor of History of Art and Visual Culture and the founding director of the Visual Studies graduate program at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He is the author of several books, most recently, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (2011) and *Freedom Now! Forgotten Photographs of the Civil Rights Struggle* (2013).

**Janet Catherine Berlo** is Professor of Art History and Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester. The author of numerous books and articles on Native American and American art, Berlo has received grants from the Guggenheim and Getty Foundations and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

**Alan C. Braddock** is the Ralph H. Wark Associate Professor of Art History and American Studies at the College of William and Mary, author of *Thomas Eakins and the Cultures of Modernity* (2009), and co-editor, with Christoph Irmscher, of *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* (2009).


**Mary K. Coffey** is Associate Professor of Art History at Dartmouth College, where she teaches courses on the modern art of the Americas. She is the author of *How a Revolutionary

David Peters Corbett is Professor of Art History and American Studies at the University of East Anglia. He has held visiting positions and fellowships in the United States, UK, and Europe. Recent publications include An American Experiment: George Bellows and the Ashcan Painters (2011) and an edited volume, Anglo-American: Artistic Exchange between Britain and the USA (2012). He is currently working on a monograph, “Urban Painting and the Landscape Tradition in America, 1850–1930,” which deals with the relationship between the mid-nineteenth-century landscape tradition and the painting of cities that emerged later in the century.

John Davis is Alice Pratt Brown Professor of Art at Smith College, where he also teaches in the American Studies Program. He is the author of several books, including The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture (1996), and (with Sarah Burns), American Art to 1900: A Documentary History (2009), as well as essays on race, religion, music, still life, portraiture, artists’ organizations, and pedagogy in American art history. He has held visiting professorships at Doshisha University, Japan; the Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium; and the École normale supérieure, France.

Rachael Z. DeLue is Associate Professor in the Department of Art & Archaeology at Princeton University, specializing in American art and visual culture, with an emphasis on intersections between art and science. Her books include George Inness and the Science of Landscape, Landscape Theory (2004), and a forthcoming study of Arthur Dove.

Kathleen A. Foster is the Robert L. McNeil, Jr., Senior Curator of American Art and Director of the Center for American Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Adjunct Professor at the University of Pennsylvania. With a BA from Wellesley College and MA and PhD from Yale University, she is a historian of American painting from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Her publications include numerous works on Thomas Eakins, including Writing about Eakins (1989) and the award-winning Thomas Eakins Rediscovered (1997).

Jennifer A. Greenhill is Associate Professor of Art History, Criticism and Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She is the author of Playing It Straight: Art and Humor in the Gilded Age (2012) and articles on visual, literary, and theatrical humor; popular illustration and commercial imagery; and race and the politics of visuality. In 2014 she was the Terra Foundation for American Art’s Visiting Professor at the Institut national d’histoire de l’art in Paris, France, and she is currently working on a book about early twentieth-century magazine pictures and their multi-sensorial strategies of engagement.

Randall R. Griffey is Associate Curator, Modern and Contemporary Art, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He studies and writes primarily on early American modernism, specifically American painting from 1900 to 1945. Much of his work has focused on the painter and poet Marsden Hartley. In 2011 he contributed “Reconsidering ‘The Soil’: The Stieglitz Circle, Regionalism, and Cultural Eugenics in the 1920s” to the catalogue accompanying
the Brooklyn Museum’s traveling exhibition, *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties*. From 2008 to 2012, Griffey served as Curator of American Art at the Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts.


**Jessica L. Horton** earned her PhD in visual and cultural studies at the University of Rochester in 2013. Her current book project, *Places to Stand: Histories of Native Art in Europe*, was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Museum of the American Indian in 2013–14. She has received fellowships from the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, the Terra Foundation for American Art, and the Social Science Research Council. She has published essays in *American Art*, the *Journal for Transnational American Studies*, *Third Text*, and *Parkett*.

**Robin Kelsey** is the Shirley Carter Burden Professor of Photography in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University. The first scholar to receive the Arthur Kingsley Porter Prize for an essay on the history of photography, he has written extensively on photography, landscape, and American art.

**Jason D. LaFountain** is an instructor in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He received his PhD in history of art and architecture from Harvard University, with a dissertation about the discourse of life as a work of art as formulated in the literature of English and American Puritan practical theology, 1560–1730. In addition to colonial American and early modern European art and architecture, his interests include the history of the history of American art, the philosophy of art, methods, sculpture, and contemporary art.

**Ethan W. Lasser** is the Margaret S. Winthrop Associate Curator of American Art at the Harvard Art Museums. His curatorial and scholarly work focuses on questions of art-making and its representation in image and text. Committed to innovative modes of exhibition-making and curatorial practice, he has also published on issues of museum education and interpretation. His forthcoming exhibition, *From the Philosophy Chamber: Harvard and the Arts in the Eighteenth Century*, focuses on the first museum in colonial America.

**Anthony W. Lee** is the Idella Plimpton Kendall Professor at Mount Holyoke College and founder and series editor of *Defining Moments in American Photography*. His most recent books are *A Shoemaker’s Story* (2008), *World Documents* (2011), and *A River of Dreams* (2014).

**Michael Leja** is Professor of History of Art and Director of the Visual Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (1993) and *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (2004).

J.M. Mancini is the author of *Pre-Modernism: Art-World Change and American Culture from the Civil War to the Armory Show*, which received the 2008 Charles C. Eldredge Prize for Outstanding Scholarship in American Art, and co-editor, with Keith Bresnahan, of *Architecture and Armed Conflict: The Politics of Destruction* (2014). Her contribution to this volume is based on research for her forthcoming book, *Art and War in the Pacific World*. Mancini is Senior Lecturer in the Department of History, National University of Ireland Maynooth.

Leo G. Mazow has been Associate Professor of Art History in the Department of Art at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville since fall 2010. He was curator of American art at the Palmer Museum of Art at Pennsylvania State University from 2002 to 2010. He is the contributing editor of *Picturing the Banjo*, accompanying a Palmer Museum exhibition he curated. Mazow’s book, *Thomas Hart Benton and the American Sound*, was awarded the 2013 Charles C. Eldredge Prize for Distinguished Scholarship in American Art by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. His current book project is entitled *Hopper’s Hotels*.


Angela Miller is Professor of Art History and American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. She has lectured and published in a range of areas spanning the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Her work has focused on constructions of cultural nationalism and the politics of form in the arts. Her 1993 book, *Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875*, won awards from the Smithsonian Institution and the American Studies Association. She is a lead author of *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (2008), an integrated history of the arts from the pre-Columbian era to the present.

Kevin D. Murphy is Andrew W. Mellon Chair in the Humanities and Professor of History of Art at Vanderbilt University. Previously, he was Executive Officer of the PhD Program in Art History at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where he was a member of the faculty from 1998 to 2013. Prior to that, he was Assistant Professor in the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia. His most recent book is *Jonathan Fisher of Blue Hill, Maine: Commerce, Culture, and Community on the Eastern Frontier* (2010).

Charmaine A. Nelson is Associate Professor of Art History at McGill University, Montreal. Her research interests include postcolonial and black feminist scholarship, race and representation, and the visual culture of slavery. She has published five books, including *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (2007), *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (2010), and *Ebony Roots, Northern Soil: Perspectives on Blackness in Canada* (2010).

Louis P. Nelson is Associate Professor of Early American Architectural History at the University of Virginia. The majority of his work focuses on the early American South, the Greater Caribbean, and the Atlantic rim. He is also a specialist in the architectures of religion. Nelson is interested in the close examination of evidence, both material and textual,

**John Ott** is Associate Professor of Art History at James Madison University. He has published on art consumption and on the intersections of social class with ethnicity and gender in the journals *American Art*, *Oxford Art Journal*, and *Winterthur Portfolio*. His first book is *Manufacturing the Modern Patron in Victorian California: Cultural Philanthropy, Industrial Capital, and Social Authority* (2014), and his current book project is entitled *Mixed Media: The Visual Cultures of Racial Integration, 1931–1954*.

**Frances K. Pohl** holds the Dr. Mary Ann Vanderzyl Reynolds ’56 Professorship in the Humanities and is Professor of Art History at Pomona College. She completed her BA and MA at the University of British Columbia, and her PhD at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of a major textbook on American art, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* (2002, 2008, 2012), two books on the American artist Ben Shahn, as well as several journal articles and catalogue essays on American art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

**Susan Rather** is a professor of art history at the University of Texas, Austin, and author of *Archaism, Modernism, and the Art of Paul Manship* (1993). She has published articles on earlier American artists in such journals as *American Art*, *Art Bulletin*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, and *William and Mary Quarterly*, research supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies, Yale Center for British Art, Massachusetts Historical Society, and Tyson Scholars program at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. *The American School: Artists and Status in the Late Colonial and Early National Era* is forthcoming.

**Jennifer L. Roberts** is Elizabeth Cary Agassiz Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University, where she teaches American art from the colonial period onward with a focus on landscape, material culture, and print culture. She is the author of *Mirror-TRavels: Robert Smithson and History* (2004), *Jasper Johns/In Press: The Crosshatch Works and the Logic of Print* (2012), and *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (2014).

**Joshua Shannon** is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at the University of Maryland, as well as founder and director of the Potomac Center for the Study of Modernity. He is the author of *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City* (2009) and of a forthcoming book about art and fact around 1968.

**Tanya Sheehan** is Associate Professor in the Art Department at Colby College, where she teaches American and African American art history. She is the author of *Doctored: The Medicine of Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (2011) and editor of *Photography, History, Difference* (2014). Supported by fellowships from major research libraries and the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, her forthcoming book explores ideas about race in photographic humor.

**Mónica Domínguez Torres** is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Delaware. She specializes in the arts of the early modern Iberian world, with particular interest in cross-cultural exchanges between Spain and the Americas during the period
1500–1700. Her book *Military Ethos and Visual Culture in Post-Conquest Mexico* (2013) investigates the significance of military images and symbols in sixteenth-century Mexico, showing how interconnections between martial, social, and religious elements created cultural bridges between European and Mesoamerican communities. She has also published several essays on the production, regulation, and consumption of indigenous heraldry in Mexico and Peru.

**Dell Upton** is Professor of Architectural History in the Department of Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of *Architecture in the United States* (1998) and, most recently, *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic* (2008).

**Alan Wallach** is Ralph H. Wark Professor of Art and Art History and Professor of American Studies Emeritus at the College of William and Mary. He is co-curator of *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History* (1994), author of *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States* (1998), and co-editor of *Transatlantic Romanticism* (2014). Wallach has published numerous articles on American art and arts institutions. He served as visiting professor at UCLA, Stanford University, the University of Michigan, Williams College, and Berlin’s Free University. In 2007, he was the recipient of the College Art Association’s Distinguished Teaching of Art History Award.

**Jason Weems** is Assistant Professor of American Art and Visual Culture in the History of Art Department at the University of California, Riverside. He is the author of *Barnstorming the Prairies: Aerial Vision and Modernity in Rural America, 1920–1940* (forthcoming) and is currently working on the intersection of art and archaeology in the Americas.

We would like to express our deep gratitude to the Terra Foundation for American Art and the Wyeth Foundation for American Art for their generous subventions, which enabled this volume to be much more richly illustrated than the budget would have otherwise allowed. In particular, Francesca Rose of the Terra Foundation and Joyce Hill Stoner of the Wyeth Foundation were instrumental in shepherding our project through the application process.

At Wiley Blackwell, our editor Jayne Fargnoli has been an enthusiastic champion of this volume and a constant source of advice as we were conceiving it. During the production phase, Julia Kirk, Allison Kostka, Caroline Hensman, Belle Mundy, and Janet Moth saw to a myriad of practical, stylistic, and bibliographic details that will help ensure that this large book is a pleasure to read.

We owe so much more than thanks to the thirty-five colleagues who have joined us as contributors to this Companion. They have patiently responded to our many queries and have taught us much through their conversations and correspondence. We are delighted to be able to bring their voices together here, and we look forward to the conversations that their essays are bound to inspire within the field of American art history.

This project has had a lengthy genesis and occupied no small portion of its editors’ lives for a number of years. For their willingness to make room for it in theirs, we thank our spouses, Jason Heffner, Matt Tanner, and Amanda Douberley.

John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain
Introduction
American Art History Now: A Snapshot

John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain

What does it mean to think about, research, and write the history of American art in the early twenty-first century? How should we understand the terms “American” and “art,” and how are today’s scholars reconsidering the methods by which they come to know the people, works, and histories that fall under the umbrella of “American art”? What are the chronological, geographical, and conceptual boundaries of the field, and how should we characterize them? In what ways does current scholarship on American art participate in broader debates within the humanities? How are academic, curatorial, and contemporary artistic practices informing shifting conceptions of the constitution and character of American art? Where has the field been and where is it going?

This Companion to American Art offers a way into these questions and many others shaping the field of American art history circa 2015. The book is meant to be a reference tool for those interested in American art and a window onto the ways scholars are currently investigating and producing it through their work. It is a benchmark of sorts, which builds on the efforts of scholars over the course of the past decade to frame American art anew for a range of audiences, from the general museum visitor to undergraduates, to scholars both junior and senior, in the United States and abroad. We have in mind, for example, the textbooks Framing America: A Social History of American Art (2002, 2007, 2012), by Frances Pohl, and American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity (2008), by Angela Miller, Janet Berlo, Bryan Wolf, and Jennifer Roberts; the anthology of period texts, American Art to 1900: A Documentary History, by Sarah Burns and John Davis (2009); Internationalizing the History of American Art, edited by Barbara Groseclose and Jochen Wierich (2009), which offered international perspectives on the field; and far too many exhibitions and conferences to be named here, in both the United States and around the world.

A Companion to American Art is related to these efforts to reframe the field of study but it does so from a meta-critical vantage, prioritizing how art historians
Conceiving of and present their subjects in the process of researching and interpreting them. This book does not, then, operate as a survey of American art in a conventional sense—it does not claim to offer a comprehensive account of American artistic practice or the historical developments that informed aesthetic or critical investments. It should instead be understood as providing a kind of snapshot of the field today, of some of the dominant strains of thought on American art, visual and material culture, and architecture, as well as curatorial practice, strategies of argumentation, and pedagogical imperatives in the academy.

By “snapshot” we do not mean to conjure an image haphazardly arranged, like a photograph captured on the fly, without thought or deliberation. Although at times it did feel like we editors were hunting for some special picture, some unusual or remarkable angle, as we surveyed the field and decided on the contents of the volume, we do not want to suggest this process was undertaken lightly, as a touristic leisure pursuit—far from it. However, we like how the photographic valence of the term evokes personal interpretation and even attachment, since the book is marked throughout by first-person accounts of the intellectual formation of the authors and their evolving practice, a perhaps unusual tone for an academic work to take. We also see this volume as a “snapshot” as the term is applied in data storage management, to refer to digital content as it existed at a particular point in time. This snapshot suggests fragility and ephemerality: we back up our data in case our computers crash, in case the data disappears. It preserves a specific moment in one’s working life and allows the user to retrace her steps back to that point in time if, in the future, her digital path is lost. This book might operate in a related sense: capturing a snapshot of the field circa 2015, it will, we hope, provide a foundation for future work while giving scholars a reference to which they can always return. This is how things looked to us in 2015; how will they look in the future?

Conceiving of this collection of thirty-five chapters as a snapshot implies both temporal immediacy and fleetingness: the book is “of the now” and thus possesses undeniable relevance, we think, but it also has a shelf life and may come to seem outdated as ideas about the field change in the future. Recognizing this, our goals are relatively modest. We want to draw the reader into the sorts of conversations about American art that are happening now in classrooms, at museums and conferences, and, when we are lucky, in a wider public sphere. The book preserves these conversations so that they might be taken up in other forums by an even broader range of scholars and students. We hope that *A Companion to American Art* will have a ripple effect, then, inspiring passionate debate as readers peruse its pages.

We work debate into the structure of the volume through four dialogues. As a multi-generational team of editors, we found such a framework remarkably generative, and we like the idea of foregrounding disparate positions instead of offering a final or single word on a subject. Beginning the book with these dialogues and interspersing them with stand-alone chapters in its first section, we attempt to set the tone for the volume as a whole, which we conceive as a dynamic and multi-vocal conversation in process, which invites readers to invest in the concerns of contributors, compare their approaches, and consider the implications of this or that line of thought. We expect that the four dialogues will activate the stand-alone chapters, inspiring readers to consider them in much the same way: as a position taken against others, an argument responding to, critiquing, and anticipating alternative perspectives. We are not
prioritizing contentiousness but rather casting light on the productive disagreements that make the field such a vibrant and promising space in which to work today.

Because the chapters reflect on a variety of questions and problems facing scholars in the humanities, the volume should resonate with art historians working outside of the American field and also with scholars in related disciplines such as American studies, anthropology, cultural studies, history, literary studies, and communication and media studies. The interdisciplinarity of the field of American art history is one of its defining characteristics, and the field is also known for its attention to individual objects, for probing, detail-oriented analyses that closely engage their formal properties and idiosyncrasies. Both of these traits are represented in this collection, as are the field’s investment in social history and its concern with identity and identity’s materializations in visual form. American art history is also increasingly focused on international exchanges—within the geographical and political borders of the United States, beyond these borders in the Americas, and throughout the world; chapters in our volume attempt to chart how these relationships inform artistic production and the construction of “American” art in the histories we write.

The careful reader will notice that subsets of these issues appear in nearly every chapter in the book, linking them in subtle ways and opening up still other questions and concerns. For instance, the search for a kind of authentic, rooted Americanness turns up in Angela Miller’s account of painting between the wars as well as Dell Upton’s consideration of “native” architecture. Several chapters in the volume deal with the concepts of space and place, but Alan Braddock addresses the environment in a different way in his chapter on ecocriticism, which unsettles the ontological boundaries between humans and other sorts of things in the world, raising questions about how we conceive of “boundaries” generally. Richard Meyer and Randall Griffey each reflect on the ways that curatorial decisions shape the viewer’s understanding of artists and objects. And J.M. Mancini and Anthony Lee examine the sometimes bellicose role of photography in forcibly breaching the walls separating communities, one in an Asian context far from the United States, the other within a specific Asian American community. There are many more of these overlaps and adjacencies, and an almost endless network of interrelation made it challenging to decide on the book’s organization. Which contributions speak most closely to one another? Which line of argument should be prioritized in a given chapter? The final distribution of chapters indexes their respective interventions into the conversation about the state of the field while also allowing them to contribute to dialogues beyond their specific section headings. Readers will no doubt draw their own mental maps and perform their own acts of intellectual triangulation as they traverse the volume, and this is as we intend it.

**Writing American Art History**

The book opens with reflections on the theoretical and practical frameworks informing the production of histories of American art today. This section is structured around four dialogues treating: the Americanist/modernist divide; political commitment and the social history of American art; “close looking” as a methodology; and the relationship between the now of the art historian and the then of American art’s histories. Some of these conversations are intergenerational, and in this regard are
representative of the collection of voices in the book, whose contributors range from distinguished senior professors and curators, to the newly tenured, to scholars who have just completed doctoral work.

Joshua Shannon and Jason Weems examine the causes of the abiding division separating the “Americanist” and “modernist” fields in the first dialogue. They ask why this division has been so persistent and identify several historical differences of method and style, which they argue, unless negotiated, will leave these fields out of touch with one another. While advocating neither an Americanist nor a modernist approach, the authors focus on how differing attitudes to form, history, and humanism have colored scholarship in the two areas of study. Jennifer Roberts responds to the “historical and diagnostic” analysis of Shannon and Weems by outlining “areas that are likely to remain resistant to any mutual engagement between Americanists and modernists, and others where [she] believe[s] that Americanists and modernists have enough shared vocabulary and parallel expertise to be able to enter into direct discussion.” Roberts aims to bring the differences between Americanist and modernist art history into greater relief “in the interest of constructing a more deliberate and self-conscious transfield relationship.” She projects such a relationship through discussion of four subjects: mass/popular culture, formalism, material culture, and pragmatism.

In the first stand-alone chapter, Tanya Sheehan considers the place of race in the study of American art. In the past, if race was to be seen at all, it was in images that depict non-white bodies or that were created by artists of color. More recently, however, scholars have critiqued these approaches to locating race, noting the tendency to deracialize whiteness and to segregate “minority” arts. Sheehan’s chapter reflects on these and other efforts to think differently about where and when contemporary American art historians look for race. Are we to understand that matters of race can be found in any image and that we should always seek them out, or are we to entertain the possibility of their absence in the context of an emerging “post-racial” discourse? What motivates methodological choices in matters of race in the twenty-first century, and what are the intellectual and political implications of those choices?

In the dialogue that follows, Alan Wallach and Robin Kelsey discuss the social history of art as it has been practiced over the past forty years, with an eye to accounting for its successes and failures within the American art field. Wallach focuses on the “Marxist” social history of American art, supplying a summary of its history while at the same time distinguishing it from “Marxian” social histories of art. He suggests what a thoroughgoing Marxist approach offers American art history, which to date, according to the author, has to its detriment “ignored or downplayed the problematic relation between the social and the aesthetic.” In his response, Kelsey reverses the framing introduced in Wallach’s chapter, which primarily addresses “the role of Marxism within the study of art history.” Instead, Kelsey thinks about “the role of the study of art history within Marxism.” He tenders the provocative query: “If you are young and committed to revolution, to the eradication of alienation and private property, is your first move to get a PhD in art history?”

Ethan Lasser’s chapter looks at how the study of processes of making might productively contribute to the history of American art. Drawing on innovative scholarship on early American decorative arts to which analysis of facture and production has been crucial, Lasser argues that making is “an arena in which the scholarship on the
decorative arts, which is rarely if ever looked to as a methodological model, can contribute to the interpretation of American art more generally.” Lasser shows what uncommon methods, from running a hand across the grain of a piece of colonial furniture, to the literal reconstruction of a late eighteenth-century porcelain pickle-stand, can tell us that the textual record cannot. Written from his perspective as a museum curator, Lasser’s chapter offers a lesson on the value of engaging materials in unusual ways, for curators and academics alike.

In the third dialogue, Martin Berger and Jennifer Greenhill debate the promise and peril of “close looking” as it informs the interpretation of American art. Berger traces the “ascendance of close looking” in the field during the 1980s and analyzes the writings of Jules Prown, whom he credits with codifying this approach as a methodology. Berger speculates on the continuing attraction of younger Americanists to close looking, before enumerating the practical consequences that flow from grounding studies in “what is seen.” In her response, Greenhill fleshes out Berger’s account of Prown’s legacy, bringing his methods into conversation with newer work in affect theory and critical approaches to “surface reading” in scholarship on literature. She argues that “intense engagement” is a better way to describe Prown’s practice than “close looking,” and endeavors to demonstrate how much scholars would miss if they adopted Berger’s conception of “the visual”—what it is, how it works, where it is located, and how it might be perceived by interpreters. Drawing on theorists of racial prejudice and its visual record in the United States, Greenhill offers a counter-model to Berger’s proposition, arguing that when writing about race, a more expansive and diffuse conception of the visual is required.

Kathleen Foster reflects on the long unfolding of scholarly efforts to locate and characterize the “real” Thomas Eakins. In the 1980s, new perspectives on Eakins were generated by the discovery of material from the collection of his student, Charles Bregler. The documents and photographs in this trove have inspired commentary from the vantage of cultural history, gender and class studies, as well as psycho-biographical analysis, while Eakins’s artwork has opened doors on the artist’s methods and personality. The collaboration of scholars and conservators, increasingly important to American art history, has rewritten our understanding of Eakins in the last two decades, offering confirmation of the documentary record, a cautionary check to speculation, and startling new insights. Foster ponders the “opportunities” and “tantalizing limitations” found in both archival and object-based analysis.

The first section concludes with a dialogue between Rachael DeLue and Bryan Wolf, which engages Wolf’s scholarship of the 1980s—his first book, Romantic Re-Vision: Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature (1982), and the related article, “All the World’s a Code: Art and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century American Painting” (1984)—as a basis for discussion of the relationship between art, history, and the process of scholarly interpretation. This exchange hinges on the question of the availability of history—to historical actors and to interpreters of that history—as a visible, quantifiable, and analyzable entity. In many registers, the dialogue addresses the idea of historical subjectivity, the ways that being at a different place in history causes or enables one to see things differently. The authors discuss the relations of historicity and subjectivity and of authorial intention and historical determinism, hypothesizing an interpretive middle ground between the assumption that “art” and “context” are distinct and the insistence on their seamless reconciliation.
The second section addresses the geocultural boundaries of American art history, with a focus on initiatives to better internationalize the study of American art. The chapters in this section consider how past and present connotations of “America” color conceptualizations of and scholarship associated with the field. While taking seriously the historical reality of American cultural differentiation, these chapters consider the value of transgressing boundaries between the “American,” or “US American”—however these categories have been conceived—and that which is imagined to be culturally “other.” They address physical, geographical boundaries as well as more atmospheric conceptual borders, offering new maps of American art.

Wendy Bellion and Mónica Domínguez Torres explore the possibilities and challenges of team-teaching American art history in an expanded geographical scope. What educational opportunities emerge when scholars combine their energy, knowledge, and resources in the classroom? Drawing on their experiences co-teaching a University of Delaware graduate seminar, “Colonial Art Across North America,” the authors share practical strategies for organizing and managing a course that combines the study of art from colonial settlements ranging from New France and British America to New Spain and the Caribbean. They argue that co-teaching not only introduces students to alternative ways of studying the diverse cultural histories of North America, it also models alternative pedagogies, which foster collaborative learning among students and embrace the energies of multiple voices in the classroom.

In the chapter that follows, Dell Upton examines the quest to define an American architecture from the late eighteenth century to today. He considers appeals to American distinctiveness, such as James O’Gorman’s early advocacy of the buildings of H.H. Richardson; Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright’s pursuit of a “democratic American architecture”; and the Colonial Revival’s grounding of architectural Americanness in a specifically western European heritage. Upton’s goal is neither to celebrate Americanness in architecture nor to debunk American exceptionalism, but to explore the obvious and less obvious ways that the idea of Americanness has shaped understanding of the built environment in the United States, as well as the difficulty of escaping these consequences.

Taking the little-known visual culture of the Philippine–American War as a case study, J.M. Mancini analyzes the Pacific world as a geocultural blind spot in the scholarship on American art. She argues that “world history” is a paradigm that can transform how we construct narratives of American art history. In particular, Mancini draws on two aspects of that approach: first, world history’s focus on the relationships between cultures, people, and polities across geographical boundaries; and second, its interdisciplinary emphasis on the many and complex relationships between artistic practices (including the exchange, alteration, reiteration, and destruction of images, objects, buildings, and landscapes, as well as their creation) and geopolitical processes such as the construction of empire.

Building on the distinction between the “rooted” and “transatlantic” as developed by Wanda Corn in *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (1999), Angela Miller traces the persistent presence of the native/cosmopolitan binary in modern American cultural history, especially in its negotiations of the European tradition in the arts. She charts the shifting aesthetic
and political alignments of variations on this binary and their contexts within the polemics and politics of culture, with a focus on the period 1910 to 1940. She argues that ultimately the native and cosmopolitan gesture toward different tolerances for indeterminacy and instabilities of meaning. Native modernism’s attraction to stable meanings issued from a dialectical inversion of lived experience: a sense of homelessness and loss of identity or of interiority. By contrast, forms of “homeless” modernism, with the embrace of linguistic play, gender fluidity, and culture—rather than nature-bred terms of understanding—both issued from and generated a very different sense of identity as something constructed and circumstantial or contingent.

In their chapter, Jessica Horton and Janet Berlo focus on the year 1932, during which the *Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts* toured the United States and the American Pavilion of the Venice Biennale featured works by Pueblo Indian painters, alongside pictures by American artists such as John Sloan and George Bellows. With particular attention to the Pueblo watercolorists Awa Tsireh, Tonita Peña, and Velino Herrera, they argue that “incorporating the first Native painting movement of the twentieth century back into American art history entails fundamentally altering its *shape*.” They chart the complex relationships between national and international patronage that enabled the circulation of Pueblo Indian works and the unique ways that Pueblo paintings manifest transatlantic influences broadly affecting American art at that time.

Mary Coffey relates how approaches taken within Latin American studies can help scholars of American art establish a continental, or perhaps even a hemispheric, framework for discussions of modernism. Drawing on her research emphasis on Mexican art, she offers one example of how a more broadly American view of twentieth-century developments in “US American” art might challenge and enhance the way we frame, teach, and approach the field. She focuses on the Museum of Modern Art’s 1933 exhibition, *American Sources of Modern Art*, to resurrect a moment in US American art history when “America” was defined in continental terms and the Mexican School was held up as the regional exemplar. While this experiment in asserting a continental America failed, the tension it reveals between a nationalist interest in regional specificity and a universalist formalism would structure the post-war emergence of Abstract Expressionism.

In her contribution, Frances Pohl uses her perspective as a Canadian American historian of American art to reflect on how northern border crossings have conditioned the history of American art in modernity. She provides a nuanced analysis of twentieth-century Canadian American artistic exchange by exploring the politics and economics of cultural interdependence and how the practices of American artists Barnett Newman and Allan Sekula have processed these relationships. Newman’s Canadian visit reveals the tensions between the internationalism espoused by the abstract artists who invited him to the “Red” province of Saskatchewan in 1959 and the intense cultural nationalism advocated by a more conservative Canadian government. Sekula, on the other hand, arrived in Ontario in 1985, amidst heated debates over the economic and cultural impact of a proposed bilateral trade pact with the United States (later expanded to include Mexico). Pohl maintains that Canada matters “because it provides a place of both similarity and difference from which to engage certain foundational assumptions—political, economic, and aesthetic—about both American art and the country in which it is produced.”

John Davis analyzes the nationalistic discourse of American exceptionalism in nineteenth-century art theory and criticism and reflects on how it has shaped the
practice of American art history, which has sometimes resulted in the definition of American art by absence or negation. He contrasts the essentialist interest in “ethos and essence” with the more material, provincialist framing of center and periphery, seeking to understand exceptionalism within an international context. Making use of Milan Kundera’s notions of “small nation” and “large nation” provincialism, Davis examines several instances of exceptionalist blinkers serving as an obstacle to a fuller account of the visual arts of a given nation-state or region. He ends by suggesting that current debates in the social sciences—the sweep of globalizing processes vs. the particularity of place as understood in area studies—offer a way of recuperating the notion of the local, the provincial, and even the national in American art history.

In the section’s final chapter, Jason LaFountain addresses the longstanding relationship between linguistic inability and the study of American art. Beginning with the establishment of the field in the 1960s, so-called foreign languages have been woefully underused in researching and writing histories of American art, and consequently, these histories, generally speaking, are governed by both ignorance and avoidance of primary and secondary sources in languages other than English. Drawing on scholarship addressing the multilingualism of the history of American literature, especially the writings of literary historians Werner Sollors and Marc Shell, LaFountain argues that despite growing attention to manifold categories of difference (particularly as a result of the multiculturalism of the 1980s and 1990s), language is a crucial type of difference with which American art history scholarship has not contended. He reflects on his own experiences of linguistic inability in conducting art-historical research and writing and then posits various solutions to this problem.

**Subjectivities**

In what ways have issues of personal subjectivity—who we are, who others think we are, how we occupy the spaces assigned to us, how we think and feel—informed the production and interpretation of American art? Among the topics taken up here are artisanal and artistic identification in the late colonial era and early United States; the gendering of artistic practice in antebellum America; “maleness” vs. “manliness” in neoclassical sculptures of African American emancipation; and the challenges queer subjectivity poses for normative approaches to art-historical interpretation. While the chapters in this section address categories of socio-political difference such as class, gender, race, and sexuality, there is due consideration of subjectivity in other senses, too—from ecocritical polemics about the subjectivity of plants and animals, as well as inorganic objects, to that of the art historian herself.

Between 1670, the date of the earliest surviving paintings in British North America, and 1834, when the first official history of American art was published, the status of painters changed dramatically, condensing a process that began some 200 years earlier in Europe. Initially considered artisans (defined by hand labor), American painters participated in the belated eighteenth-century British push to win recognition for themselves as gentleman-intellectuals engaged in a liberal art. That identification, in turn, would be subverted by a more modernist conception of the artist as genius-eccentric. These types overlapped in the bumpy and contradictory process of artistic self-formation that Susan Rather traces in her contribution. Her chapter interweaves fresh analysis of well-known
artists, paintings, and texts with accounts of non-elite painters, ephemeral texts and images, and a variety of contemporaneous writings about artists.

Looking at American landscape and genre painters, Sarah Burns discusses new modes of artistic production and self-fashioning that developed in tandem with the economic changes of the antebellum decades. How did artists look, what did they wear, how did they work, where were their homes? How were they classed, and how gendered? What social roles did artists perform, what kind of manliness or womanliness did they model? How did men deal with the aura of femininity that clung to the image of the Romantic artist languishing in the studio, and how did women attempt to breach the boundaries of the domestic realm? How did normative or non-normative gender coding operate in and through their work?

Charmaine Nelson’s chapter sheds new light on nineteenth-century American sculpture through a postcolonial, psychoanalytical, and black feminist reading of neoclassical treatments of black male subjects. Specifically, she examines the emancipation-related works of John Quincy Adams Ward, Thomas Ball, and Edmonia Lewis. The period from the 1860s to the demise of neoclassicism’s popularity in the late 1870s was a time when the American nation and much of the world was concerned with the state of slavery in the United States and its potential demise through legislation or military conflict. This chapter examines the preoccupation with black subjects within American neoclassical sculpture as it is connected to the race, class, and gender of the sculptors themselves.

Randall Griffey analyzes the thematics of trespassing in American art, referring to Martin Heidegger’s assertion that “a boundary is not that at which something stops ... the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.” He thinks about transgression in terms of conceptual pairings, including human being and animal; female and male; enslaved and free; rich and poor; and citizen and immigrant. Griffey revisits iconic nineteenth-century American genre paintings from the recent exhibition, American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life, 1765–1915 (2009–10), devoting special attention to Eastman Johnson’s Negro Life at the South (1859). He looks closely at works not included in the exhibition, as well, such as Luis Jiménez’s Border Crossing (1989) and the exposé photographs by Jacob Riis from How the Other Half Lives (1890).

Addressing the interstices of queer sexuality and the history of American art, Richard Meyer traces a dialectic of visibility and suppression as formative of art-historical knowledge. Meyer “contend[s] with the difficulty of addressing historical moments prior to Stonewall in which alternative forms of sexual life were quite differently organized, named, and depicted than they are today.” He argues that a commitment “to the specificity and texture of the past” “counters the tendency to construct queerness as a master category of contemporary anti-normativity.” Rather than attempting to transcend the constraints under which individual artists lived and labored, he delineates those constraints with as much precision as possible. To model what he is advocating, Meyer looks at episodes from the lives and careers of Paul Cadmus, Jared French, and George Platt Lynes.

In his chapter, Alan Braddock demonstrates how an ecocritical approach can enhance the study of the history of American art. According to Braddock, “ecocriticism emphasizes ecological interconnectedness, sustainability, and environmental justice in cultural interpretation. It asserts the imbrication of all beings, artifacts, and matter—including humans and their creative works—within a dynamic mesh of
relations, agents, and historical forces.” Ecocritical scholarship “expand[s] interpretation beyond traditional humanist, anthropocentric issues without ignoring human beings” and “seeks to enrich understanding while fostering sustainability and responsibility.” An ecocritical analysis of Thomas Eakins’s *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River* (1876–77) opens onto a wide-ranging and thought-provoking summation of new ecocritical theories of interest to historians of American art.

Building on a mode of interpretation that has guided his scholarship for the past thirty years, David Lubin turns to collage as a way of thinking about a subjective, multicontextual, multiperspectival, and democratically plural form of art-historical practice. For Lubin, “art history that represses the personality of the art historian, the inquirer, is in danger of feigning objectivity and covering over the subjective drives, desires, and motivations that give rise to the writing in the first place.” Lubin prefers interdisciplinary writing that puts into play diverse descriptive and analytic discourses and juxtaposes them in new and meaningful combinations, even when—or especially when—they can’t be synthesized in a smooth and seamless manner. Together with collage, he introduces digression, jazz, and hitchhiking as metaphors for subjectively attuned scholarly engagement.

### Art and Public Culture

The book’s final section is devoted to the relationship between American art and its myriad and ever-changing publics. Its topics range from the corporate religiosity of colonial Anglicans to the emergence of mass visual culture in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, from innovative frameworks for analyzing art markets and patterns of art consumption to painting and photography of the urban spaces of New York and San Francisco, as well as the relationship of the built environment to the construction of American history and an American “vernacular.” Practice—or the relation of art and life—is a thread that connects the chapters in this section. Collectivity, or community, and public space are also leitmotifs.

Louis Nelson’s chapter addresses church architecture and associated objects, including memorial sculpture and organs, from the late seventeenth century through the early nineteenth century, to demonstrate the importance of material things to early American Protestants, a population long assumed to be allergic to material belief. The scholarship on such buildings and objects remains primarily concerned with their formal qualities and the lives of their makers. As a result, the field of American art history has persistently overlooked what is, according to Nelson, a very productive category of analysis: material religion. Material religion stands at the intersection of material culture (as art and architectural historians generally understand it) and lived religion, a part of religious studies that examines religion as it is practiced. Material culture and lived religion share common convictions, most importantly a preference for the everyday over the exceptional and the assumption that meaning emerges from action.

In the section’s second chapter, Michael Leja calls attention to a new, modern ecology of images that took form in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century and suggests that our ways of understanding and describing this new situation have relied on “crude conceptual tools,” such as the “opposition of mass culture and modernism, notions of lost aura and culture industry, division of audience into highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow categories.” Among other shortcomings, these categories are...
inadequate to new, socially complex configurations of audience, the hybridity of fine and commercial images, and the interpenetration of production and consumption in modern image markets. How should one model audience reception for this new image ecology? Leja’s chapter articulates problems and possibilities based on his research into early mass visual culture in the United States, circa 1840–70. It argues for the value of establishing a canon for this material and tests the relevance of new theories of socially distributed cognition developed in cognitive science—particularly Edwin Hutchins’s theorization of “cognition in the wild”—for improving our understanding of the reception of early mass visual culture.

John Ott surveys scholarship on art consumption and markets to provide an overview of tendencies and omissions within the field. American art history, he argues, has often figured art consumption as secondary to artistic production in shaping cultural forms; the field has imagined the market as at best supply-driven and, more typically, a degrading influence. Inspired by the sociology of culture and the recent “cultural turn” in business and economic history, newer scholarship more productively accommodates consumers (both elite and non-elite) and markets by treating artists as economic actors in their own right, narrating the history of art from vantage points besides those of artistic producers, and even conceptualizing consumer demand as a precondition for artistic production. Ott also cautions against exclusively economic motivations for consumption, suggesting that the social setting and the very forms of the objects purchased must be part of a “multicausal” understanding of the market.

Kevin Murphy discusses the emergence of historicism as an aspect of urban, domestic, and civic environments beginning in the 1820s. That decade, which witnessed the Marquis de Lafayette’s “Farewell Tour” of the United States, signaled the transition of the revolution from “memory” to “history.” The belief that the revolution’s major actors, such as Lafayette, were fated to pass soon from living memory ignited a self-conscious effort to make the colonial period a permanent part of the built environment, through the preservation of historic buildings, the erection of monuments, and the construction of new buildings in the style of the old. Inspired by Continental and British historicism, Americans inscribed their physical environment in time. Murphy’s chapter considers American historicism as it was expressed in architecture, urbanism, and monuments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

David Peters Corbett looks at the painting of urban life in the United States from 1880 to 1930, with special attention to representations of New York City. Corbett addresses “the continuing presence of nature” in depictions of cities during this period. As Van Wyck Brooks described America, it is “a civilization that perpetually overreaches itself,” so that it is “obliged to surrender again and again to nature everything it has gained.” Thus, even as the “predominantly rural character of the nation began to slip away,” the nineteenth-century tradition of landscape “played an important if shadowy role” in painting the modern city. Corbett constructs his argument through thoughtful analysis of works by Childe Hassam, Joseph Pennell, George Bellows, and Edward Hopper, among others.

In the chapter that follows, Anthony Lee reflects on how photographs mediated the complex social relationships among immigrants, migrants, and natives in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century San Francisco. He focuses on photographs taken by visitors to Chinatown’s opium dens, which included not only Chinese laborers but also Victorian ladies, journalists, social reformers, health officials, and police (including the nefarious “Chinatown Squad”). Lee explores alternative histories of
opium, which indicate that it “was not a symbol of a deep Chinese racial character but instead of cultural contact, even foreign imperialism.” “Where the non-Chinese saw the den as backwards and primitive,” writes Lee, “the Chinese could just as easily see it as modern and all too Western.” The chapter explores how photographs participated in the madness of social encounter in a port city and makes larger claims about using photographs as a visual cultural archive.

Leo Mazow argues for the importance of the vernacular as both content of and methodology for understanding American art. While the term “vernacular” “connotes the popular, local, prosaic, and informal (as opposed to the elite, universal, poetic, and rarefied),” Mazow does not call for a mode of art-historical analysis that is “popularizing, localizing, or debunking.” Rather, he proposes the vernacular as “a worldview, a mindset, and even a physical approach that is as useful for understanding ‘highbrow’ cultural production as it is for interpreting the more common, even abject, subject matter typically designated as vernacular.” Mazow analyzes Robert Arneson’s ceramic facsimiles of bathroom objects and scatological themes; Wright Morris’s and Ralston Crawford’s grain elevator imagery; and Edward Hopper’s painted edifices and the literature engaging them.

In the volume’s final chapter, Andrew Hemingway considers American realism of the 1930s, analyzing works by Reginald Marsh and Philip Evergood. He distinguishes the “Baroque realism” of Marsh and the “Expressionist realism” of Evergood from the earlier American realisms of Thomas Eakins, Dennis Miller Bunker, Dodge MacKnight, and the Ashcan School, as well as Soviet Social Realism. He traces Marsh’s and Evergood’s struggles with the “intractable problem” of “how to picture social life in a way that penetrated beneath surface appearances to apprehend the underlying forces of historical and social change.” “Marsh’s art depicted kitsch and the vulgar; but he represented them in the forms of High Art,” writes Hemingway. “By contrast, Evergood assimilated these qualities into the very form of his art.” Whereas “Marsh’s example illustrates the exhaustion of traditional modes,” “Evergood points to the far more uncertain character of realism in art after modernism.”

**Conclusion (An Opening)**

From well-known painters like Eakins to little-studied artists; from oil painting and neoclassical sculpture to documentary photographs, pickelstands, and church architecture; from parochialism to cosmopolitanism; from the national to the hemispheric and global; from issues of identity and community such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, to intersections between human and non-human beings; from patronage to reception history and the constitution of mass culture; from exhibition spaces to the classroom; from geographical boundaries and feelings of belonging to displacement and homelessness; from new methods based in the social sciences to those grounded in the subjectivity of the individual interpreter; from considerations of the language of objects to the languages scholars use in their research and writing, *A Companion to American Art* reflects the range of scholarly work on American art today. By contributing to the conversation about American art and the scholarship it has inspired, *A Companion to American Art* will, we hope, engender new lines of argumentation that will add further dimensions to the vibrant dynamism of the field as it is portrayed in these pages.
Part I

Writing American Art History
Dialogue
A Conversation Missed
Toward a Historical Understanding of the Americanist/Modernist Divide
Joshua Shannon and Jason Weems

It has now been some time since “Mind the Gap,” a 2004 conference at Stanford University that sought “to challenge the divide between modernist and Americanist art history.” A central goal of the event was to trouble the conventional notion that US art made before 1945 is above all American (and the fit subject of “Americanist” art historians), while art made later is better understood under the international rubric of modernism (and studied only by scholars trained in that tradition). Papers delivered at the conference, therefore, demonstrated continuities in American art across the twentieth century and drew attention to both avant-garde and visual-culture material.

The frontier separating the two fields was hardly a transient problem. Before the Stanford conference, it had already been worrying art historians (or at least Americanists) for some time, and it has continued to do so. Over the past couple of decades, though, the concern has been growing, with some scholars seeing the distinctions between Americanist and modernist approaches as increasingly problematic, even damaging to proper scholarship. While a major historiographical essay of 1988 called attention to American art’s 1945 endpoint without argument or justification, a similar essay published fifteen years later explicitly asked whether such a cut-off might reinscribe false notions of American insularity before World War II. Despite such writing and the symposia explicitly dedicated to the topic, our survey of the scholarship suggests that the separation between Americanists and modernists remains quite real: for one thing, the two groups very rarely cite one another.

But the separation between the fields is not just one of dates or topics, or even of venues of publication. Far more significantly, it seems to us that Americanist and modernist bodies of work still have remarkably distinctive characteristics, even on the occasions when they treat the same material. This chapter, then, asks why this division has been so persistent, and it identifies several historical differences of method and
style that, unless negotiated, will leave these subdisciplines substantively out of contact with one another.

We should caution from the outset that our chapter, which treats only art history in the English language, necessarily relies on generalization. Several scholars work across the lines we describe here, which are meant to delimit mainstreams of Americanist and modernist art histories, respectively. These mainstreams, in our view, have clustered in recent decades especially around the journal *American Art* and the University of California Press (in the case of Americanists) and around *October* and the MIT Press (for their modernist counterparts). Our point is not that the divide is hermetic and total—it quite clearly is not—but rather that it is real, and, for reasons we hope to show, abiding. The first part of the chapter sketches some major areas of difference between the fields; the second half offers a case study comparing their approaches to Jackson Pollock, one of the very few artists heavily studied in both fields.

### Areas of Difference

**Form (and Voice)**

Americanists and modernists are perhaps nowhere more different from one another than in their habitual approaches to form. In addressing artworks, Americanists very often take the things and people represented, together with their social context, as the central focus. And while Americanist art history does of course consider the means by which those things are represented, it rarely demands that its artworks embody radical innovation in their form of representation. Indeed, the treatment of a given topic generally opens, above all, onto a larger cultural history of that topic. Distinctions of innovation or quality are relatively unimportant, and the boundaries between art objects and other things, including popular culture images, are relatively freely crossed.

Among modernists, by contrast, form is almost always central. This is no accident: modernist art was defined from the start by formal innovation—by the weirdness of avant-garde depiction. And it was this weirdness—the various opacities of representation, we might say—that became the central subject of modernist scholarship. Above all, art was interesting insofar as it demonstrated problems, failures, or inadequacies of representation. Add to this the fact that abstract art (central to modernism as it never could be to the long historical field called American art) seemed more or less to preclude any talk of what is depicted. In the last few decades, many modernists have wanted to see a link between radicality of form and radicality of politics. In this mode of scholarship, the new possibilities of thought opened by avant-garde art are far more important than any local or historically specific objects or topics that might be represented, or any ideas that mass culture might formulate about them. Associated with these valuations for many modernist scholars is the imperative (influenced by readings of Theodor Adorno, for example, as well as by modernist art itself) that art take the form of negation—critiquing previous habits of sight, for example, and ultimately false political consciousness. All these discriminations (formal innovation, problematization of representation, negation of ideology) are judgments of quality. While beauty is hardly a more comfortable topic for modernists than for Americanists, modernists are far keener, if sometimes covertly, to make judgments. As such, modernists tend to be more closely affiliated with criticism than their Americanist colleagues.
Indeed Americanists are often proactive in their efforts to write about art that they recognize to be aesthetically or politically conservative. On their motivations for this equanimity, however, Americanists as a group have been uncertain: is it merely that much American art has been undervalued, or is quality inherently a corrupt criterion for scholarship? (In our view, the role of scholarly judgment has remained regretfully implicit and undertheorized on both sides: what in fact governs our choice of objects?)

Modernist formalism sometimes gets cast as a pursuit of quality and innovation. While these Greenbergian tendencies do exist, they represent only an elementary piece of the scholarly modernist formalism of the last thirty years. In such scholarship, radicality of form is prized not merely because it is art-historically fresh, but specifically because it is seen to make available structural rather than superficial or familiar critiques of social reality. Yve-Alain Bois, a leading formalist in modernist art history, has written that, while historically some formalism was merely “morphological” and hermetic, strong formalist scholarship “envisions form as structural,” and always brings the scholar back to history.

Just as they focus on the form of the art they write about, many modernists take a special interest in the aesthetic quality of their own prose. While there are some prominent exceptions, Americanist scholarship as a whole is written in a voice closer to that of general historical nonfiction, aiming to communicate to the broadest readership possible. Much modernist art history, by contrast, draws extensively not only on the vocabulary of translated French and German theory but also on its academic-poetic style. Rhythm counts highly, and the pleasures of the text sometimes trump its straightforwardness.

To summarize this distinction, we might observe that Americanists and modernists agree on something important: the central topic of art-historical inquiry is how things are represented. The difference is that, while the how in question is for Americanists largely cultural and social (what constructs of race are at work in a picture, say, or what ideas of nature?), for modernists the how is at first structural-formal (what modes of representation are being used?), opening only through such questions onto political matters.

**History (and Politics)**

If the two fields are distinguished by the degrees and characteristics of their orientation to form, they are likewise distinguished by the lenses they use to view history. The vast majority of Americanist scholarship operates in the mode of the social (or, perhaps more precisely, cultural) history of art. Context—chronological, local, and national—matters, so scholars carefully offer information about an artist’s studio, her training and reading, her relationship to recent problems reported by the popular press, and, at least somewhat more than modernists do, her biography. Following recent models in cultural history, this “local knowledge” becomes an entry point for understanding broader cultural issues and the social forces that underlie them.

Most modernists, by contrast, tend to see the important aspects of history as not so finely grained, either temporally or geographically. Here it is a long, epistemic view of history that matters: not the Kennedy assassination or the march on Selma, but the condition of late capitalist subjectivity. Often, when modernists discuss art deeply engaged in the specifics of its own moment, they take more interest in the fact and form of that engagement than in the specific social topics addressed. Art remains the
central topic of inquiry, at least until the highest and most abstract layers of history emerge. And while artists are significant in modernist narratives, what matters is often not their individual agency but rather their role as conduit through which the work of art might be said to come together or appear.

The Americanist and modernist clusters are both fundamentally left traditions, each in its way heavily influenced by the intellectual legacy of Marxism. For the generation that saw the explosive growth of Americanist art history thirty years ago, however, readings of Marx mingled with interests in Pragmatism, social reform, and the legacies of New Deal liberalism, as epitomized, for example, in the writings of John Dewey. Civil rights was perhaps the most indelible chapter of recent history. Such progressive values as free speech, equal rights, and public health are centrally important in Americanist accounts of the past. For their part, modernists mixed their Marx with such figures as Theodor Adorno, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Lacan. (Michel Foucault’s influence is more complicated, having been a significant source in both fields.) The result has been an attention not so much to civic wellbeing as to the possibilities (and historical accounts, largely failed) of radically reordering knowledge and the social order. The stakes in such scholarship are high, and modernist histories can be agonistically, even tragically pitched.

To a degree, we do mean to suggest that American art history has a more progressive bent than modernist scholarship, which often seeks only a radical alternative to hegemony. What interests us most, however, is not the degree but rather the kind of left political commitment in each case. This leads us to the last of our synthetic sketches of the differences between the two fields.

**Humanism (and Its Rejection)**

It seems to us that the single most significant difference keeping Americanists and modernists from engaging in conversation is this: while mainstream modernist art history is poststructuralist, most Americanist scholarship is humanist. This distinction is not absolute, of course, but it certainly separates the broad centers of the two disciplines from one another. To make clear what we mean by this distinction, let us begin by making a pair of comparisons. Each sets an Americanist historiographical essay against a modernist one. The first pair appeared in 1987 and 1988, the second in 2003 and 2004. We hope, through these comparisons, to show the ways in which each field understands the roles of scholarship (and the function of art objects) quite differently. On both sides, we will see our historiographers describing epochal shifts, beginning in the 1970s, in the aims of scholarship; we believe that the differences between these shifts, as experienced and understood by modernists and Americanists, account for much of the ongoing miscommunication.

Wanda Corn’s 1988 essay “Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art” remains a landmark in the historiography of American art. As its title suggests, the essay remarked on the recent and massive growth of the Americanist field, both in the quantity of work being undertaken and in the diversity of its interests and methods. Corn noted that Americanist art history had so far been dominated by “documentary monographs” that recovered empirical information and remarked that the field had suffered from too little work on “what might be called historical or intellectual ‘problems.’” She added that starting in the late 1970s, revisionists had begun to enlarge the field by considering objects that had not often come in for study: work
by women, non-white artists, outsider artists, and others. The resulting questioning of taxonomy and method was so profound that, for a time, “survey books in American art suddenly stopped appearing.” In the years following, Corn noted, many Americanist art historians came to drop the exclusive attention to fine art, turning their attention also to material culture objects such as Mount Rushmore, post office murals, and kitschy motels.11

Twenty-five years later, we agree with this characterization of the revisionist turn in Americanist art history. Corn writes, though, that these shifts belonged to a broader transformation across fields, a “radical critique of art history itself, which questioned a discipline that focused so exclusively on art considered innovative and aesthetically superior.”12 While we agree that other corners of art history were likewise transformed in and after the 1970s, it strikes us that the character of the shifts within Americanist and modernist art history differed in important ways. For one thing, modernists, on the whole, did not embrace popular culture but remained dedicated to the art they saw as important, sometimes dismissing visual culture studies as vague and rudderless.13 For modernists, the most notable shift was not enlargement or even critique of the canon (although there was some of that) but rather a turn to a new set of questions or approaches—specifically to poststructuralist methods which, it was hoped, might help to undermine the general epistemic and social order. These differences in character between the Americanist and the modernist versions of 1970s revisionism have, in our view, set the scene for an ongoing misunderstanding. It is a misunderstanding, moreover, by which each side can perceive the other as backward or conservative for failing to have made the apparently central transformation.

Corn’s essay went further, indicating that, over time, the revisionist turn in Americanist art history came to include not only expansion (even explosion) of the canon but also efforts at forging new, more historically robust methods. Here she cited, in addition to the material culture work already mentioned, a growing interest in social-historical concerns. In this brand of recent work, analyzing cultural-institutional factors such as education, taste, and power structures took precedence over the traditional tasks of uncovering artists’ biographies and recounting their art-historical sources. What had once seemed background material, she wrote, “now became part of the foreground.”14 This social-historical method has since become by far the dominant mode of Americanist art history. It is worth noting that both Americanist and modernist brands of social art history have been fundamentally influenced by the work of the modernist art historian T.J. Clark. The nature of that influence, however, has been different in the two fields. While Americanist art history situates representations within frames of genre, institution, and politics, it is generally not built on form. One of Clark’s great influences on the modern field, by contrast, was to demonstrate ways in which composition, style, and even facture can reveal deep social structures (as in his discussion of the historical meanings of Impressionist flatness and unfinished.)15

For our purposes, it is very interesting that in her observations on the future of the American field, Corn did add that “the most sophisticated studies of art and society” were in fact “those using post-structuralist analysis to locate the work of art within history, and history within art.” Recognizing the sensitivity of these accounts while cautioning that they “raise questions they do not resolve,” she mentioned also some new, theoretically oriented “interpretive criticism,” which, she wrote, drew from “deconstruction, post-structuralism, and psychology.”16 It is true that writers in this
mode—Corn mentioned Jules Prown, Bryan Wolf, David Lubin, and even Michael Fried—often assembled speculative and subjective readings of their objects of study, and that these were frequently inflected by Freud. It strikes us, though, that few of the accounts were truly poststructuralist, at least not in the sense held dear by modernists: for all the sophistication and subtlety of their interpretation, these writers did not require their art to overturn the structures of meaning by which the world is assembled. Instead, their writing maintained the aim of uncovering individual and collective expression, however layered, socially mediated, or unconscious.

Only months before Corn’s essay, the editors of the modernist journal October published an anthology of essays that had appeared in the first ten years of that journal’s run. They grouped the essays under the following headings: The Index, Historical Materialism, Critique of Institutions, Psychoanalysis, Rhetoric, and The Body. It is difficult imagine a collection of essays in Americanist art history organized under these theoretical terms, although several of them could certainly be made to apply. The difference perceptible here is a symptom of the kinds of theory at work in the two fields. And it is in modernist art history, more consistently than in any other branch of the discipline, that poststructuralist approaches have shifted the mainstream of scholarship.

In their introduction to the volume, the October editors wrote that much of the work in the journal was offered as a critique of late capitalism and its “revival of traditional artistic and discursive tendencies.” They went on to name directly the predominant method for this critique: “it seemed to us that the most cogent response to the return to traditional Western values in every sphere of social and cultural life [after the 1960s] was the critique of the presuppositions of those values made by French theorists, those who had come to be called poststructuralists.”

Further remarks clarified what the editors meant by claiming that they and their authors took a poststructuralist view. Primarily, this stance had to do with understanding reality as shaped by ideology and social forces, which, if refracted through the lens of sufficiently radical art, could be broken and remolded into better forms. Distinguishing themselves from more traditional individual or institutional understandings of power, they wrote that “social discourses have rhetorical force, which is not simply to say that they affect us … but more, as psychoanalytic and linguistic theory teaches us, that they effect us.” By distinguishing the mere idea of affecting (altering) from effecting (bringing into being), the editors located social structures as the very genesis of individual human existence. The individual is not simply acted upon by society but invented by it.

Compare to this one of Corn’s remarks about the role of social and economic forces in Americanist art histories. Addressing the nonjudgmental perspective of material culture studies, she wrote that such scholars do not see popular culture “as the capitalist’s means of manipulating the taste, values, and pocketbook of unsuspecting citizenry.” In relief against October’s short manifesto for poststructuralist art history, what jumps out here is Corn’s passing over of the term capitalism in favor of the singular human figure “the capitalist.” And although this may seem a minor point, Corn’s phrasing bespeaks a more humanist notion of economics, in which individual agents undertake (often) self-interested actions. Modernist scholarship, by contrast, tends to understand capitalism as a force, indeed a structure, beyond and outside the actions of even big-business profiteers. The poststructuralist move is to identify the system and to seek means for undoing its seeming inevitability.
The *October* editors offered a gloss, for example, on their brand of feminism, one that they took pains to distinguish from humanist inclusionism:

Women had to be written into historical and contemporary cultural practices as producers and as addressees. This task would entail, however, more than a simple retrieval of women from neglected historical archives or support of contemporary women’s work. It would also entail a reconception of the scotoma that kept women from sight not as an impediment to be removed but as a process of vision itself. Feminism would participate in the redefinition of vision as historical.  

Here the articulated ambition of writing about art is not to make visible lost pieces of history, nor to bring forward hidden social events or even obscured psychological forces. Rather, the aim is to demonstrate that vision itself is shaped by social discourse, and, further, to enable the possibility of breaking the contemporary, patriarchal structure of sight.

Fifteen years after Corn’s essay, John Davis published “The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States.” Also appearing in *The Art Bulletin*, Davis’s comprehensive survey recounted the growth and the many changes in the Americanist field since the time of Corn’s account: the involvement of art history in the US culture wars around 1990, for example, as well as the further development of institutional critique and of African American, Asian American, and Chicano art histories. Despite these developments, however, the Americanist field surveyed by Davis appears little different in terms of its relationship to poststructuralism from that described by Corn. Indeed, Davis’s language echoes Corn’s when he identifies, as a balance to the social and cultural art history dominating the field, a smaller but ambitious strain of work characterized by “creative speculation, attention to the psychoanalytic unconscious, and the presentist critical propositions of deconstruction and poststructuralism.”

But if we look into Davis’s chief examples of this latter strain, essays from around 1990 by Jules Prown and Alexander Nemerov, we still find work quite different from modernist poststructuralism. In the former case, we encounter arguments that, while deeply psychoanalytic, do not aim to help dismantle social consciousness. Prown’s method, as Davis describes it, is “to probe the kinesthetic excitement” of the artwork in order to achieve the “unlocking of mental culture (society interests him much less) inscribed, usually unconsciously, onto objects by the physical act of creation.” In the case of Nemerov, we find greater overlap with modernist interests in epistemic and structural-formal thinking—Davis notes, for example, that Nemerov’s writing is shaped by “internal musings about … the nature of representation” and a sensitivity to “semiotic contingency.” However, his approach remains in at least one respect fundamentally Americanist; the critique of ideology is not dependent upon radicality of form. Quite to the contrary, the art he treats here is formally and politically conservative, and the analysis he offers is not intended by the artist but rather built by the historian.

Perhaps not surprisingly, even the most self-consciously poststructuralist Americanist scholarship is insufficient to satisfy the expectations of some leading modernists. Writing contemporaneously with Davis, the modernist Benjamin H.D. Buchloh observed that the major theoretical strains of modernist art history had been developed specifically “as attempts to displace earlier humanist (subjective) approaches to criticism and interpretation.” No doubt Prown’s and Nemerov’s efforts—unorthodox as they are—do no
better for Buchloh than the interpretive approaches that had, up to the 1970s, dominated even modernist scholarship: they hold to notions of the art object as an expression of its maker’s meaning—a vessel, if even unconsciously, for “Homer’s message” or for “the painters’ sublimated acknowledgment of the difficulties … in making history.”

Buchloh’s essay was one of four introductions to *Art since 1900*, the 2004 textbook that he wrote together with the three other central figures behind *October*. Each of the essays introduced a method of modernist art history: Buchloh wrote on social art history, Hal Foster on psychoanalysis, Yve-Alain Bois on formalism and structuralism, and Rosalind Krauss on poststructuralism and deconstruction. While only the last of these essays used the word poststructuralism in its title, all four echoed the 1987 *October* anthology and further developed its positions. Buchloh, for example, wrote that the aim of avant-garde art (and, implicitly, of good history of it) was to “initiate fundamental changes in the conception of audience and spectatorial agency, to reverse the bourgeois hierarchy of aesthetic exchange-value and use-value, and most importantly perhaps, to conceive of cultural practices for a newly emerging
internationalist ... public sphere.” It was no less than the “innermost telos” of abstraction, collage, and Dada, he added, “actively to destroy traditional subject-object relationships.” This is not a model of art as expression, however sublimated, but of art as means for remaking thought.

Our point here is not that Americanists fetishize the individual; in many ways they do so less than their modernist counterparts. (Think of Americanist notions of pluralistic popular culture up against the avant-garde heroics that characterize much modernist writing.) We mean rather to say that Americanists generally take more interest in historical expressions—even when those expressions are unconscious, contradictory, and collective—than they do in the forms by which those expressions are made. For many modernists, by contrast, the topic is form, both aesthetic and social, and the ways in which it enables the taking apart of some expressions and the potential building of others. Let us now test these generalizations, and complicate them, in a comparison of modernist and Americanist treatments of the Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock (Figure 1.1).

**Case Study: Jackson Pollock**

While modernist accounts of Pollock may be more widely circulated, the claims that both modernist and Americanist art historians make on his work are compelling, especially in relation to the historical break at 1945 problematized in the opening passages of this essay. We have selected four well-recognized analyses of Pollock’s work: two commonly affiliated with modernist art by Rosalind Krauss and T.J. Clark and two usually associated with the American field by Michael Leja and Erika Doss. Chronologically, the texts make a tight grouping as all were published in the 1990s. Our goal in comparing the interpretive strategies deployed by these authors is not to critique or even to recapitulate each of their arguments as such, but rather to locate in them the methodological and philosophical differences that shape the two fields. In doing so, however, we also aim to demonstrate some of the uniqueness of each case and to recognize moments of hybridity when they arise. In our view, the accounts by Krauss and Doss are the most different, while Leja’s is the most difficult to categorize. We reprise the categories laid out previously for the sake of clarity.

**Form**

Rosalind Krauss’s writing typifies modernist scholarship in its heavy investment in form as such, together with its belief that radicality of form lies at the heart of art’s decidedly critical purpose. In her account of modernist art, *The Optical Unconscious*, Krauss defines the importance of Pollock’s art in its almost insurrectionist challenge to the formal and structural conventions of representation. Describing how Pollock’s approach to form embodied such a structural critique, she writes:

At some point, it became clear that figure could only be approached through *bassesse*, through lowering, through going *beneath* the figure into the terrain of formlessness. And it also became clear that the act of lowering could, itself, only register through the vehicle of a trace or index, through, that is, the stain that would fissure the event from within into act of aggression and mark, or residue, or clue. When Pollock began to dribble a network of line over the figures on the canvases of what became *Galaxy* and *Reflections of the Big Dipper*, this *bassesse* was suddenly in place.
For Krauss, form is not merely a locus for aesthetic innovation, but rather a register for deeper penetrations into the structural field of representation. Her understanding of Pollock’s breakthrough as the ability to get beneath the figure (“bassesse”) relies on a belief that specific formal acts or configurations—moving the canvas to the floor; reconstituting the intentional mark as an autonomic trace—held the potential for unmasking and subverting the structures that shaped both art and knowledge. Indeed, Krauss’s own writing enacts an analogous subversion of academic writing forms in its eschewal of footnotes, its stylized repetition of phrases and passages, and its familiar references to Clement Greenberg as “Clem.” Yet, central though form may be, Krauss offers no extended visual analyses of individual works. Rather, her interest in form concerns the history of the medium of painting and its structuring logic.

By contrast, Erika Doss’s *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism* is, above all, contextualist. Radical formal innovation is not a central topic, and although Doss does characterize Pollock’s drip paintings as “revolutionary,” she writes directly against viewing this breakthrough “purely in formalistic terms.” Instead, her aim is to reconnect Pollock’s Abstract Expressionism to its regionalist roots, and, moreover, to attach “the story of the shift from regionalism to abstraction” to “that of the shift from the New Deal to the Cold War.” Doss’s method certainly does not ignore formal operations, though it does delimit the field of formal possibility and make it more purposeful in its own immediate historical context:

The abstract nature of Pollock’s drips showed the tense instability of life in postwar America; the dense webbed content of his pictures embodied the entrapment of consensus culture. But the visual dynamism inherent in Pollock’s abstract works also conveyed a desperate sense of the need for revolution, for the overthrow of authority. ... In the way he painted Pollock defied the conventions of traditional art making and proposed a method for self-healing and individual empowerment. He visualized especially the need to loosen—if not completely dissolve—the restraint of consensus conformity.30

Here, Doss connects visual form to external subject matter. The verbs she uses—“showed,” “embodied,” “visualized,” “defied,” “proposed”—heighten this sense that Pollock’s works, if of course in abstract ways, actively represent and negotiate the concerns of the world around them.

In *Farewell to An Idea*, T.J. Clark, like Rosalind Krauss, gives formal-structural issues pride of place. “I want modernism,” Clark writes, “to emerge as a distinctive patterning of mental and technical possibilities.” Within these formal-cognitive operations, he adds, the most significant art is “characterized by a thickening and thinning of those patterns—by kinds of simplification or overload, stabs at false immediacy or absolute muteness, ideas of beginning again or putting an end to representation, maybe moving finally from representation to agency.”31 Like Krauss, Clark builds his account on a notion of the radicality of Pollock’s form, but for Clark this invention concerns not horizontality and lowness but rather the painter’s ongoing effort to refuse metaphor. Also, Clark, much more than Krauss, attends to the formal details of individual pictures. Consider this representative passage about Pollock’s *Number 1, 1948* and its relationship to *One: Number 31, 1950*:

The picture is fragile. Tinsel-thin. ... The clouds of aluminum and the touches of pink toward bottom left only confirm the essential brittleness of the whole thing—the
feeling of its black and white lines being thin, hard, friable, dry, each of them stretched to the breaking point. … One, by contrast, is more poured than thrown, and more splashed (rained) than poured. Spotted. Sprayed. Which does not mean that its surface looks straightforwardly liquid. Finding words for the contradictory qualities of Pollock’s surfaces is, you see already, a torturous business.

Clark’s interpretation of Pollock’s form hinges on what he perceives as its efforts to resist and negate the transparency of representation. Pollock’s painting, he writes, “is a constant action against metaphor: that is to say, against any one of his pictures settling down inside a single metaphorical frame.” What Clark perceives in Pollock’s form is not merely a negation of external references, but rather a perpetual and open-ended disruption of any effort toward the stabilization of representation with its attendant hegemonic implications.

While Clark’s structural-formal approach affirms his status as a modernist, his detailed attention to specific historical contexts (especially in his earlier work) has proven attractive to Americanist scholars. Perhaps this aspect of Clark’s method has even played a role in leading some of his students to the American field, including Michael Leja, author of *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*. Like Krauss and Clark, Leja believes that much of the significance of Pollock’s oeuvre (again, the drip paintings are important, though not so central as in the two modernist accounts) belongs to his formal innovation. Echoing the passage of Clark’s quoted above, Leja’s analysis of *Out of the Web, Number 7, 1949*, originates in a careful analysis of the formal characteristics of Pollock’s art:

Thinned paint has left splashy marks that reveal fully the underlying textures; thick paint is visible in pasty impasto and in raised, smooth-edged lines and pools. The width of the line varies greatly as an index of viscosity and speed of the gesture. … In some areas a dry brush has been dragged over textured surfaces, in others, the brush was pulled through a wet web, interrupting the flow and delicacy.

In many respects, Leja’s passage bears striking resemblance to Clark’s example. Yet, whereas Clark dwells on the negations and instabilities of Pollock’s marks, Leja understands these marks to function, if in very complicated ways, as metaphor. Specifically, Leja reads Pollock’s paintings as expressions of what he names the “modern man” discourse of subjectivity (a discourse broadly manifest in postwar American culture, from popular psychology to *film noir*.) “The image of man struggling to exert control over the powerful forces within and without him,” Leja writes, “found compelling visual form in Pollock’s work.” In Leja’s view, some modernist accounts have gone too far in understanding Pollock’s abstraction as an attack on representation at the expense of its contextualist linkages:

The question of subject or meaning in these [Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists’] paintings is complex, it is true, but not so complex that it warrants enveloping the pictures in mystification or obscurity, or justifies the revival of untenable accounts of solely formal and expressive significance. The task is to reconcile the artists’ commitment to abstraction with their simultaneous commitment to expanding abstraction’s possibilities for meaning. … their work reveals itself to be committed to devising an abstract art rich in complex, articulate metaphors.
Pollock’s abstractions, in Leja’s estimation, were doubly responsive—offering a radical critique of representation even while also articulating the metaphors underlying the notion of “modern man.”

**History (and Politics)**

Orientation to form inevitably bleeds into matters of historical context. Yet if modernists and Americanists share history in common—the objects, personalities, events, and stories are often the same—their deployments of these materials diverge both in overarching concept and specific application.

Again, the most categorical differences can be seen between Krauss and Doss, for whom what is relevant (as history) varies greatly. Krauss’s historical framing of art is epistemic rather than detailed, almost subterranean rather than explicit. She specifically argues for holding the history of art apart, at least for a time, from history more generally. As historical evidence, Krauss calls on few artifacts beyond the paintings and their criticism (by Greenberg especially) and a fractured and stylized version of Pollock’s biography. Any historical or political relevance for Pollock’s negation—his horizontality, lowness, and formlessness—remains, until the very end of her account, unnamed. In her last two pages, however, Krauss writes that Pollock’s art acts against collective repressions associated with modernist opticality. Seeming to imply that such anti-transcendental actions might help to undercut the ideologies underpinning hierarchy, she writes that Pollock’s work had managed to “undo form by knocking it off its sublimatory pedestal, to bring it down in the world, to make it déclassé.”

Doss offers a direct contrast. Where Krauss’s history is abstract and structural, Doss’s is specific and contextualist. From the outset, Doss identifies her topic as a discrete set of historical objects (“American art from the Depression to the Cold War”) framed by a definite history (the “socio-political and cultural conditions of its age”). And unlike Krauss, who maintained a distinction between modernist art and other modes of cultural discourse, for Doss the relationship between art and its historical milieu is robust and everywhere entangled. In a representative passage, she writes:

> Pollock focused on the tragedy of contemporary social alienation and the primacy of individual expression. … For postwar intellectuals who had abandoned the “search for community” in favor of “the virtues of privacy and personal fulfillment” and the search for individual identity, Pollock’s aesthetic model was perfectly appropriate. But, his appeal to individual empowerment was also an enormous threat to the ideology of postwar consensus, which albeit conflicted, centered on conformity and consumption.

Here, the grounding for Pollock’s work is not the long epistemic history of modernity, but rather the relatively discrete social environment of America’s late 1940s transformation from Depression-era populism to postwar consumerism. The motivating agents of history are people—who function either as groups (the New Deal generation, the WPA, postwar intellectuals) or as individuals (Pollock and his teacher, Thomas Hart Benton). While artworks are privileged, their value is not unique. We sense, for example, that Doss finds almost as much of interest in the 1949 *Life* magazine layout on Pollock as she does in his paintings. This relatively nonhierarchical approach positions art within the mainstream of cultural objects and enables a wide
range of historical subject positions—middle-class magazine readers, for example, in addition to avant-garde critics—to emerge.

Clark’s handling of Pollock’s relationship to history is far less oblique than Krauss’s but still in many ways characteristically modernist. Unlike Krauss, Clark understands art to have an explicit and synthetic relationship to historical forces, but the relationship is long and grand. Consider his introductory remarks on the relationships between modernism (“a particular mode of representation,” or a “family of modes”) to modernity (“a social order”). He writes:

Modernism’s disdain for the world and wish for a truly gratuitous gesture in the face of it are more than just attitudes: they are the true (that is, agonized) form of its so-called purism. … And yet the thought of belonging and serviceability (of Economy as an ideal) haunts modernism, all the more so because belonging and serviceability are sensed to be modernity’s true opposites—the dimensions to experience it most ruthlessly outlaws or travesties. These antinomies of modern art, and their relation to a history it invents ... and misrecognizes, are what this book is mainly about.

Here, modernism as an artistic mode takes form only in synchronicity with modernity, with social structures ground into the pigment of form. Still, Clark envisions both modernism and modernity primarily as broad conditions whose reach extends beyond the discrete situation of any particular time and place. An understanding of Pollock’s cultural milieu circa 1948 is important, but somewhat less so than a longer view of modernity’s core operations—which are understood to play out epochally. The historical circumstances in Pollock’s art are, in other words, only relatively different from those in other of Clark’s “episodes” of modernism.

A key to Clark’s influence on both modernists and Americanists lies in his ability to balance, to a degree, contextualist and epistemic histories. This desire to see history both from on high and close in also emerges in Leja’s work. Sounding very much the Americanist, Leja writes that his aim in studying Pollock is to enable the artist’s “reinsertion into history,” and to demonstrate “the extensive interdependence between New York School art and the culture in which it flourished.” Hence his close readings of “popular philosophy, cultural criticism [and] Hollywood movies.” Sounding like a modernist, however, Leja insists, too, on a place for long epistemic structures—particularly for ideology, which he defines as “an array of basic propositions and attitudes about reality, self, and society embedded in representation and discourse and seemingly obviously true and natural.” Leja, then, reads Pollock’s paintings both as expressions of their time and place and as objects that might make visible some of the basic cognitive apparatuses of modern hierarchy. If one aspect of his method makes Leja appear to us more Americanist than modernist, it is his rejection of an agonistic, Adornian mode, in which art must attack the palliative, ideological functions of mass culture. On the contrary, Abstract Expressionism, he writes, is little different from film noir: “both repress some anxieties, but give visual form to others.”

**Humanism (and Its Rejection)**

To say that the Pollock literature shows modernists to be poststructuralist and Americanists humanist is not, of course, flatly or simply true. But consider the tendencies of each of our pairs. Krauss and Clark may disagree broadly in their readings of
Pollock, yet both believe that the work of art is shaped by pervasive epistemic structures. In Krauss’s handling, these structures belong chiefly to art itself, with Pollock’s “formlessness” constituting an assault on the structures of modernist, transcendental opticality. Although she takes an interest in Pollock’s psychological biography (and certainly sets him dramatically apart from other artists), agency in her view seems almost to belong as much to art itself as to its makers: in her formulation it is “the mark” in the drip paintings that “cuts itself away from any intentional matrix to achieve its own isolation.” Clark’s Pollock is similarly poised against powerful and abstract structures. Clark avows that his opinions of Pollock’s paintings “do not tally in any obvious way with other (equally banal) opinions I have about politics, realism, modernity, capitalism, and so forth.” Rather, the value of the paintings lies in an overall “resistance and refusal,” or “some form of intransigence or difficulty”—provided, that is, that such ideas “have any sustaining force still left them.” Such negation is formal and also social; what is to be resisted is not historically specific but ultimately structural and comprehensive. Here, Pollock’s painting does not express social conditions (such as Doss’s postwar alienation and consumer culture) but rather works in a “utopian, slightly lunatic” way as if to “overcome” history itself. Like the other great “limit cases” of modernism, these paintings are busy dreaming that “[h]uman nature is going to be remade” and that “[a]rtists have invented a new alphabet.”

For Leja and Doss, Pollock’s art is deeply tied to individual agents, particular historical configurations, and explicit representational purposes. In Doss’s account, for example, the sustained interpersonal relationship between Pollock and his former mentor Benton serves as the linchpin for a new explanation of Pollock’s turn to abstraction—one that figures the artist’s shift not as a radical turn against the conventions of art or the structures of modernity, but instead as an effort to negotiate the cultural issues of midcentury American culture. Although she does see the paintings in relationship to “corporate and political forces” that Pollock could not control, these forces only emerge to the historian’s eye when they are tested by the actions of individuals. For Doss, social conditions are always interwoven with individual experience: Pollock “painted to express social alienation and propose modes of personal transformation.” This rhetoric of personal expression exemplifies the humanist core of Americanist art history. For his part, Leja, again embodying aspects of both fields, endorses a view of the human subject as “simultaneously dominated by discourse and empowered to function as more than an ‘actor for the ideological script.’” Concerning subjectivity, Leja writes that his book aims “to eschew both extremes [social determination and autonomy] by portraying the artists as agents making decisions within systems of constraints, namely, discourses and ideologies whose reshaping, development, and extension are determined in part by those decisions.” Seeming at once both humanist and poststructuralist (or, perhaps better, not purely either), Leja keeps in view both the “expressive power” of Pollock’s paintings and also the “ideological components of their aesthetic stature.”

Concluding Observations

Our goal in this chapter has not been to advocate either an Americanist or a modernist approach, but rather to better understand the beliefs and circumstances shaping the differences between the two. What has emerged, we hope, is a recognition that each field
has developed methods that are uniquely responsive to its objects and interests. As such, we do not wish to end with any prescription that each field improve itself by being more like the other. Indeed, we are not convinced that the distinctions between the fields require a “solution” in some definitive form. We conclude instead with some very brief notes about the possibilities and problems endemic to each method, in hopes that further attention to these might encourage the development of new methodological terrains.

Modernist art history has proven compelling to many audiences in its formulation of methods for perceiving the systematic and diaphanous powers that underlie not only representation, but also history, politics, and everyday life. Art becomes meaningful as a way to disclose, analyze and, ultimately, negate the codes and rules that underwrite power. This approach, however, has sometimes generated notions of the human subject as so deeply socially constructed that individual expression is nearly impossible. The subject is fractured and atomized, and there is little space outside the total power of capital. Though often useful and compelling, such formulations can both underestimate individual agency and diminish difference. Such approaches can also be problematic in their downplay of specific pictorial subjects in favor of broader questions of form or representational mode.

Americanists, for their part, are deeply invested in the premise of the individual subject as a consequential figure in cultural discourse. This proposition is the source of what might be perceived as American art history’s greatest strength: its ability to give voice to a plurality of subject positions. Americanists also maintain the notion that the work of art can still persuasively function in narrative, expressive, lyrical, and even moralizing modes. While these notions of individual and artwork will strike some modernists as romantic or naive, we believe that they too open up artistic meaning, not least for the potential purpose of imagining a world very different from the one we inhabit.

Notes
1 The conference was organized by Richard Meyer. Meyer, 2004, p. 5.
2 Ellen Wiley Todd convened a panel at the 2007 meeting of the College Art Association called “Troubling That 1945 Border Again.”
3 Corn, 1988, p. 188n1; Davis, 2003, p. 572.
4 The Arts and Humanities Citation Index—although it is clearly incomplete—gives some indication of the poor engagement. Using sample groups of Americanist journals (American Art, Archives of American Art Journal, and Winterthur Portfolio) and modernist ones (Art Journal, October, and Oxford Art Journal), we found only eighteen citations across the Americanist/modernist divide since 1996 (compared with 3,006 citations of these journals overall). Index consulted online in November 2012.
5 Some may object that we contrast Americanist art history to October rather than to modernist art history as a whole. There are of course modernists working outside the methods we focus on here, but it is no exaggeration to say that the methods clustered around October have defined the leadership of that field over the last quarter-century. In using the term “modernists” we refer also to contemporary art historians who, for the most part, share training and publication venues with those working on modern art.
6 Americanists have their closest cognate, by contrast, in cultural history. We would venture to add that cultural studies is separated from cultural history by a divide in many ways analogous to the one we describe here.


See, for example, most of the scholarship on Robert Rauschenberg or even Hans Haacke. The modernist Hal Foster has recently noted his preference for scholarship that periodizes art to a paradigm rather than historicizing it to a social context: Foster, 2011, p. 13.

Americanist scholarship is largely consonant with Foucault’s telling of history in epistemic periods.

Corn, 1988, pp. 193, 197, 199, 203–204.

Corn, 1988, p. 199.


Corn, 1988, p. 200.

See especially Clark, 1984.

Corn, 1988, p. 201.


Corn, 1988, p. 204.

The fact that modernists are generally concerned with more recent history is relevant: the conditions described are more or less still with us, and want correcting.


Davis, 2003, pp. 556, 553.

Buchloh, 2011, p. 22 (parentheses original).


Leja’s account was first developed as a dissertation advised by Clark. Any of these scholars might debate our categorizations, which derive foremost from their scholarship but also from their conference participation, their publication venues, and their specializations within their university departments.


Clark, 1999, p. 7. The chapter (6) that we draw on most heavily is based on an earlier essay: Clark, 1990.


Clark, 1999, pp. 7–8.

This relatively epistemic notion of history is more pronounced in *Farewell to an Idea* than elsewhere in his writings. His previous book, *The Painting of Modern Life*, is decidedly more contextualist in its interweaving of form and social history.

Leja, 1993, pp. 324, 4, 6.
The Americanist/Modernist Divide

References


Response
Setting the Roundtable, or, Prospects for Dialogue between Americanists and Modernists
Jennifer L. Roberts

By tracing the split between Americanists and modernists as it maps onto the fracturing of liberal humanism in the later twentieth century, Joshua Shannon and Jason Weems have revealed the contours of a fundamental methodological antinomy—one that accounts persuasively for the “gap” between the fields. Their provocative analysis strikes with the force of an epiphany—it instantly clarifies a series of previously obscure and seemingly unrelated problems and opens the way to a realigned perspective on both fields. Their analysis has been necessarily historical and diagnostic, however. In this chapter, I will attempt to account for the current state—and project the future state—of the relationship between modernist and Americanist scholarship. I will outline some areas that are likely to remain resistant to any mutual engagement between Americanists and modernists, and others where I believe that Americanists and modernists have enough shared vocabulary and parallel expertise to be able to enter into direct discussion. I hasten to say that my intent in seeking areas of contact is not to bring about some total reconciliation between the fields—I agree with Shannon and Weems that this would only dilute the particular strengths of each—but rather the opposite: to bring their differences into greater relief in the interest of constructing a more deliberate and self-conscious transfield relationship, whatever its final shape.

Perhaps the most important question to be asked about Shannon and Weems’s chapter is simply this: “Why hasn’t anyone made this argument before?” It’s 2015, after all, and versions of the humanist–poststructuralist debate have been resonating through the art-historical discipline for two generations. Why haven’t Americanists framed their work more explicitly around these problems, and—more to the point—why haven’t Americanists and modernists directly confronted each other about this (or nearly any other) issue? It would seem logical that a methodological divide as stark as the one traced by Shannon and Weems would have led by now to a vigorous culture of debate between Americanists and modernists. But I would argue that because the
two fields are separated by persistent topical and institutional divisions as well as methodological divisions, it has not been possible to express methodological conflict directly. Topical enclaving has structurally excluded debate by closing off avenues of confrontation and critique.

In the mid-twentieth century, with the American art field developing an identity supported by a general rubric of nationalism and essentialism, there was a relatively clear logic behind the topical division of the fields. Americanists would tackle the long and largely unknown history of art produced in the United States and its colonial antecedents; modernists would stick to the traditional European basis of the discipline. This logic had an important incubation effect for American art studies, giving it room to develop on its own terms. But the logic of territorial division has become not only unnecessary (given the robustness of the American art field today) but also untenable, with the collapse of the “American Mind” School, the rise of postcolonialism, and the increasing importance, with each passing year, of the post-1945 period in American art to which both fields now lay claim. Still, however unsustainable their ultimate rationale, national/geographical divisions remain an active part of the inheritance of contemporary scholarship, and continue to play a key role in simultaneously obscuring and amplifying methodological divisions between the fields. The original territorial division still governs the lamentable misalignment of the journals and presses publishing work in each field, as well as the institutional categories that ensure that “Americanists” and “modernists” hold separate teaching posts and attend separate conferences. We are in the grip of a self-regenerating territoriality that draws upon the deep methodological divisions that Shannon and Weems have uncovered, even as it absorbs and obscures them.

The persistence of the territorial divisions between the fields helps explain the revelatory power of Shannon and Weems’s thesis, and also points to the difficulty of their task in constructing it. For all the forums and roundtables and state-of-the-field debates that have populated academic journals in the two fields over the years, the fields have not substantively engaged with each other in methodological conversation in print. We are not sitting at the same roundtables. And so anyone attempting to diagnose the split between the fields must attempt to limn the contours of an underground debate, one carried on obliquely, anecdotally, even unintentionally, and one that has been characterized more by mutual suspicion and misunderstanding than by any direct confrontation.

To be sure, the relationship between the two fields is changing very rapidly. Many younger Americanists will not recognize themselves in the humanist-social historian schema that Shannon and Weems place at the center of American art studies. There is a breed of hybrid Americanist-modernist scholars emerging who have been cross-trained in both traditions; scholars who read both October and American Art, who are comfortable with both American studies and French poststructuralism, and whose work speaks to both contingents. Many of these “hybrids” have similar intellectual formations. Shannon and Weems have alluded to the importance of T.J. Clark as a figure whose method bridges modernist and Americanist studies; it should come as no surprise, then, that so much important cross-field scholarship has been produced by scholars who have worked directly or indirectly with him: prominent examples include Michael Leja, Jonathan Weinberg, Richard Meyer, Julia Bryan-Wilson, and Joshua Shannon. The two fields have also begun to coalesce around students in large PhD programs that have had mixed dissertation committees including both Americanists and modernists.
The statistics that Shannon and Weems cite about the meager cross-citation between Americanist and modernist journals over the years, deflating as they are, thankfully overdraw the severity of the broader publishing situation now. Americanists as well as modernists are increasingly publishing in journals like *The Art Bulletin*, *The Oxford Art Journal*, *Modernism and Modernity*, and *Art History*, which function as meeting grounds for Americanists and modernists outside of the traditional centers of each field. But the present softening of barriers between Americanists and modernists does not disqualify Shannon and Weems’s argument—in fact it is closer to the truth to say that it enables it. One could even say that it is only possible to make a diagnosis like theirs because the barrier between the fields has begun to dissolve. Chipping away at the wall has provided footholds for its analysis. And as there is a great deal more chipping to be done, the articulation of methodological divides is an essential tool for the continuation of the project.

**Mass/Popular Culture**

The 2006 Frost Prize for the best article published in *American Art* went to Michael Clapper’s scholarly treatment of the paintings of Thomas Kinkade.¹ It is impossible to imagine Clapper’s article even being considered for publication, much less given an award, in *October*. However complex and historically revealing Kinkade’s work might be (Kinkade’s painting is so ruthlessly efficient at exploiting art market mechanisms and conservative taste that it might easily be classified as institutional critique in the Komar and Melamid vein were it not so earnest—and profitable), the Frankfurt School methodologies that anchor much of *October*’s outlook, committed to a model of worthwhile art as negation, set such painting outside of the realm of serious consideration.

Indeed, one area where the barriers between the fields seem likely to remain standing, at least in the short term, is in the analysis of work like Kinkade’s: popular art, “bad” art, vernacular art, commercial art. As Shannon and Weems have suggested, Americanist art history, drawing as it often does upon humanist and democratic models of social art history, is naturally amenable to the serious examination of advertising, popular illustration, and the work of minor or outsider artists. Indeed, taken more broadly, one could say that the embrace of “minor art” was historically necessary for the field of American art history to emerge in the first place, since from the traditional Eurocentric perspective that governed art history well into the 1980s, virtually all American art produced prior to World War II was “minor” by definition.² Simply to identify oneself as an Americanist required one to theorize or at least practice a refutation of traditional canonicity.

While the Americanist approach to popular art has often taken on the character of a strident liberal democratic populism, it is not fully reducible to such humanist proclivities. It has tapped into other critical veins as well, some of which can be categorized as broadly poststructuralist but none of which have gained much purchase in modernist art history. Here it is important to note the impact of American art history’s close entwinement with American studies over the past few decades and its consequent contact, especially in the 1980s, with methodological developments within the study of English and American literature (the literary origins of theory in European modernist studies, by contrast, lie more directly in French poststructuralism, Frankfurt School
criticism, and Russian formalism).\(^3\) Consider the sophisticated post-poststructuralist-Marxist thinking about mass and commercial culture in the work of Fredric Jameson. Jameson has been central to some influential Americanists: Bryan Wolf, whose *Romantic Re-Vision* announced the entry of poststructuralism into nineteenth-century American art scholarship, routinely assigned *The Political Unconscious* in his seminars at Yale. Michael Leja evokes Jameson explicitly in his work on the conjunction of abstract expressionism and *film noir*, and emerging scholars like Robert Slifkin have been returning to Jameson to help think through the compromises and contradictions of nineteenth-century American landscapes.\(^4\) Jameson explicitly contested the Frankfurt School approach that guides so much modernist art history, arguing that mass/commercial culture cannot be reduced to a complicit and debased product of an all-powerful culture industry, but that it too must bear a utopian force. It does so, for Jameson, even as it attempts to repress anxiety about intolerable social conditions: popular works “cannot manage anxieties about the social order unless they have first revived them and given them some rudimentary expression.” Thus they work by “deflecting … the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity” and giving them a voice.\(^5\) Jameson also provided a way to link poststructuralism’s feel for indeterminacy and aporia with the existing Americanist penchant for local, specific histories. For Jameson, the “determinate contradictions” that structure all works link them to several historical horizons simultaneously: that of the grand sweep of capitalism, to be sure, but also to specific problems in specific historical moments.\(^6\)

Another enabling factor in the development of Americanist approaches to “minor” art was the influence of New Historicism, a model of literary criticism ascendant in the 1980s and 1990s that rejected the autonomy of literary language, insisting upon the embeddedness of literary texts within the materials and institutions of cultural production more broadly, and focusing unprecedented attention on the analytical potential of seemingly insignificant objects and ephemera. This is not a traditionally humanist approach—as Louis Montrose explains, New Historicism sees cultural forms as relating to subjectivity in a conflicted way: they provide tools for the construction of individual agency, but they simultaneously distribute the subject within a network of external codes and power relations.\(^7\) For the New Historicist, there are no selves, just self-fashionings.

As Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher put it, New Historicism is a method based in the “almost surrealist wonder at the revelation of an unanticipated aesthetic dimension in objects without pretensions to the aesthetic.”\(^8\) I would add that it is a method characterized not only by “wonder” but also by a certain style of eccentric bravado, demonstrated through the heroic extraction of entire cultural worlds from humble artifacts and anecdotal events. The more unlikely the subject matter (the cheese, say, in Carlo Ginzburg’s *Cheese and the Worms*), the more impressive the analysis.\(^9\) This basic structure of revelatory critical engagement stands behind much of the most provocative Americanist art history of recent decades—it seems inseparable, for example, from the lapidary worlds that Alexander Nemerov has unfolded from unsung (or under-sung) artists like Raphaëlle Peale, Val Lewton, and George Ault, or David Lubin’s early penchant for (as he puts it in his chapter in this volume) “twisty art history,” exhibited perhaps most fully in his remarkable analysis of the unruly intertextuality of the visual culture of the Kennedy assassination.

This model of critical acumen, assuming as it does that the job of the critic is to transform the lowly, unknowing, minor object into a counterintuitively dazzling optic
on a world, is not shared by most modernists. Indeed, one of the reasons that the methodological mismatch between Americanists and modernists around the mass-visual culture divide is as entrenched as it is, is that it involves deeply felt convictions about the very purpose of art history and the role of the art historian, particularly the proper relationship between the art historian and the art being studied. For many Americanists, it is simply assumed that there is inherently a wide gap—historical, conceptual, and often ideological—between the critic and the object. The object and/or its maker need not (and, better, must not) fully “know” what the historian discovers about it. Shannon and Weems encapsulate this in a nutshell when they say about Nemerov’s work that “the analysis he offers is not intended by the artist but rather built by the historian.” Modernist art history often takes the opposite approach, conceiving the primary role of the art historian as one of the explication, endorsement, and critical amplification of work that already consciously articulates, at some level, an intricate, complex, oppositional agenda.

Americanists are more comfortable than modernists at separating their own politics from those of the artists they study. Indeed, in many cases, Americanists in recent years have been obligated to distance themselves politically from the artists they study (so as to correct for the triumphalism and essentialism of previous Americanist scholarship). This leaves Americanists open to the charge of occulting their own politics, or of refusing political engagement altogether. But because Americanists are willing to think seriously about conservative art, they are sometimes able to exercise real-world critical agency in ways that modernists cannot. *The West as America* is probably the best and most notorious example: an exhibition on artists of the American West that attended to the complexity of the art even as it was thoroughly predicated on the exposure of the offensive political views underlying nearly every work under discussion. The failures and ambivalences of the work in question did not disqualify it from serious scholarly analysis—in fact they made it worthy of analysis in the first place. And because this analysis was visited upon figurative art that was so tightly bound to nationalist pieties of Manifest Destiny, the battle over that analysis spilled out into the Senate Appropriations Committee and the national press.10

**Formalism**

Although the two fields seem so stubbornly entrenched on opposite sides of the question of fine art/mass art that not even a conversation between them is possible in the near term, there are other opportunities for building a space for debate. One of these is formalism, which both fields share as an essential approach. Here I part company with Shannon and Weems, who argue that Americanists are essentially not formalists: “While Americanist art history situates representations within frames of genre, institution, and politics, it is generally not built on form.” I would argue that this image of Americanist scholarship downplays the significant investment in the primacy of form among much of the central scholarship of the field. There are indeed robust strains of formalism anchoring Americanist art history—strains that, although not identical to modernist approaches, share enough fundamental qualities with modernist formalism that they can provide a common platform for debate about specific disagreements in interpretation.
Let me begin mapping out these contact points by reviewing four central attributes of modernist formalism, drawing on the work of Yve-Alain Bois, whose writing on formalism has been among the most perspicacious in the modern field. First: modernist formalism understands form to be generative of meaning. The material configuration of the work is understood to produce meaning rather than passively and transparently conveying it. Second, and related to the first: it embraces a materialist model of form. As Bois vividly describes it, formalism should stand firmly against idealist notions in which “form is an a priori UFO that lands on raw matter, rescues it from its dark inertness, and transports it to the sunny realm of ideas.” Form always remains tied to the “dark inertness” of the matter of which it is made. Any ideas generated by form will depend on the particular qualities of the matter that constitutes it—it matters whether a painter uses a brush or a stick, thick or thinned paint, primed or unprimed canvas, heavy or delicate line. Third, following from these: modernists insist upon the disruptive and estranging capacity of formal innovation. Here they draw heavily on the legacy of Russian Formalism, particularly the work of Viktor Shklovsky, whose 1917 essay “Art as Device” introduced the concept of ostranenie or “making strange,” and the notion that “the main function of art is to defamiliarize our perception, which has become automatized.”12 Finally, form is seen as structural-historical, with its own internal lineage that develops to some extent independently of political and social context. Radical formal innovation is made possible because it occurs against a history of formal innovation, a long horizon of formal possibility.

On this last point, I agree with Shannon and Weems that Americanists differ from modernists. For Americanists, formal problems raised by the individual work tend to be apprehended as radiating immediately into the contextual explanatory field, hitched to synchronic social forces that reciprocally inform them. We might say that Americanists have a point-to-field model of the relationship between form and context. They are more likely to see artists responding directly to social conditions than to previous artists. Modernists are closer to a point-to-point-to-point-to-field model, constructing genealogies of formal innovation—Manet to Cézanne to Picasso, etc. By placing form in a sequence (whether or not that sequence is understood as progressive or teleological) modernists are much more likely to perceive radical formal innovation as a propulsive agent in itself, driving epochal historical change.

In terms of the other qualities of modernist formalism I have mentioned, however, the fields are closer together than might be immediately apparent. It is not difficult to find influential examples of Americanist formalism that share a modernist belief in form as generative, rather than merely illustrative, of contextual phenomena. Many Americanists have written with exemplary sensitivity to the way particular forms of ethnic or political expression have not been “expressed” but have been made possible by particular visual formats and genres—here I’m thinking of Wendy Bellion’s *Citizen Spectator*, which demonstrates the immense political agency of trompe-l’œil in the early republic, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw’s *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*, which tracks the long history of the silhouette as a cathected format for racial understanding in the United States, or Michael Gaudio’s *Engraving the Savage*, which closely interrogates the medium of engraving—as form and process—as it produced the European imaginary of Native Americans from the early modern period through to the nineteenth century.13

Americanists are also comfortable with the notion of form as disruptive of normative structures of understanding. In her book on George Inness, for example, Rachael
DeLue argues that the painter’s landscapes “offered up impossible, unaccountable, incomprehensible, [and] unseeable visions of the world.” And these radical landscapes, for DeLue, had a socially radical purpose: “By presenting viewers with features they would not have been able to understand or categorize according to landscape conventions of the time, Inness may well have been hoping that they would have to see things in a different, and radically new, light.” Or consider the opening pages of Michael Leja’s essay “Eakins and Icons,” in which he closely parses the surface of the Schuylkill in *The Champion Single Sculls*:

Most striking is the fact that each rower has left a trail of perfectly intact rings marking the points where the oars were inserted into the water. Time has not dissipated them: the earliest remain as integral and discrete as the most recent. Schmitt has left thirteen identical rings neatly stacked like gray lily pads on the canvas; Eakins is in the midst of producing his seventh. While the rowers have continued moving through time and space, the river surface is shown arresting time. As if filled with gelatin, the river stills and preserves the marks of the oars’ contact. These undissipated rings are anachronisms: they compress past events into the painting’s expanded present. Two different temporalities are juxtaposed in the schematic marks representing the indexical traces of the oars’ contact with the water. The wakes of the dragged oars signify continuity and duration, while the series of rings presents intervals within a structure of repetition.

Leja builds his article on a series of descriptions like this that reveal his acute attention to formal conflicts and contradictions. These formal observations lead him to posit a “crisis of reference” (a phrase used also by Bois) in the later nineteenth century. For Leja, the formal-temporal conflict on the surface of the Schuylkill disrupts the unified temporal structures of each of the genres in which it intervenes simultaneously: history painting and photography. Eakins riddles his paintings with “seams” that open “a decisive rift between knowledge and appearances.” If, as Weems and Shannon argue, for modernists “art [is] interesting insofar as it demonstrated problems, failures, or inadequacies of representation,” Leja’s work fits the bill.

Leja’s work, already identified as a bridge between modernist and Americanist art history by Shannon and Weems, exemplifies a vital strain of formalist dexterity, flowing through the center of American art history, with connections in the pedagogy of T.J. Clark. Another major taproot of formalist method in American art scholarship is the work of Jules Prown, whose fundamental legacy to the field is the rigorous and disciplined formal approach that he articulated. The so-called “Prown Method,” laid out most clearly in his early 1980s articles “Style as Evidence” and “Mind in Matter” and enacted in assignment format by every student in every course he taught over his forty years at Yale, dictates that a hairsplitting attention to form must be the art historian’s first step in approaching a work of art or material culture, and that any contextual or conceptual investigations must follow this primary formal encounter. Prown’s method is not uncontroversial, but it has stamped the field indelibly. Prown’s students (or his students’ students) are now teaching American art in many of the largest graduate programs in the field: Yale, Stanford, Harvard, Berkeley, Penn, Minnesota, Illinois, and Michigan, to name just a few. Prown has also trained, either directly or at a generational remove, dozens of Americanist curators. The members of this large and influential population in the field are by no means homogeneous, but they all learned
art history in such a way that formal questions programmatically, even formulaically, precede political or institutional ones.

Prown’s method insists above all on the practice of interpretive deferral—it lays out a four-stage process beginning with description, moving to deduction, then to speculation, and only in the last instance to “investigation of external evidence” or research. Ideas are meant to be held at bay as long as possible: one must spend hours patienty attending to all of the material qualities of the work before beginning to speculate on their purpose or meaning.

The method bears a complicated relationship to the poststructuralist formalism under discussion. On the one hand, it flatly contradicts poststructuralism, since it implicitly assumes the ability of the historian to strip away cultural bias and approach a work of art with an innocent eye (one that is not always already structured by the discourses of meaning that are supposedly being deferred): the method “affords a procedure for overcoming the distortions of our particular cultural stance.” Built into the method is an attempt to approach the object without preconceptions or cultural bias, a desire to forestall the process of signification and cultural recognition. The method holds out the promise of a primary or original relation to the object, uncontaminated by tradition, precedent, or language. Moreover, it assumes that in practicing the method the historian gains access to a transhistorical form of embodiment, and can open a conduit to the object’s makers and users in the past. This derives largely from the sensory and affective analysis that the historian exercises in the early stages of the process:

This affective mode of apprehension through the senses that allows us to put ourselves, figuratively speaking, inside the skins of individuals who commissioned, made, used, or enjoyed these objects, to see with their eyes and touch with their hands, to identify with them empathetically, is clearly a different way of engaging the past than abstractly through the written word. Instead of our minds making intellectual contact with minds of the past, our senses make affective contact with senses of the past.

In its overt theoretical articulation, then, Prown’s method seems thoroughly incompatible with modernist formalism as Shannon and Weems have described it. But, that said, in many respects the method actually inscribes a set of approaches to form that parallel modernist attitudes. Many of these parallels derive from the fact that the method is designed as an approach to the broad class of objects called “material culture,” rather than a fine art method per se. Thus it treats paintings and other two-dimensional visual objects as material rather than simply “visual.” In approaching an oil painting, for example, the scholar following Prown’s method must first analyze it as a three-dimensional material object, with six sides (not just one), fabricated in a specific configuration of textiles, woods, minerals, oils, and other substances. The method thus disallows an attitude toward painting that would imagine it as a disembodied image or as an uncomplicated exercise in “opticality.” In this sense, Prown implicitly stands with Bois, Krauss, and others in their adamant rejection of Greenberg’s “optical idealism.” Moreover, although there is nothing in Prown’s method to prevent outright a scholar’s investigations from eventually issuing in something that looks like iconography, its fundamental thrust is anti-illusttative and anti-representational. The analysis of representational
content (if it exists in the object) is only one, carefully delimited, stage of the descriptive process, sandwiched between a close description of materials and fabrication and a close analysis of formal/compositional configuration. In this sense, the method structurally deemphasizes iconography. Along the way (as I can attest by having found Prown’s method surprisingly useful in my own work on Robert Smithson) it prepares the student to describe and analyze, and what is more to respect, abstraction.24

In theory, the method holds to a faith in the object’s transparency to general cultural meaning and average “patterns of mind”: “the configurations or properties of an artifact correspond to patterns in the mind of the individual producer or producers and of the society of which he or they were a part.” “Artifacts transmit signals which elucidate mental patterns or structures.”25 But if in theory the method treats form as transparent and symptomatic, I would argue that in practice it sends (inadvertently) the opposite message. The painfully slow and careful process of formal and material description, the dehabituation dictated by the premise of interpretive deferral, and the generally quizzical position toward the object that the method outlines, force the scholar to see form first and to approach it as detached from knowledge or habitual understanding. In other words, in going through the motions of the method, the scholar must perform the primacy, opacity, and resistance of form. The process is meant to enable the recognition of patterns, coherent structures, and hidden relationships in the object, but it also necessarily forces attention to illegible passages and opaque details, inexplicable, muddled, or unresolved incidents in the work that might otherwise be ignored or dismissed. It is often these strange and estranging qualities, because they generate the most questioning and speculation, that find themselves at the center of the resulting analysis. Thus, at the core (or one core) of Americanist formalism is an opening into the modernist faith in defamiliarization. This is one reason that the most poststructurally inclined Americanist art history also tends to avail itself of Prownian methodology: as Bryan Wolf wrote in the introduction to Romantic Re-Vision (a book whose first chapter is titled “The Collapse of Intelligibility”), American paintings “continually baffle and frustrate our everyday expectations, and require that we, like their makers, discard our habitual relation to the world in order to catch them in all their original dissonance and beauty.”26

Material Culture

As my discussion of Prown’s method has already indicated, one of the areas in which formalism has been most commonly deployed in American art is in the field of material culture. Notwithstanding the fact that much of what falls under the rubric of material culture lies outside of the avant-garde or neo-avant-garde radius of much of modernist art history’s purview, the evolving theoretical profile of material culture studies does offer a potentially rich ground for a cross-fertilization of modernist and Americanist concerns. The longstanding Americanist dexterity with material culture stems largely from the centrality of the Winterthur and Bard programs in decorative art and material culture and the impact of Prown’s method.27 This means that Americanists have a head start in their ability to engage with the “material turn” that is currently transforming the study of the humanities and social sciences. Of course
the interdisciplinary body of thought now generally denominated as “thing theory” or “new materialism” has not been universally embraced by Americanists. American material culture studies remains internally divided (more than other areas of the subfield) between connoisseurial, archival, empiricist, and process-based approaches and more theoretical or philosophical ones. But it seems to me that this division will become harder and harder to sustain as thing theory itself becomes more and more concerned with articulating the importance of tacit rather than explicit knowledge and the resistance and opacity of matter—in short the special capacity of things to resist flighty conceptual abstraction.28

In terms of constructing an interface with modernist art history as Shannon and Weems have defined it, material culture is a good place to start, because modernists (particularly those that work on the post-1945 period) cannot avoid confronting “things” variously defined. Post-1945 American art is much less a history of images than it is a history of objects—from the “Specific Objects” of minimalism to the gravel heaps and “part objects” of 1970s feminism and land art, to the appropriated objects of 1980s commodity sculpture, to the objects of the culture wars, including countermonuments, crucifixes, and quilts. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, artists attempting to negate or resist the commodity status of art have tended to break the frame of traditional painting and sculpture, creating instead unclassifiable, unexchangeable, and otherwise resistant objects, spaces, or performances.

Thing theory also traffics increasingly in models of agency and human–nonhuman interaction that are inherently antihumanist and thus open up possibilities of productive integration with modernists. The work of Bruno Latour, Alfred Gell, Graham Harman, Jane Bennett, and many others is reformulating traditional concepts of agency and subjectivity by putting pressure on the traditionally inviolate boundaries between persons and things (boundaries that have been historically sacred both to liberalism and to Marxism).29 Humans do not stand over and above “things” in a condition of absolute sovereignty and agency; but instead form “collectives” of social action with nonhuman actors. In American art, this perspective is beginning to take hold in various parts of the field, particularly in the new ecological criticism, which both continues and unsettles the longstanding Americanist interest in landscape by approaching it from an explicitly post-humanist perspective, one that grants natural entities and forces—animals, clouds, trees—agency and even rights.30 Another prominent strain of new materialist thought derives from gift theory, which examines the exchange of gifts as an alternative economic practice that counters the anonymity and alienation of commodity exchange. Gift theory has already been taken up by modernists for its critical potential.31

The further exploration of this critical territory by scholars in both fields will allow other methodological proclivities to share space and thus be more productively and openly juxtaposed. It might be a territory in which theoretical models more common to modernism could be confronted by Americanists (examples here would be various object theories native to Surrealism, such as Bataille’s informe, and related psychoanalytical approaches of British “object-relations” theorists like Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott). Alternatively, it would be a space for Americanists to expose modern and contemporary art to more developed thinking about localized and historicized making and materiality.
Pragmatism

Another area with significant potential for opening a conversation between Americanists and modernists is the study of American Pragmatism and its role in the developments of modern and contemporary art. The work of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey had an immense impact on American art—not only in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, but also the postwar period. And yet there is little mention of these figures in the modernist scholarship on post-1945 American art (much less European art), because this scholarship is generally constructed around European lines of inheritance by scholars who have not been trained in American history and art history prior to 1945. One problem has been that Pragmatism has been reduced to a token caricature of the too-standard tale of frontier exceptionalism: thus even an American artist like Robert Morris can link it to “tough-guy, American, low-tech know-how,” and an “American obsession with the new and the now as progress over a past that was to be forgotten.”

However brilliant Robert Morris has been as a critic of sculpture, this is, I think, a grotesque distortion of Pragmatism. Pragmatism developed a theory of relational or differential meaning, a sophisticated understanding of contingency, a concern for efficacy over ideality, and a refusal of models of inherent meaning or truth. It thus begs for a closer dialogue not only with minimalism, performance art, and activist art, but also with the French poststructuralist versions of relationality and phenomenology that have most deeply influenced the interpretation of these artistic modes within modernist art history. As early as the 1960s, Barbara Rose proposed a Pragmatist genealogy for postwar American art, but her interpretation did not have much traction among other rising scholars of the period.

This was probably because her claims were attached to an American essentialism and exceptionalism that aligned with current writing in American studies but made Europeanists skeptical. Now that we have emerged from the spell of the “American Mind” School, Pragmatism is ripe for reintroduction. Recent work by Suzanne Hudson, who reads Robert Ryman’s work through the lens of Pragmatism, David Raskin, who does the same for Donald Judd, and Jennifer Marshall, who plumbs the relationship between John Dewey and MoMA in the 1930s, has been exemplary in opening up the new possibilities for scholarship on Pragmatism in twentieth-century art.

Another more general advantage of a closer look at Pragmatism is that, in providing a genealogy for postwar art that runs partially through American philosophy of the interwar period, it would help illuminate the significance of that period in the broader development of twentieth-century American and European art. One of the most persistent historical models structuring modernist scholarship of the twentieth century is the notion of a split between two major periods of radical avant-garde activity, the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde. The basic outline of this model is as follows: after the original European avant-gardes of the early twentieth century came an interwar gap in which their advances were lost, forgotten, or retracted. Then, in the 1960s, a group of artists (many of them Americans) rediscovered, in a fragmentary way, these radical predecessors, and in deploying them in a manner that was conscious of their vastly reduced efficacy in a late capitalist world, established themselves not so much as a continuation of the avant-garde but rather a neo-avant-garde.
What I want to emphasize about this model is that it relies upon the idea of an absolute interregnum between the historical avant-gardes in Europe and the most radical postwar developments in the United States. I wonder whether this construction will be sustainable when the sophistications of the interwar United States are better understood by modernists, and the period is not seen simply as a wasteland of figurative populism. Is it not possible that the dark ages between the two avant-gardes are in fact an artifact of the structural invisibility of this period that derives from the disciplinary territorialization that we have been discussing? A stirring of new scholarship tracing the connections between the 1930s and the 1960s in American art is beginning to test these waters: here I’d particularly mention Robert Slifkin’s work on Philip Guston and Blake Stimson’s work on Warhol. It is entirely possible that the model of the neo-avant-garde will hold, but now is the time to give it a serious critical test. Now is the time, in this respect and many others, to examine the ways in which the segregation between Americanists and modernists has helped determine the very structure of each subfield, and to test the effects that more lively confrontation between the subfields will have on the most cherished assumptions of each.

Notes

1 Clapper, 2006.
3 A roster of prominent Americanists with degrees in American studies rather than (or in addition to) art history would include (among others) Angela Miller, Margaretta Lovell, Erika Doss, David Lubin, and Bryan J. Wolf. Those who have directed American studies programs include (among others) Alan Wallach and Sarah Burns.
4 Leja takes Jameson’s work even further, arguing that in some cases, such as that of the relationship between film noir and Abstract Expressionism, there is no fundamental ideological difference between modernism and mass culture at all. “Both repress some anxieties, but give visual form to others; both produce compensatory structures; neither has much optimistic to offer in the line of imaginary resolutions or illusions of social harmony” (Leja, 1993, p. 17). Slifkin, 2013a.
5 Jameson, 2000, p. 142.
9 See Ginzburg, 1980.
12 Bois et al., 2004, vol. 1, p. 35.
13 Bellion, 2011; Shaw, 2004; Gaudio, 2008.
15 Leja, 2001, p. 481.
16 Bois places “a crisis of reference” at the center of avant-garde semiotic experiments. Bois et al., 2004, vol. 1, p. 34.
Even among Prown’s students (and students of students), there is broad debate about the method’s viability, its ethics, and its biases. Many Americanists have reservations about the psychosexual interpretations that the method often encourages. There have been several critiques of the universalizing tendencies of the method. See especially Dillon and Reed, 1998. And there are also objections to its fundamentally materialist premise of formal primacy, which can distort understanding of anti-materialist cultures such as that of the Puritans; see LaFountain, 2013.

Prown lays out the sequence in Prown, 1982.

Bois objects to “the apotheosis of the concept of image—an apotheosis whose current symptom is the rise of what is called Visual Studies.” Bois, 1996, pp. 10–11.

For an excellent recent analysis of Prown’s complex role in the development of material culture studies see Yonan, 2011.

See Bill Brown’s discussion of the difference between “Things” and “Objects” in Brown, 2001. For the notion of making as the exercise of “tacit” (therefore extralinguistic) knowledge, see Smith, 2012.

The key texts by each author include: Gell, 1998; Harman, 2002; Latour, 2005; Bennett, 2010.

See Braddock and Irmscher, 2009.


Morris, 2000, pp. 480, 478.

See Rose, 1969, pp. 44–49.


For an early and influential articulation of the theory of the neo-avant-garde, see Buchloh, 1986.


References


A Time and a Place
Rethinking Race in American Art History
Tanya Sheehan

Where do we look for race? Historians of American art invested in the study of racial identity and visual representation returned repeatedly to this question in the second half of the twentieth century. Their responses were largely consistent; if race can be seen at all, it is in images that depict non-white bodies and/or that were created by non-white artists. Although this idea informed studies of Native American and Jewish depictions, questions about race and its location in American art focused heavily on the specific case of blackness. Images of black subjects became the focus of numerous US exhibitions, beginning with The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting at the Bowdoin College Art Museum in 1964 and culminating with the Corcoran Gallery of Art’s large-scale survey in 1990, Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940. Accompanied by published catalogues, these displays worked together with a larger body of scholarship to reveal the racial content of works by Copley, Homer, Eakins, and other American “masters” by highlighting the black bodies in their pictures. The same period also saw the establishment of museums and galleries devoted to African American art and culture, such as the Studio Museum in Harlem, while historically white institutions across the United States started to recognize African American art as a legitimate object of study. These developments and the scholarship to which they gave rise gestured toward an expansion of the American artistic canon to include figures such as Henry Ossawa Tanner, James Van Der Zee, and Jacob Lawrence as well as the distinctively “black” subjects they produced.

By the end of the last century, Americanists were acknowledging the intellectual and political value of illuminating once invisible bodies and empowering the long-silent voices of racial “others.” Many felt that there was much to celebrate about art history’s new methods of locating race. And indeed there was. At the same time, an outspoken group of scholars was noting the significant limitations and exclusions associated with those methods. In 1990, for example, art critic and curator Maurice
Berger posed a provocative question in *Art in America* through the title of his much-reprinted essay, “Are Art Museums Racist?” Despite efforts to include people of color in major museums, Berger argued, they remained segregated within “black museums” or in “token exhibitions.” In making this observation, he urged the US art world to ponder the implications of positioning black bodies, and with them a discussion of race, on the margins of institutionalized histories. Kymberly Pinder picked up this line of argument at the end of the twentieth century, shifting its focus from the American museum to the art-history textbook. Pinder objected to the ways in which images of and by African Americans have been set apart from the discipline’s “primary” subjects and asked to adhere to strict, often stereotypical definitions of “minority” representation. A black body, she contended, can only ever enter the story of American art as naive, unsophisticated, or indigent—and always as an essentially raced subject.

This chapter picks up where Berger and Pinder left off—that is, with a challenge to how we locate discussions of race in histories of American art today. It acknowledges the value of continuing to study black representation and African American art-making today, while questioning the institutional structures and values into which art historians insert them. As Jacqueline Francis asked when reflecting on writing African American art history in 2003: “Are we privileging, fetishizing, and even trying to concretize our margins? Will we always look for ‘race’ in the same place?”1 Critical scholarship on American art published in the last decade necessitates extending these questions to address not only where but also when we look for representations of and ideas about race. Are art historians to assume that racial discourse can potentially be found anywhere in American visual culture and that we should always seek it out? Or are we to entertain the possibility of its absence? Or perhaps something in between? What is motivating art historians’ methodological choices in matters of race? And what are the intellectual and political implications of those choices? Such questions are emerging from current efforts to think differently about blackness and whiteness in art and its histories. In surveying those efforts, the present chapter situates American art history in dialogue with contemporary challenges to multiculturalism and the emergence of “post-racial” discourse.

**Race-ing Black Artists**

Throughout the 1990s, writing on nineteenth-century African American artists consistently assumed that race was always at the center of their work, and so should be similarly placed in scholars’ interpretations of it. Consider Juanita Marie Holland’s approach to the early harbor and seascape paintings of Edward Mitchell Bannister, one of the first efforts to unearth the many accomplishments of this Rhode Island artist. While Holland observed that the paintings were likely inspired by the work of Fitz Henry Lane and John Frederick Kensett, two (white) leaders of the American Luminist movement in the mid-nineteenth century, she put aside this connection to discuss the “personal and political relevance” of the scenes for Bannister. The image of a ship leaving a harbor, Holland explained, was “emotionally resonant on so many levels to African-Americans [sic],” suggesting the transatlantic slave trade and the possibility of escape to freedom; Bannister’s paintings must therefore be understood as “more than compositional studies of ships, sky, and sea.”2 Two decades after the publication of Holland’s essay, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw took a similar approach to
Bannister’s painted landscapes of southern New England, claiming that they “evoke the history of Rhode Island chattel slavery” despite their apparent resemblance to the work of the Barbizon School in terms of subject matter and style. Referring to Bannister’s autobiography and the iconography of African American religious tradition, Shaw found personal meditations on racial oppression across these canvases. This allowed her to read the “absence of black bodies” in Bannister’s work “as a survival mode by which he submerged his blackness beneath a generic landscape aesthetic” that addressed white viewers. The few black figures he painted, often in the act of navigating pastoral landscapes, then served for Shaw as metaphors for “attempts to pass over racial barriers,” including those in the artist’s life.

Given its relative lack of figuration, landscape painting presented a special challenge to scholars who were trained to look for race in African American art and specifically within the body. David Lubin reflected on this challenge explicitly in his writing on Cincinnati artist Robert S. Duncanson, whose paintings appear to adopt the style and subject matter of the Hudson River School. He explained that he wanted to avoid reading Duncanson’s landscapes as “black” or to suggest that “in some essentially immanent and concretely discernible manner [they] are distinct from the landscapes painted by whites.” What Lubin intended to say was that “when an artist socially construed as being black paints in the style developed by whites, it no longer means the same thing.” Working from this assumption, he read Duncanson’s landscapes not only in relation to the artist’s biography and American race relations of the period, but also as a self-conscious critique of white society. Here again the art historian looks for, and claims to find, in landscape art a message about race and resistance.

Responding to what she called the “race-centered approach” practiced by Lubin and others in the late twentieth century, Margaret Rose Vendryes warned that it has “impeded rather than expanded our ways of seeing” paintings by Bannister, Duncanson, the portraitist Joshua Johnston, and other early African American artists. Vendryes observed that the general lack of “black” iconography and style in their artwork led scholars in the 1960s to express a “critical impatience” with these figures; this resulted in a minimization of their importance in American art history and a pre-occupation with pictures with obvious references to race like Duncanson’s *Uncle Tom* and *Little Eva* (1853), however uncharacteristic they may be of the artist’s oeuvre. Recently, moreover, we have seen a commitment to reading “either explicit or veiled racial content” in nineteenth-century African American painting—seemingly everywhere and always. Such commitment, in Vendryes’s view, operates directly against the “few documented traces of Duncanson’s life” and “the more abundant evidence of his art,” which together “suggest that race was as superficial to his story as it has been imperative to his art-historical survival.” Not only did nineteenth-century criticism generally assume that race was not the painter’s primary concern, but Duncanson himself appears to have had little involvement in abolitionist and black cultural activities; he thus “claimed the right, as an artist and a freeman, to skirt or transcend racial classification when he so chose.” For Vendryes, these historical “facts” require the art historian to see the African American artist as a man with professional aspirations who was in love with his nation’s landscape and in dialogue with the white “masters” who painted it—not as someone who always had “color” on his mind.

Scholarship on Henry Ossawa Tanner has positioned the expatriate painter as one of the most important test cases for this critical position. In his revisionist reading of Tanner’s oeuvre, Albert Boime proposed that the artist’s career is “inseparable from
his cross-cultural social relationships, ” which include his affiliation with the African American community, in the United States and Europe, and his significant relationship with the black church as the son of a preacher. He further read changes in Tanner’s style and subject matter in terms of his “constant negotiation of the social terms of his racial identity,” noting that, unlike Duncanson, Tanner wrote much about his mixed racial identity, as did period critics. Boime used this historical evidence to rationalize his own efforts to bring Tanner’s few black genre scenes, such as the much-reproduced The Banjo Lesson (1893), into conversation with his biblical subjects, which dominate his artistic production beginning in the late 1890s. References at the time to Tanner’s “African blood” as accounting for his special ability to depict religious emotion, in other words, allowed Boime to read paintings like Daniel in the Lions’ Den in racial terms (Figure 3.1), as did contemporary connections between Jewish types and African American culture.6 As Boime saw it, Tanner’s associations with that culture, along with his racial identity, placed constraints on his work at the time of its production, thereby restricting the ways in which modern art historians can write about it.

Figure 3.1  Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937), Daniel in the Lions’ Den, 1907–18, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 41½ × 49⅞ in. (104.46 × 126.8 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection (22.6.3).  
Current debates about the place of race in Tanner studies remind us, however, that an artist’s career and his place in history can be narrated in many ways, depending on the evidence deployed. According to Will South, Tanner was a man in conflict about his blackness and whiteness, so much so that in France “he systematically worked to remove race from the equation of his life” through personal and public statements. Given that the artist himself expressed uncertain feelings about his race, South deduced, why should art historians insist on reading his work, and especially the prolific biblical paintings, as commentaries on blackness? In their published criticism of South’s essay, Naurice Frank Woods and George Dimock offered a response by claiming that a disavowal of Tanner’s specifically racial concerns effectively “diminishes the cultural significance” of his work. As Woods and Dimock saw him, Tanner was a man who “championed his black heritage through his civil rights activism, his dignified portrayals of African Americans, and his unyielding refusal to allow the limitations of race to break him in an era of extreme racial oppression.” And they argued that it was precisely these things—not his aesthetic accomplishments alone—that make him “central to American art history.” The newest museum survey of Tanner’s work, curated by Anna Marley, attempted to incorporate both critical perspectives. However, the exhibition and its catalogue ultimately lent more sympathy to South’s efforts to think beyond Tanner’s identification as an African American artist by introducing issues other than race into an analysis of his paintings. This sympathy found its strongest expression within the catalogue essay authored by Alan Braddock, who challenged current attempts to interpret the biblical scenes “exclusively in racial terms.”

Although writing on Tanner remains locked in debate about the artist’s relationship to blackness, scholars tend to agree on an important methodological point: that historical sources should determine if and when to foreground race in interpretations of African American art. Few art historians, that is, have proposed that a work should be raced (or not) solely on the basis of the scholar’s personal politics. In their efforts to take an “objective” view, moreover, they have placed more trust in printed texts than in images, which are considered vulnerable to subjective interpretation. Critical historiographical studies have supported this view, taking their cues from statements made by period critics or artists themselves. In Distinction and Denial: Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920–1940, for example, Mary Ann Calo supported Sarah Burns’s decision to minimize her discussion of race in Inventing the Modern Artist even though it made explicit reference to Tanner. Quoting from Burns, Calo explained that the “absence of race” in a study of late nineteenth-century American art makes sense, insofar as it constitutes “a reflection of its non-existence in cultural discussions of the Gilded Age, when there was little or no question that only whiteness counted in building, defending, and advancing civilization.”

Leaving aside for a moment the problematic de-racing of whiteness and late nineteenth-century American discourse in this statement, I want to underscore Calo’s very different opinion of the early twentieth century, the focus of Distinction and Denial. The interwar decades, she argued, were “an era clearly preoccupied with the relationship of race to the definition of national culture and to the concept of America as a modern civilization,” and that preoccupation made itself known through the period’s art criticism. It was an historical moment that “witnessed the construction of a critical frame that privileged overt cultural racialism in African American artists as a criterion of value, excluding or denying other variables that could be brought to bear on their
work.”¹⁰ Calo’s close readings of period texts demonstrated that this “racial bias” was forged through mainstream (white-male-authored) criticism as well as exemplified by the prolific writings of Alain Locke and other black leaders of the New Negro movement. Jacqueline Francis makes similar observations in her 2012 study of three New York painters: Malvin Gray Johnson, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Max Weber. Francis bases her interpretation of their engagement with race on period criticism that “confidently asserted that the artists’ racial positions were self-evident in their themes and practices.” She further addressed significant objections to her reading of Weber’s painting as “racial art,” which came from the Jewish American artist’s estate, by noting that each of her case studies framed his own work and identity in precisely such terms. Francis’s intention, as she put it, was thus to “draw attention to that historical fact rather than to authorize their racially deictic contextualization in an unraced modernist pantheon.”¹¹

While sympathetic to one another, methodologically and politically, the efforts by Calo and Francis to ground their discussions of modernism and race in historical precedents are motivated by subtly different conceptions of art-historical practice today. For Calo, it is lamentable that “the tendency to read the artistic production of African Americans as uniformly encoded with simple racial or ethnic essence remains widespread.” What she sees as our “failure to fundamentally alter this frame,” moreover, “has resulted in the continued neglect and distortion of African American artists in both American art history and in contemporary art criticism.” Her aim, then, is to “undermine the authority” of “simplistic” readings of African American art created through a myopic racial lens, and she does so by laying bare their “historical origins.”¹² Francis agrees that historical terms like “racial art” are “old and limiting way[s] of categorizing and conceptualizing figural images made by minority artists in the United States.” She points to the legacy of this discourse in American art history today, moreover, in the “celebratory and delimiting” space for difference that the discipline created in the 1980s and 1990s. Francis’s aim in Making Race was not to obliterate that space, but rather to ask more “questions about the composition of ‘difference,’ or of sameness.” Discussing the artwork and critical reception of an African American artist (Johnson) alongside those of two other raced painters—neither one black—is one way in which she aimed to accomplish this. Francis therefore put into practice her vision of a “critical race art history” that does not relegate considerations of race to African American artists but will ultimately “include more examinations of the normalized and neutralized racial subject positions of [the discipline’s] canonical figures.”¹³ Within this revised paradigm, whiteness, as a racial construction, becomes a crucial object of art-historical study.

Seeing White

Established through the writings of Alexander Saxton, David Roediger, Toni Morrison, and others in the 1990s, the field of whiteness studies consists of a range of methodologies and disciplines united by a common interest: examining the perceived invisibility of whiteness in Western culture along with the sources and social effects of that perception. The idea that whiteness continues to be deracialized both within and outside the art world of the United States has received special attention from historians of American art since the publication of Richard Dyer’s White in 1997, which explored
the cultural work of whiteness in popular visual media. Rather than hunting for an often elusive black body that holds the key to a picture’s racial meaning, John Bowles, Maurice Berger, and Martin Berger have each advocated attending to the specificity of whiteness as an object of representation, a way of seeing and interpreting the visual world, and the basis for a racialized value system that has material consequences for both whites and non-whites. The seeds of this critique can be found in some of the African American art historiography and image of the black studies outlined above. Within his writing on Robert Duncanson, for example, David Lubin called upon scholars "to begin looking into the racial operations" of other (white) Hudson River School artists, in addition to pursuing raced readings of the black painter’s life and work.14 Kymberly Pinder engaged in similar speculation when considering black representation in art-history survey textbooks, asking “[W]hat if the ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation of all the artists in these texts were identified?” To frame “all white, male, heterosexuality artists” as one does “African American, feminist, and Jewish artists,” she explained, “would be a radical step, and possibly one we should consider.”15 That Pinder’s subsequently published anthology, _Race-ing Art History_, includes essays on black, Native American, and Asian identities, but not one solely devoted to whiteness—an omission that Pinder herself described as “regrettabl[e]”—nevertheless suggested that more would need to be done to bring whiteness into the fold of a critical race art history.16

In 2005 Martin Berger would respond to this need in _Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture_ by proposing a radical shift in art historians’ approaches to race. For Berger, every American artist and image can and should be read in relation to racial politics. To test this claim, he selected objects of study that appeared at first glance to be “most removed from racial concerns.” These included genre paintings and early films without nonwhite subjects as well as landscape photographs and museum architecture that lack human bodies altogether—all created by white US artists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Berger’s method of interpreting visual culture also differentiates _Sight Unseen_ from other American art histories insofar as it is grounded in a refusal to see “visual evidence” as the only or the most important source of racial meaning. Instead, he “sees meaning shaped by the complex interaction of discourses” particular to the time and place of an image’s initial reception—namely, the “dominant cultural discourses residing in viewers” and the “secondary discourses suggested by the work’s subject matter and media.”17

While Berger’s subordination of image to text is not radical in the context of African American art historiography, his conception of “obvious” racial tropes has been met with resistance from some art historians who feel uncomfortable with the term’s possibly arbitrary definition, given that what may be readily observable to one viewer could be indiscernible to another. Still, many of Berger’s critics have acknowledged that _Sight Unseen_ has performed important historiographical work by situating race in relation to a greater number of visual objects and discourses than scholars previously imagined was possible and valuable.18 The book also urged readers to recognize the unique stakes for different racial groups in studying representations of themselves or others. Here Berger implicated his own social identity and political leanings in his methodological choices. On the one hand, he pointed to his Jewish “ethnicity” as informing his concern for disempowered peoples who exist outside of or in problematic relation to whiteness; on the other hand, as a liberal-minded “white” academic he claimed to be especially sensitive to the troubling political
implications of fixating on nonwhite bodies and “indulging in our [European Americans’] long-standing fascination with the other.”

Just as Berger was working to make visible previously “unseen” racial discourses in the work of William Sidney Mount, Timothy O’Sullivan, Frank Furness, and other modern American “masters,” other art historians were introducing ideas about race into their interpretations of modernism practiced by white Americans. In her 2005 study of Marsden Hartley, Donna Cassidy pointed to several discourses that inform Hartley’s representations of the light-complexioned North Atlantic folk from Maine and Nova Scotia: “Mysticism, the male body, race.” And yet, much like Berger, Cassidy assumed that “the racial content of these works remains hidden until we see them through the lens of Hartley’s construct of the northern race and in the context of his cultural milieu.” Her readings of the references to racial whiteness in Hartley’s writings, in period treatises, and in the visual culture he encountered in post-World War I North America and Germany were thus meant to serve as correctives to art historians’ apparent inability to see beyond the artist’s homosexuality and his fascination with rural culture in the “folk” paintings. Some of the newest studies of American modernism continue the work begun by Cassidy without fully taking up the challenge that motivated Berger’s *Sight Unseen*—that is, of potentially seeing race in any visual object. Exemplary of this trend is Lauren Kroiz’s 2012 study of Alfred Stieglitz and his circle. Rather than taking New York’s avant-garde in the early twentieth century as “purely formalist,” Kroiz demonstrates that period debates about race and immigration can tell us much about masterworks like Stieglitz’s *The Steerage* (1907) and can more generally reframe how we conceive of the foundations of artistic modernism in the United States. Whether in the writings of immigrant critic Sadakichi Hartmann or in Arthur Dove’s engagement with multi-media experiments, she finds connections to the period problem of integrating difference into the national body.

**The Ends of Race?**

As much of the recent writing on African American art historiography has taught us, it is crucial to acknowledge the historical specificity of seeing (or not seeing) race in relation to artistic production. As Mary Ann Calo writes in *Distinction and Denial*, a discourse on “racial art” became common in the interwar period, “in a climate shaped by idealistic pluralism in competition with extreme (even xenophobic) nationalism.” Jacqueline Francis similarly views the language of the 1940s and 1950s as “particularist” and “xenophobic,” while framing newer efforts to foreground racial difference in discussions of black artists in terms of the “multicultural politics and policies” that took hold in the United States in the 1980s and early 1990s. In its celebratory forms, liberal multiculturalism has promoted tolerance of racial and ethnic difference and worked to bring it into dominant culture—without, however, undermining the fantasy of white (self) and nonwhite (other) on which notions of “tolerance” have been predicated. For this limitation it has been the subject of widespread critique in sociology, political philosophy, literary criticism, and cultural studies. In light of such criticism, we might describe whiteness studies, which has influenced art history since the 1990s, as belonging to a more critical multiculturalism, one committed to analyzing inequities of power in American social relations and to combating racism through deep structural change.
We can further locate Vendryes’s push back against “race-centered approaches” to African American art history within the context of academic debates that unfolded in the late 1990s about the value of decentering race within the public and political culture of the United States. These debates acknowledged the vital role that collective thinking and action organized around race have provided politically oppressed populations, at the same time that they associated political change with taking a humanist approach to identities and communities. As Paul Gilroy argued influentially in Against Race, “the current disruption of race-thinking presents an important opportunity … to break away from the dangerous and destructive patterns that were established when the rational absurdity of ‘race’ was elevated into an essential concept and endowed with a unique power to both determine history and explain its selective unfolding.” Leaving behind “those vain and mistaken attempts to delineate and subdivide humankind” along color lines, in other words, presented for Gilroy “a welcome cue to free ourselves from the bonds of all raciology in a novel and ambitious abolitionist project.”

Provocative proposals to make sense of our social and political landscape without seeing race as determining one’s identity, status, and choices took hold of the popular American imagination through the presidential campaign and election of Barack Obama in 2008. The idea of a not-so-distant future (if not a present) in which one’s membership in a particular racial or ethnic group would not define one’s destiny appealed to many Americans and seemed to have been confirmed by Obama’s life story. Indeed, it was hard to see as undesirable what social historian David Hollinger described at the time as “a gradually spreading uncertainty about the significance of color lines, especially the significance of blackness itself,” if it meant that a change in signification translated into changes in lived experience. Left-leaning critics were quick to point out, however, that what had come to be known as a “post-racial” discourse displayed unfounded optimism and intellectual short-sightedness in its conception of this translation. Reducing the racism of white voters was certainly a sign of progress, if such a thing had indeed taken place in 2008; but Americans had yet to overcome the challenge (as Cornel West put it) of moving from “symbol to substance.”

The production of images of Obama and the heated discussions they sparked across the nation offered their own challenges to the idea that the United States was entering an era in which its citizens could (and should) somehow get beyond, outside, or around race. Throughout the 2008 presidential campaign, some of the most celebrated political cartoonists in the US labored to construct a visual language to depict the first self-identified African American presidential nominee without making his racial identity the primary object of humor. We can see this labor in the New Yorker’s many comic renderings of Obama, beginning with its prize-winning cover published in February 2008 (Figure 3.2). As readers would have instantly recognized, the cover participated in the magazine’s long-standing tradition of re-presenting its original 1925 design, which featured a caricatured dandy dubbed “Eustace Tilley.” The contemporary comic artist “Seth” (Gregory Gallant) revised this conception of white urban masculinity by superimposing two “other” identities onto Eustace, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Avoiding gross exaggeration, he ensured that both figures closely resembled their common model, save subtle changes in skin tone, hair style, and the shape and color of the lips. He also suggested their visual and social equality by endowing them with a single monocle and a conflated name, “Eustace
That the cover was designed to be viewed from one of two directions contributed to that perception; half of the issue’s run was printed with Clinton on top, the other with Obama in this presumably “superior” position.

In the wake of the controversy surrounding Barry Blitt’s July cover, which depicted Obama as a turban-wearing, flag-burning, Bin Laden-loving Muslim alongside a militarized, Afro-sporting Michelle, the *New Yorker* renewed its effort to avoid racial humor in its post-election issue. Among the six caricatures of the president elect that the magazine commissioned liberal cartoonists to draw was Richard Thompson’s vision of Obama as the new Roosevelt, replete with top hat, spectacles, cigarette holder, and convertible. This fantasy of the first African American president in the guise of another “great” political leader synchronizes Obama’s image with established conventions of (white) presidential representation, acknowledging his legitimate place within them. Barry Blitt contributed three cartoons that similarly map Obama onto other iconic figures: the farmer in Grant Wood’s iconic *American Gothic*, the African

**Figure 3.2** Rea Irvin and Seth, *Eustace Tillarobama*, *New Yorker* cover, February 11 and 18, 2008. *Source*: © The New Yorker Magazine / Seth / Condé Nast.
American baseball star Jackie Robinson, and Adam in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel cycle. Significantly, the incongruities that these images set up do not construct “jokes” about blackness or even about Obama himself. In the case of the reimagined Creation scene, we are encouraged to laugh, not at the notion that a black man could represent the origin of the human race and a physical ideal, but more likely at the idea that a stereotypically white God could bestow life through a fist bump.

American cartoonists’ labored efforts to take “race” out of political caricature and contribute to a post-racial discourse pose questions for art historians as they rethink their writing on race and representation. Can readings of a cartoon Obama tell us more about the political beliefs and cultural anxieties of individual viewers than about the specific intentions of the artist? Or do images of black bodies inevitably invoke the visual vocabulary and practices of racial oppression, no matter who does the looking? Certainly there is as much politics as pleasure bound up with the act of seeking out racial discourse in (or in relation to) a work of art. If that discourse adheres to modern notions of racism, then the art historian may feel a sense of accomplishment in laying bare, and helping to undermine, the operations of stereotyping and discrimination—as in the case of Sight Unseen. Alternatively, positive feelings can come from imagining racial difference as a relatively insignificant factor in an artist’s work, especially when his or her identity and context indicate otherwise. A concerned scholar might experience satisfaction or pride in “rescuing” a nonwhite subject, such as Henry Ossawa Tanner, from his confinement within a historiographically constructed ghetto. She or he might also locate sympathetic feelings in the artist and his work, as in the recent attribution of a “post-racial vision avant la lettre” to Tanner’s depictions of Christ “as a universal figure of humanity.”

Imagining a Post-Racial Art History

In 2001 Thelma Golden used the term “post-black” to describe the work of twenty-eight young artists on view in the Freestyle exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem. They “were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists,” Golden explained, “though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.” This generation of artists and their critics continue to use the term as a reaction against notions of an essentially black aesthetic understood only in terms of social activism and racial separatism. It refers to African Americans who are trying to figure out what comes next, formally and politically, after the struggle for civil rights fought by their parents and after multiculturalism lost its appeal as a solution to social inequalities in the United States. With this uncertainty came the freedom for individual artists to explore any aspect of “culture, sexuality, religion, gender, feminism, the body, popular culture, political, social and economic history, transcultural expression, and abstraction,” as Golden put it. At its origins, then, “post-black” was meant to connote possibility rather than limitation or segregation.

Post-blackness is one of many post-identity discourses in contemporary American art that have been the subject of museum exhibitions since 2001. In her introduction to the catalogue, Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art, for example, co-editor and curator Elizabeth Armstrong explained that the exhibition’s subtitle was meant “to emphasize our interest in art from Latin America
characterized by a postmodern approach to cultural production that is no longer determined by geographical borders and identity politics.” What Armstrong recognized as “provocative nomenclature,” she went on to add, “reflects the production of a discourse that can account for artistic expressions driven by local as well as global impulses, that are grounded in historical specificities yet that seek to go beyond them.”31 Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement similarly approached “post-identity” as an opportunity to explore “the gray zone between categories, between inclusion and exclusion, without grounding our effort in identity.” Curators Rita Gonzalez, Howard Fox, and Chon Noriega “wanted to give [themselves] the freedom to follow an idea, rather than represent a constituency,” specifically contemporary artists of Mexican descent in the United States.32 The “after” in Phantom Sightings thus suggests, without specifically defining, an association with the Chicano civil rights movement.

It is through such projects that histories of American art are absorbing the rhetoric and critical debates of the “post-racial” and forging new ideas about what it means to “race” images and image-makers. But what would or could a “post-racial art history” look like? If we were to take exhibitions like Freestyle and Phantom Sightings as models, then we would be urged to set aside the notion that a post-racial art history would be one that precludes all considerations of race in art or undermines an artist’s racial self-identification. Kymberly Pinder entertained the value of such erasure in 1999 when she posited that the author of an art-history survey might “exclude all allusions to race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation” in her writing; she concluded, however, that “the essential problem of such ‘blind’ representation is the impossibility of being truly free of identity politics” since most readers would assume a “label-free” subject to be a white heterosexual male.33 Cartooning in the context of Barack Obama’s election pointed to a similar reinscription of difference resulting from a naive assumption at the heart of color-blind ideology: that obliterating prejudice requires erasing blackness.

Many Americanists who write on race and representation today nevertheless remain skeptical about the benefits of making art history “post-racial” precisely because it suggests to them the possibility of setting aside race, and racial inequities, altogether. This response is expressed determinedly in Cherise Smith’s 2011 study of four contemporary artists whose performances of identity have responded to pivotal moments in the recent history of American race relations. In reading the photographic performances of Nikki S. Lee, for example, Smith frames the Korean American artist’s ethnic cross-dressing as working in complex relation to “the rise of postidentity and colorblindness” in the 1990s.34 Smith offers a strong critique of these terms by defining them together as:

a series of far-flung and far-reaching ideologies, adopted by both left-leaning progressives and right-leaning conservatives, that seek a return to a universal humanism wherein so-called particularist identity-groups, including but not limited to feminists, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, and their political and social aims are deemed outdated, superfluous, and even dangerous to the integration and equality that have been achieved in the United States.35

Locating the seeds of “postidentity discourse” in the 1993 Whitney Biennial and Golden’s Freestyle, Smith implicitly warns art historians against embracing an ideology
that “prioritizes individual agency over collective identity, suggests that identity-based discrimination has been eradicated along with other outmoded ways of being, and blames members of so-called ‘particularist’ groups for their marginal or disenfranchised positions.”

I have encountered similar reactions to post-racial ideology, and understandable uncertainties about the future direction of art-historical approaches to race. In email communications between 2010 and 2012, I posed to a group of scholars working in the fields of image of the black studies and African American art history a deliberately open-ended question: What thoughts, if any, does the idea of a post-racial art history conjure up for you? Many of their responses echoed the reactions against post-racial and post-ethnic concepts that are expressed today by political pundits—namely, “that racism is still a vital problem in the United States, and that the physical marks of descent remain highly determinative of an individual’s destiny.” They underscored the distinction between discourses and material conditions, noting the value of exposing race as a constructed and evolving idea while recognizing that its deployment in the discipline and institutions of art history has very real foundations and consequences. Others opted to highlight the emphasis that the term “post-racial art history” could place on fluidity, multiplicity, and choice when it comes to artistic affiliation and meaning. They looked forward to a moment when identity would no longer need to be at the center of art-historical practice and interpretation, and when race in particular would become one element in the complex study of modern power structures and global flows.

Many of the responses made specific reference to Darby English’s *How To See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, citing it as an in-depth investigation of what it means to write a post-racial art history today. While Martin Berger’s *Sight Unseen* taught Americanists in 2005 to turn to the discourses surrounding a work of art at the time of its production and reception and bring those to bear on its racial meaning, English advocated in 2007 returning to the formal elements and themes of the work itself that refuse to be read as exclusively raced. He described his approach as a “strategic formalism” that is “interested in the peculiarity of works within their varied contexts of meaning, responsive to the specific artistic operations that often manifest relations and differences to which culturalist regimes of reception must remain blind.” English put this approach to the test in *How To See*, which begins by surveying African American art historiography since the early twentieth century and critiquing its construction of and investment in what he calls “black representational space,” or a set of institutionalized practices that limits discussion of art to what it has to say about blackness. The book then turns to its case studies: five African Americans whom critics have consistently subjected to racialization and thus closed off (in English’s view) from other varieties of interpretation.

In Kara Walker’s cut-paper silhouettes, for example, English points to an unresolved tension between not only the raced terms “black and white” but also “violence and pleasure, death and birth, orality and anality, documentation and fantasy, art and nonart, seeing and imagining, and so on.” Without discounting Walker’s obviously deep investment in rethinking the history of slavery, his analysis of her large-scale tableaux highlights their engagement with the nineteenth-century traditions of landscape painting and sentimentalist narratives in the United States as well as their alignment with the conceptual art of Lawrence Weiner, the abstract wall painting of Blinky Palermo, and the minimalism of Carl Andre in terms of their
similarly critical use of space (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4). Glenn Ligon’s text paintings receive the same kind of treatment in How To See, and so they are read as negotiating conflicts “between ways of painting and ways of being, representer and represented, figure and ground, art and object” as well as “looking and reading” and “modernism and postmodernism.” In addition to acknowledging the specific African American sources of many of Ligon’s texts, English grounds his paintings within recent reflections on what can and cannot be seen in painting, and more specifically examinations of the “real and imagined linguistic processes and durational events that make images possible.”41 This reading of Ligon brings him into dialogue with an eclectic collection of predominantly white writers and image-makers, from Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg to Barbara Kruger and Ed Ruscha. Importantly, the contemporary art that English considers in How To See does not (in his view) deracialize looking as much as it creates a space for other types of identification; his critical readings of their artwork, in turn, are modeled on the method that he attributes to it.

English’s invocation of Greenberg is significant, in light of the considerable criticism that his writings have received in recent decades for separating art from the material and historical conditions of its production and, with that, writing African Americans (and women) out of the history of modern artistic movements in the United States. As Ann Gibson observed in her 1997 re-evaluation of Abstract Expressionism and its histories, Greenberg’s conscious blindness to the social identity and individual goals of artists “contributed to the creation of a dominant realm in which biography and politics played no admitted part, but in whose preferred subjects and subject matter the continuing exclusionary function of these factors is
In *How To See*, English proposes a way of correcting for Greenberg’s exclusions by shifting his initial choice in subject to the African American artist but without radically altering the methods of analysis that follow, including their formal criteria and Eurocentrism. If this is the work of a post-racial art history, how might it help expand and reframe American art history in the twenty-first century? Derek Conrad Murray has suggested that, in an effort to open up the possibilities of interpretation and release “black” art from the yoke of racialization, it might simultaneously close those possibilities down, insofar as English’s efforts to situate his case studies within a Eurocentric history of Western art place “limitations on artistic creativity (its assessment and valuing).” By trying to “evade the limitations of ethnocentrism,” in other words, the practice of seeing beyond race that English proposes may demonstrate inevitability—that is, of politically (and even racially) inflected restriction in *any* history of American art.43
And So, Where and When?

Regarding the important matter of where and when we look for race in American art history, this historiographical survey has aimed to open up more questions about our methodological practices than it has chosen to answer. Do such practices depend more or less on the kinds of images and image-makers we choose to study, on public political discourses, on our personal investments in the cultural (in)visibility of race, or on something else? How do the moments of interpretation, many and multifarious as they are, shape what we do and do not observe about the racial meaning(s) of an image? Can we trust what we see in the twenty-first century when it comes to understanding representations of race in the nineteenth century? Conversely, when should we read a contemporary image in relation to the visual history of race (and racism) in the United States: always, sometimes, never? Finally, what is at stake—politically, culturally, and art-historically—in perceiving, or not perceiving, such connections?

As art historians we must ask these tough questions and become more comfortable with the potential impossibility of answering them simply or definitively. Indeed, debates about (de)race-ing American art history remind us of the need to make space for ambivalence in the hotly contested political terrain that we call race in America. This is not to say that scholars should compromise their politics but rather that they should consider the effects, and desirability, of different approaches to race and representation.

Notes

1 Francis, 2003, p. 9.
6 Boime, 1993, pp. 415, 437.
7 South, 2009.
8 Woods and Dimock, 2010; Braddock, 2012, p. 140.
9 Calo, 2007, p. 22.
13 Francis, 2012, pp. 147, 153, 30.
15 Pinder, 1999, p. 536.
18 See DeLue, 2006; Sheehan, 2007.
19 Berger, 2005, p. 3.
24 See Taylor et al., 1994; Gordon and Newfield, 1996.
26 Hollinger, 2008, p. 1033.
27 West repeated this phrase in interviews when Obama was first elected president. See for example the interview with Amy Goodman on Democracy Now!, aired on November 19, 2008, http://www.democracynow.org/2008/11/19/cornel_west_on_the_election_of (accessed September 1, 2014).
30 See Byrd, 2002; Campbell, 2007.
31 Armstrong and Zamudio-Taylor, 2000, p. 5.
34 Smith, 2011, p. 9.
35 Smith, 2011, p. 191.
36 Smith, 2011, p. 199.
38 I am grateful to the following scholars for their responses: Martin Berger, Mary Coffey, Rachael DeLue, Tatiana Flores, Camara Holloway, Elizabeth Hutchinson, John Ott, Richard Powell, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, and Phoebe Wolfskill.
39 English, 2007, p. 32.
40 English, 2007, p. 75.
42 Gibson, 1997, p. xxxii.
43 Murray, 2007, p. 113.

References


Dialogue
On the Social History of American Art

Alan Wallach

Introduction

In February 2000, Marc Gotlieb convened a panel at the College Art Association’s annual meeting to consider the question, “Whatever Happened to the Social Art History?” Given the title, it was to be expected that the session would be less a historiographical investigation than a postmortem. As it turned out, the discussion did not go well, with panelists talking past each other rather than addressing a common theme. Still, the answer to the question the session posed seemed inescapable: a version of the history of art that had once exerted a powerful influence on the discipline was now defunct. As Gotlieb put it in his introduction, “the [social art history’s] moment seems to have passed—indeed even to its practitioners.”

Gotlieb’s observation apparently contradicts the claims advanced by a number of art historians who have argued that the social history of art now flourishes as never before. For example, in 2006, Thomas Crow, who had served as the College Art Association panel’s discussant, wrote, “From its beginnings as a minority—and immediately embattled—position, the so-called social history of art has grown … to constitute something of a new default function for the field: virtually every contribution to the Art Bulletin (seen as the scholarly journal of record) represents a variation on this approach, even when these components are not explicitly acknowledged.” Or to take another example, in a recent issue of the Burlington Magazine, Alastair Wright maintained that the social history of art “has perhaps been the dominant art-historical approach of the last three decades or so.” Crow and Wright have a point, but only as long as no distinction is drawn between Marxist and non-Marxist versions of the social history of art. Non-Marxist versions do indeed constitute, as Crow observed, the field’s “default function,” which is to say approaches in which art is seen in relation to one or another social context or contexts. However, the College Art Association panel was not wrong in
assuming that Marxist versions of the social history of art, its primary target, no longer enjoyed the influence they once had. Princeton historian Philip Nord, the only panelist to attempt a historical explanation in response to the question posed by the session title, argued that the Marxist social history of art had always been a left-wing phenomenon and attributed its decline to the crisis of the left in the closing decades of the twentieth century.4

In this chapter I am primarily, although as will become apparent not exclusively, concerned with the Marxist social history of American art. Or rather I am mainly concerned with what is regrettably its absence. Save for a brief moment in the late 1940s, the Marxist social history of art has been a marginal phenomenon in the field of American art history despite its influence in the wider discipline. In what follows, I give a summary account of its history, examine the reasons for its current marginality, and in my conclusion suggest what it has to offer a field that has over the last three decades employed a wide variety of theoretical models, but has for the most part ignored or downplayed the problematic relation between the social and the aesthetic.

The Marxist Social History of Art

In 1905 Georgi Plekhanov, often described as the “father of Russian Marxism,” published “French Drama and Painting of the Eighteenth Century,” an essay that was the first to raise the defining question of the Marxist social history of art: is there, Plekhanov asked, “a discernible causal relationship between existence and consciousness—between the means of production and economic relations in society, on the one hand, and art on the other?”5 The question, which Plekhanov answered in the affirmative by linking the appearance of naturalism and classicism in eighteenth-century French painting to the rise of a revolutionary bourgeoisie, originated in a well-known passage from Marx’s Preface to a Critique of Political Economy of 1859:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and which correspond to definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. … [In an epoch of social revolution] changes in the economic foundation lead, sooner or later, to the transformation of the whole, immense, superstructure.

In studying such transformations, it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic, or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.6

The Marxist social history of art turns on Marx’s argument that the economic base “conditions” the legal, political, religious, artistic, and philosophic superstructure—an
argument that has been at the center of long-running debates among Marxists about the nature of the relation between base and superstructure and about what Marx called “ideological forms.”

Plekhanov’s essay inaugurated the first phase of the Marxist social history of art. Among the leading practitioners—Arnold Hauser, Frederick Antal, Max Raphael, F.D. Klingender—Hauser is the best known. Born in the small Hungarian town of Temeswar in 1892, Hauser studied art history and literature in Budapest, Vienna, Berlin, and Paris, participated during World War I with Antal and the sociologist Karl Mannheim, among others, in Georg Lukács’s Sunday Circle (at this point neither Hauser nor Lukács was committed to Marxism), and fled Hungary in 1919 after the defeat of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Hauser went on to study economics and sociology in Berlin and was deeply influenced by the writings of the Viennese art historian Max Dvořák, who pioneered a historicizing approach to the history of art, and the sociologist and neo-Kantian philosopher Georg Simmel. By the early 1920s, he had arrived at the idea that sociology offered a powerful tool for the study of art and literature.

Hauser moved to Vienna in 1924 and then to England after the Nazi occupation of Austria in 1938. There he spent ten years writing *The Social History of Art*, which appeared in English translation in London and New York in 1951 before being published in German in 1953. A four-volume paperback edition became available in the United States in 1958 and in England in 1962. Spanning the history of Western art from the Stone Age to the “Film Age,” with sections devoted to such topics as “the development of [medieval] aristocratic class consciousness,” Mannerism and “the age of political realism,” and “the social novel in England and Russia,” Hauser’s monumental study—it runs to more than 500,000 words—epitomized for a generation the Marxist approach to the social history of art.

As might be expected, Hauser’s Marxism did not always sit well with conservative English and American critics, who among other things questioned his synthetic method. To take one example, in a widely read review the art historian E.H. Gombrich wrote,

> Mr. Hauser is deeply convinced that in history “all factors, material and intellectual, economic and ideological, are bound up together in a state of indissoluble interdependence,” and so it is perhaps natural that to him the most serious crime for a historian is the arbitrary isolation of fields of inquiry.

Michael Orwicz and Claire Beauchamps observed that in contrast to Hauser’s broadly dialectical approach to the history of art, Gombrich and other conservative critics “insisted on its periodization, its fragmentation, its discontinuity with other domains.” Still, Hauser could be critical of mechanical formulations and was far more suspicious of political and philosophical orthodoxies than his Cold War critics imagined. This is perhaps the reason why *The Social History of Art*, which remained in print for decades, appealed to thinkers as different as Thomas Mann, Meyer Schapiro, Theodor Adorno, and Clement Greenberg, who in 1951 wrote a laudatory account of Hauser’s *magnum opus* for the *New York Times Book Review*.

And yet, ironically, conservative criticism of Hauser’s sweeping generalizations and apodictic pronouncements found an echo in the 1970s and 1980s in the writings of New Left art historians—in effect, the art-historical generation of 1968 confronting
the generation of 1919. They criticized what the German art historian Peter Klein described as Hauser’s “strongly idealist heritage,” and questioned his conventional concept of art history’s object—the work of art—which he shared with his conservative adversaries.\textsuperscript{12} As Orwicz and Beauchamps put it in \textit{The Social History of Art}, “[t]he work is always whole, always complete. It participates in other histories, receives a ‘context’ from them, but is never allowed to enter fully, for it must always emerge as the subject of its own history. Such a conception disregards the work’s historical and ideological functions, its real place in those other histories.”\textsuperscript{13}

Orwicz and Beauchamps wrote these words in 1985. Twelve years earlier, in a pair of books on French art and the revolution of 1848, \textit{Image of the People} and \textit{The Absolute Bourgeois}, T.J. Clark more or less single-handedly launched the second phase of the Marxist social history of art, as well as the broader revisionist movement that came to be known as “the new art history.” In a chapter called “On the Social History of Art”—the title, according to Clark, “an ironic courtesy” to Arnold Hauser—Clark attacked “the mechanical image of ‘reflection’,” which in his view underlay earlier Marxist attempts to connect the social and the aesthetic:

If the social history of art has a specific field of study, it is exactly this—the processes of conversion and relation, which so much art history takes for granted. I want to discover what concrete transactions are hidden behind the mechanical image of “reflection,” to know how “background” becomes “foreground”; instead of analogy between form and content, to discover the network of real, complex relations between the two. These mediations are themselves historically formed and historically altered; in the case of each artist, each work of art, they are historically specific.

By insisting that mediation was not susceptible to formula, that each historical instance had to be comprehended in all of its specificity and uniqueness, Clark shifted the discussion away from the broadly defined movements and styles (the Gothic, the Dutch Baroque) that had characterized Hauser’s and others’ analyses and toward close reading and individual case studies. “The social history of art,” Clark wrote, “sets out to discover the general nature of the structures that [the artist] encounters willy-nilly; but it also wants to locate the specific conditions of one such meeting.”\textsuperscript{15} As Gail Day has remarked, for Clark, mediation was never “a direct object of study.” Rather, “it emerges in his writing like a perpetual gnawing.”\textsuperscript{16}

It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that this problematic more than any other defined the art-historical generation of 1968, and that critical Marxism supplied the terms, the idiom in which it was understood and debated.\textsuperscript{17} Here as elsewhere the “new” necessarily drew upon the “old.” For as Clark so forcefully reminded readers in a brief, incendiary essay he published in the \textit{Times Literary Supplement} in 1974, the “new” did not mean ignoring or rejecting the discipline’s history but recovering its fundamental issues: not only the problematic relation between the social and the aesthetic, but also such questions as the conditions of consciousness and the nature of representation—questions that had preoccupied an earlier generation of art historians.\textsuperscript{18}

By contrast, postwar American scholars, products of the Cold War academy, tended to see themselves à la Gombrich as specialists in one or another area of the discipline rather than participants in an ongoing debate about the discipline itself. Such a debate would have been an ideal way to explore the relation between the social and the
aesthetic, but it required an institutional context as well as a tradition of intellectual engagement, and the field’s dissenters, whose outlook had been formed in the political struggles of the 1960s, were incapable of reshaping the institution or creating ex vacuo the tradition. Instead they settled, as they knew they would have to, for a place in the institution, hoping to transform it from within. And they were successful in the sense that “new art history” rapidly overtook the “old” and then went on to eclipse it. The circumstances under which this occurred were far from ideal. In his 1974 article, in a passage that has been frequently—I am tempted to say willfully—misinterpreted, Clark warned against the “cheerful diversification of the subject, [with the social history of art] taking its place alongside the other varieties—formalist, ‘modernist,’ sub-Freudian, filmic, feminist, ‘radical,’ all of them hot-foot in pursuit of the New.” Clark believed that the social history of art was the place where the discipline might best concentrate its energies, where the old debates might be restaged in new, more viable terms. But in the United States, any hope for a discipline-wide discussion ran up against the reality of a corporatized institution, albeit one that was now in flux. The crises of the 1960s had revealed the superficiality of a discipline that had all but abandoned its roots in critical philosophy—in effect, the new world attempting to slough off the burdens of the old. By the time Clark wrote his article, diversification, cheerful or otherwise, was well under way, much of it premised on a critique of “old” art history, which now seemed vapid and unambitious, too focused on safe, art-market-friendly “methods”—connoisseurship, documentation, iconography (often reduced to image chasing)—and out of touch with developments in the other humanistic disciplines. The “new” meant connecting with politics, with new or at least newly discovered theoretical currents (semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, the Frankfurt School), and with the work of earlier art historians who had wrestled with the question of meaning. New areas of inquiry opened. The 1970s witnessed the birth of critical museum studies as well as efforts to develop a critical history of the discipline itself. All this occurred at a time when the Marxist social history of art stood at the forefront of the “new.” Nowadays we tend to lose sight of its centrality during the 1970s and early 1980s or the range of its influence—so much so that leading feminist art historians of the period struggled with the problem of fusing Marxism with feminism and a prominent non-Marxist art historian, commenting in 1985 on the then current state of the discipline, felt it necessary to say that “the way a work of art looks and what it means are today commonly studied as functions of the society in which it was made and viewed.”

Yet even as its vocabulary, if not its analytical method, was becoming an increasingly commonplace feature of art-historical discourse, the Marxist social history of art was losing the influence it once had had within the broader field. Clark’s next book, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (1985), although conceived, as Clark wrote, “within the framework of historical materialism,” did little to advance the discussion. Moreover, it was not well received by Marxists, who took Clark to task for focusing on high art and canonical male artists, and for setting up “an apparent partition,” as Gail Day writes, between art and society, text and context—in other words for failing to arrive at a plausible account of mediation. At the same time, mediation itself was losing its place as Marxist art history’s central theoretical concern. Andrew Hemingway and Paul Jaskot have argued that the Marxist social history of art demands “steady plodding work … to identify concrete mediations.” But New Left critical theory, deeply influenced by the Frankfurt School (especially
Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse), inspired a new emphasis on what became known as “ideology critique.” Radical art historians of the period 1975–85 wrote exposés of how works of art, art institutions, and the discipline of art history itself produced and reproduced beliefs and belief systems that served hegemonic interests. Their purpose was avowedly political. As O.K. Werckmeister asserted in 1976 at the inaugural meeting of the Caucus for Marxism and Art, “Critical art history ... will aim at [instilling] a coherent historical consciousness which is the condition for [radical] political conscience.” Yet if ideology critique had at first a powerful impact upon the profession, its influence was relatively short-lived, not least because the radicals of the 1970s failed to consolidate their gains organizationally or institutionally. That failure went hand in hand with a process of dilution and institutional recuperation that ultimately resulted in the marginalization of Marxist art history at the very moment when the non-Marxist social history of art was becoming ubiquitous. At the height of its influence, Marxist art history had posed a threat to art-historical business as usual—or so it seemed. Thus one detects a sigh of relief in the phrase “Whatever Happened to the Social Art History?”—as if, by the year 2000, Marxist art history’s potential for politicizing a normalized academic discourse had finally been laid to rest.

Marxist and “Marxian” Social Histories of American Art

In a “state of the field” essay published in the Art Bulletin in 2003, John Davis argued that recent scholarship in the history of American art divides into two modes or directions, one involving “a general, Marxian commitment to social history, contextual research, and explorations of power and difference,” the other marked by close reading, “creative speculation,” psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. Davis’s comment is helpful in coming to terms with the major division within the field, and it also serves as a reminder that the social history of American art itself divides between Marxist and what might be called, in the spirit of Davis’s critique, “Marxian” tendencies. Before considering the latter, I want to trace the history, however meager and fragmentary, of self-conscious efforts to write a Marxist social history of American art. That history has its origin in, and in a sense reaches its apoogee with, Oliver Larkin’s Art and Life in America (1949) and Milton Brown’s American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression (1954). These landmark contributions to the then nascent field of American art history were rooted in the Marxist cultural debates of the 1930s. With the advent of the Cold War, Larkin and Brown were obliged to contend with the anti-communism and anti-Marxism that pervaded academia (Larkin taught at Smith, Brown at Brooklyn College) and much of American life. Consequently, in their mature work the two scholars avoided using terminology that would too readily signal their Marxist views.

Larkin (1896–1970) began his career as an art instructor, but by the 1930s he was offering courses in the history of art and publishing essays on Daumier and Courbet in the independent Marxist journal Science and Society. A decade later, Art and Life in America won the Pulitzer Prize for history despite mixed reviews in which the reviewers were apparently unaware of Larkin’s commitment to Marxism. Larkin’s resort to Aesopian language, the love for “the things Americans have made,” boldly proclaimed in his dedication, and the celebratory tone he often adopted—echoed
in the publicity handed out by his publisher—resulted in the assimilation of *Art and Life in America* into the dominant cultural-nationalist discourse.\(^{31}\) Today art historians tend to remember Larkin’s book as an early encyclopedic effort “to place American art in a historical setting,” a judgment that seems warranted but does not go far enough when it comes to locating Larkin historically or describing his achievement and its limits.\(^{32}\)

Michael Denning has written that “Larkin’s book is the major work of art history to come out of the popular front,” referring to the period from 1935 to 1939 when communists made common cause with liberals in the fight against fascism.\(^{33}\) Larkin’s Marxism seems to have been shaped by his participation in Popular Front political groupings and by his reading, which was apparently extensive, in the Marxist literature of his day. His understanding of political and historical issues could be sophisticated, as his essays in *Science and Society* attest, but probably because of the limitations under which he later wrote, in *Art and Life in America* his treatment of questions of class and ideology lack the critical edge that distinguishes his earlier work. Although he evokes social settings, class relations, economic developments, and ideologies (never named as such), the history of American art is not cast in terms of determining economic and social factors (as in Hauser’s writings), but as a story of a people’s political struggle for freedom and democracy in which the best or most progressive art, almost invariably naturalist or realist, participated in or reflected that struggle. In this respect, *Art and Life in America* was very much of a piece with the politics of the Popular Front, but it failed to provide a model or framework for later scholarship in the field.\(^{34}\)

During the 1930s, Brown (1911–98) studied art history with Walter Friedlaender, Erwin Panofsky, Meyer Schapiro, and Paul Sachs. He also participated openly in the intellectual life of the American Communist Party. In 1938, while still a graduate student, he published a book-length pamphlet titled *Art and the French Revolution*, which appeared in a series put out by the party’s Marxist Critics Group that included Plekhanov’s *Art and Society*.\(^{35}\) A year earlier, he published an article on “The Marxist Theory of Art” for the magazine *Dialectics* in which, as Andrew Hemingway has written, he demonstrated an understanding of “the history of artistic forms as a complex reflex of class struggles.”\(^{36}\) That understanding is not absent from *American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression*, Brown’s pioneering study of early twentieth-century American modernism. In his introduction, Brown set forth his overall position: “Art is obviously not always a direct and simple reflection of society or social events, but no matter how purely esthetic the result, it remains always a social phenomenon.”\(^{37}\) Despite its toned-down language, the book’s Marxist framework was evident to many. In a cautious if ultimately positive review in the *Art Bulletin*, John Baur remarked on “the ideological note that permeates the book,” but concluded, “if you grant [Brown] his initial premises, what he has to say is always logical, tolerant, and perceptive.”\(^{38}\) Not every reviewer, however, allowed Brown his Marxist premises. In a punishing critique that appeared in *College Art Journal*, James W. Lane lambasted Brown for “his taste for genre, and class-struggle genre at that.”\(^{39}\)

Lane’s attack typifies the Cold War climate in which Larkin and Brown worked—a climate in which critics indiscriminately identified Marxism with Stalinism and equated the work of serious Marxist scholars such as Antal with the productions of party apparatchiks.\(^{40}\) Not surprisingly given the reigning anti-communist orthodoxy, neither Larkin nor Brown inspired a new generation of Marxist social historians. Instead, as we have seen, the revival of the Marxist social history of art had to wait until the 1970s,
and even that revival had little direct influence on the study of American art. What influence it did have was for the most part confined to studies of the New York School.41 T.J. Clark played a key role in this development. In the 1970s he became interested in the criticism of Clement Greenberg and the work of Jackson Pollock.42 Clark’s students, Serge Guilbaut and Michael Leja, wrote dissertations, later turned into books, in which they sought to understand Abstract Expressionism in relation to the social, political, economic, and cultural developments of the immediate postwar period. Mediation was for them, as it had been for Clark, a crucial issue. In the introduction to How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art, published in 1983, Guilbaut argued, “The history of American art can be written only if society is not divided up into isolated cells, only if the mediations among social, economic, cultural, and symbolic facts are not obliterated.”43 Guilbaut was primarily concerned with discovering the reasons for Abstract Expressionism’s seemingly improbable success. Leja, whose Reframing Abstract Expressionism appeared a decade after How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art, pursued a different set of questions (especially the relation between Abstract Expressionist and contemporary popular ideologies of the self), but employed a parallel approach. “My purpose,” Leja wrote, “is to point to a discursive frame for the intellectual and artistic commitments of the Abstract Expressionists, a frame that preserves and highlights the individual and idiosyncratic aspects and colorings given those interests, but that also situates them in the cultural and social history that lends the ideas significance and unity.”44

Yet if fully Marxist contributions to the social history of American art have been few and far between, since the 1970s Marxism’s influence, if usually unacknowledged, has been pervasive. That influence, as suggested earlier, can be summed up by the term “Marxian.” I use the term to denote an approach to the social history of art that draws upon one or another aspect of Marxist social-historical analysis but does not problematize the relation between the social and the aesthetic. Instead, it employs a vocabulary associated with the Marxist social history of art although often without much in the way of methodological self-awareness. Today such terms as ideology, class, and even class conflict (which put in an appearance in the title of a paper read at the College Art Association’s annual meeting in 2009) seem unremarkable.45 By the same token, discussions of historical realities that were once almost exclusively the domain of radicals—slavery, racism, the slaughter of Native Americans, capitalism, imperialism, class conflict—now hardly raise an eyebrow in the academic community, indeed often constitute a point of departure for scholarly inquiry.46 Witness, for example, Ross Barrett’s analysis of the portrayal of class conflict and political violence in mid-nineteenth-century New York that was featured in the Art Bulletin in 2010, and was awarded the College Art Association’s Arthur Kingsley Porter Prize for a distinguished Art Bulletin article by a scholar under the age of 35; or Maurie McInnis’s study of Abolitionist art and the American slave trade, which in 2012 won the Charles C. Eldredge Prize for outstanding scholarship in the field of American art.47 It is evident that the effort to comprehend American art in its social, historical, and cultural contexts, a controversial feature of “new” art history in the 1970s and 1980s, long ago lost whatever novelty it once possessed.48 This goes for the discipline of art history overall as well as for the American field. Craig Clunas, a specialist in the history of Chinese art, exaggerates only slightly when he writes, “putting the work of art in its ‘larger context’ … is what art history is, and an art history of the social, if not a social history of art, may arguably be what most of us are in fact writing much of the time.”49
Conclusion

On September 12, 2008, the Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the Eldredge Prize with a symposium on the theme “Words Matter!” Fourteen current and former prizewinners presented short papers, later published in *American Art*, on a chosen “word.” Some choices seemed inevitable—*gender, history, context, place, affect*; others less so—*censorship, silence, reciprocity, fracture, money*. Of the fourteen scholars, the majority have pursued one or another version of the social history of art. Yet at the Eldredge Prize symposium, the words that mattered most were not words associated with a Marxist approach. Conspicuous by their absence were such terms as *society, class, class conflict, class consciousness, ideology, capitalism, imperialism, hegemony, commodity, reification, patronage, totality* (the list goes on). It could be maintained, as I have above, that some of these terms (*society, class, ideology*) are now so ingrained in scholarly discourse that they almost go without saying—in effect, they matter so much they are now taken (perhaps too much) for granted. It could also be argued that of the fourteen scholars contributing to “Words Matter!” only two or three were directly influenced by Marxism. Still the absence of the words I have listed signals a loss—a diminishing awareness of intellectual histories, a forgetting of struggles that made new critical perspectives possible, above all the disappearance of fundamental problems.

And that is, finally, very much to be regretted because even if the problems fall below the threshold of scholarly concerns, they have not gone away. Americanists may no longer wrestle with the problematic relation between the social and the aesthetic, but that does not mean they cease to figure some form of that relation in their work. What the Marxist version of the social history of art offered—still offers—are ways to conceptualize the problem, to raise it to the surface of scholarly awareness, and thus to discover how, for example, the rise of a particular art form went hand in hand with a process of class formation or class conflict, and how these circumstances in turn shaped the look as well as the subject matter of the art in question.

Acknowledgments

This chapter would not have been possible without Andrew Hemingway’s scholarship or his friendship. I am deeply grateful for both. Phyllis Rosenzweig’s support went far beyond anything I could have ever reasonably expected. For that and so much more, I am forever grateful.

Notes

1. See Gotlieb et al., 2000, p. 157. Gotlieb’s “The Social Art History” strikes me as an awkward locution that makes a familiar category—the social history of art—seem less so.
2. Crow, 2006, p. 86. Crow’s use of the phrase “so-called social history of art” suggests ambivalence or perhaps a lack of clarity about the approach under discussion.
4. Philip Nord was kind enough to send me a copy of his contribution to the panel, “Social History and Social Art History at a Moment of Transition.” I would add that,
like the other panelists, Nord was not overtly hostile to Marxism, but his argument was based upon the commonplace if wrongheaded assumption that with the end of the Cold War, Marxism itself had become passé.

5 Plekhanov, 1905.
6 Marx, 1859.
7 For biographical information and analysis, I have relied on the following sources: Ludz, 1979, Roberts, 2006, and Hemingway, 2013.
9 Gombrich, 1953, p. 80.
10 See Orwicz and Beauchamps, 1985, p. 55.
13 Orwicz and Beauchamps, 1985, p. 59.
15 Clark, 1973a, pp. 12, 13.
17 And not only for art historians: mediation was also a pressing problem for Marxist cultural critics during the 1970s and 1980s. Perhaps the most important contribution to the discussion at the time was Williams, 1977.
18 Clark, 1974, pp. 561–562.
21 Alpers, 1985, p. 1. Alpers’s comment appears in an introduction to a set of papers that had been presented at a panel of the same name at the College Art Association’s annual meeting in February 1985.
22 Clark, 1985, p. 6. Clark’s remark concerned the question of representation, but it applies, I believe, to his entire project.
23 See Day, 2011, pp. 16–17. For criticism from the left, see, for example, Rifkin, 1985.
24 See Hemingway and Jaskot, 2000, p. 265.
25 Quoted in Orwicz, 2010, p. 151. I am indebted to Orwicz’s analysis for my observations on ideology critique and the history of New Left art history in the United States.
26 I refer here to the Caucus for Marxism and Art (1976–ca. 1982) and the failed attempt at UCLA in the early 1980s to establish a center for the study of the social history of art.
28 For Larkin, see Wallach, 2001. In addition, for Larkin, Brown, and the more general question of the Marxist social history of American art, I have relied on Hemingway, 2013.
29 See Larkin, 1937, 1939, 1940, 1941.
30 For a listing of reviews, see Wallach, 2001, p. 89n4.
32 Corn, 1988, p. 189.
I am in this regard in agreement with Hemingway, 2013.

Hemingway, 2002, p. 113. See Brown, 1938. Brown’s book was eighth in the Marxist Critics Group’s series; an edition of Plekhanov’s *Art and Society* was the third.

See Brown, 1937.


Baur, 1957.

Lane, 1957, p. 174.

See, for example, Martin, 1951. Symptomatic of the situation I’ve been describing, Larkin was summoned to testify before the Subcommittee on Education of the Committee to Expose Communism in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Failing to respond to the summons or to answer questions to the committee’s satisfaction would have cost him his job. See Wallach, 2001, p. 82. Brown escaped the witch hunters at Brooklyn College, but only through sheer luck. (Conversation with the author, March 25, 1988.)

I note that the few examples of American art scholarship that explicitly stake a claim to Marxism do not always fit comfortably into that category. One prominent example: Frances Pohl’s popular textbook (Pohl, 2012), which in its subtitle bills itself as a “social history of American art.” The book might be read as a successor to the work of Larkin and Brown; however, while the author, who describes herself as a historical materialist, pursues the entirely admirable aim of encompassing in a single volume a vast swath of art created by Americans, *Framing America* does not embody a consistent Marxist perspective. As Hemingway, 2013, has noticed, it tends to reduce works of art to “images [that] function primarily as illustrations of the historical process.”


Guilbaut, 1983, p. 8. However, Guilbaut did not consistently pursue the methodological program he describes in his introduction. See Craven, 1985.


I refer here to the title of Ellen Todd’s paper, “Remembering the Unknowns: Memorial and Class Conflict after the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire,” which figured in a session on art and class organized by Frances Pohl at the College Art Association’s annual meeting in 2009. See Todd, 2009a. When the paper became an article in the journal *American Art*, “class conflict” disappeared from the title. See Todd, 2009b.

In the 1960s and 1970s, leading Americanists ignored or glossed over these issues. One obvious example is John Wilmerding’s *American Art*, a volume in the prestigious Pelican History of Art series that appeared in 1976 as a bicentennial summing up of scholarship in the field (Wilmerding, 1976). For a radical response to the then routine separation of art from history exemplified by Wilmerding’s *American Art*, see Catalog Committee, 1977.


Johns, 1983 represents a turning point in this history. Henry Adams’s review in the *Art Bulletin* described it as part of “the current fad for treating art as a document of social history.” He also expressed relief that Johns had avoided “jargon and Marxist cant.” See Adams, 1986, p. 345. Johns’s book demonstrated how much could be gained through close scrutiny of cultural and social contexts. If, in retrospect, its analysis suffers from the absence of a theoretical framework and from an
overly optimistic concept of Eakins’s “heroism,” it nonetheless helped guarantee that the study of the historical contexts for American art would not be simply a “fad.”

50 See Burns et al., 2009.

References


Our Cause Is What?
Robin Kelsey

In his rich and stimulating essay, Alan Wallach draws a helpful distinction between Marxist and non-Marxist versions of the social history of art. According to Wallach, while non-Marxist versions thrive, the Marxist social history of art has drifted into obscurity and forgetfulness. This decline, he claims, has diminished the capacity of the discipline to ask fundamental questions about the concrete mediations that make up the relation between the social and the aesthetic. We have lost our willingness to ask, for example, how “the rise of a particular art form went hand in hand with a process of class formation or class conflict, and how these circumstances in turn shaped the look as well as the subject matter of the art in question.”

Wallach’s argument is robust and provocative enough to warrant testing. He frames his inquiry by affirming the role of Marxism within the study of art history, but it might be productive to frame it the other way around—that is, by considering the role of the study of art history within Marxism. This framing of the question reminds us that a Marxist art history has always been a peculiar hybrid. If you are young and committed to revolution, to the eradication of alienation and private property, is your first move to get a PhD in art history? Is that the surest route to emancipation, to delivering the means of production to the proletariat? These questions are jocular, tendentious, even borderline rude, but they have a point: no Marxism worth its salt aims merely to make an academic discipline flourish. Any Marxist art historian perhaps should worry, as O.K. Werckmeister once did, about “the discrepancy between [Marx’s] all but complete neglect of art and the disproportionate interest in art on the part of his later commentators.”

The obvious rejoinder to such musings is that writing and teaching are practical ways of explicating the dialectical relationship between base and superstructure and of mapping the complex operations of class conflict across society. Marx himself noted that “Raphael as much as any other artist was determined by the technical advances in
art made before him, by the organization of society and the division of labor in his locality, and, finally, by the division of labor in all the countries with which his locality had intercourse.” To understand the processes by which the means of production have informed the ways painters paint or critics write fosters insight dialectically into those means and into the class relations and forms of domination they entail. Professional art historians who pursue this intellectual agenda can be understood as taking part in a broader effort to further social transformation. From this point of view, the Marxist social history of art is a political praxis in its own right.

But this justification is a steep climb. Marx was after a material transformation in social relations, not an ever-finer grain for the historical analysis of them. It sufficed for him to observe that even the highest art (for example, that of Raphael) has been determined by the material structures of production. How important is it to reconstruct the governing local relations in particular art-historical cases? How vital is it to mobilize a coterie of academic specialists to unearth and describe the precise divisions of labor that subtended the art of Thomas Eakins or Winslow Homer or the Tonalists? Such an effort might refute particular myths of artistic autonomy or lead to convincing historical interpretations of individual pictures or practices, but if art historians use these interpretations to reinforce the institutional apparatus of their discipline, with all its journals, conferences, cliques, and other privileges, what kind of Marxism is that?

As Slavoj Žižek has helpfully observed, the place of ideological illusion for Marx is not in the knowing but in the doing. Any Marxist would presumably aspire to a more radical form of practice.

In other words, a marginal place for art history within Marxism gives Marxism an awkward role within art history. The more buttoned down the Marxism, the more strained the art-historical commitment becomes. Treating art in the quick and schematic fashion that Marx did will satisfy no one believing deeply in the formative possibilities of aesthetic experience. For believers—and presumably most of us who have been drawn into the practice of art history would qualify—art must be more than an economically determined superstructure.

Is there a way to reconcile a commitment to aesthetic experience with the practical aspirations of Marxism? Can we recognize the political potentials of art without imagining that it will liberate us directly? In an exchange at the University of Chicago in 2012, T.J. Clark noted the need to calibrate our expectations. “Art,” he said to a questioner, “is one limited form of social practice” in which “dream-work can be done.” Through this dream-work, he explained, “real alternatives can be explored imaginatively, and false alternatives or false freedoms can be exposed.” As dream-work, art can do more than betray the material relations that governed its production. It can talk back, however cryptically, to domination. It can get the subtle contours of class conflict into form rather than merely taking form under their pressure. It can imagine, with the density and opaqueness of dreams, alternative social relations or the lies that structure existing ones. Clark’s notion of dream-work allows for an art history that preserves the Marxist aim of social transformation while introducing a plausible role for aesthetic experience.

Such a reconciliation has real consequences for the practice of art history. By interpreting art as dream-work, Clark has distanced his scholarship from certain strains of American institutional critique. “I still learn more from an afternoon in MoMA—from the links and analogies its installations argue,” he has written, “than from fifty essays denouncing its biases and exclusions.” Tough words, those, from the leading
Marxist art historian! Clark does not dispute the findings of such critiques of museum practice ("I basically agree with many of the essayists' points," he says), but they bracket or muffle what Clark regards as the most essential political functions of art under capitalism. Concrete economic relations set constraints on art and its institutions, but an unruly capacity to transgress this or that constraint is precisely what gives art its distinctive value.

For the Marxist art historian who accepts art as dream-work, scholarship enters a murky vale between capital's brutal indifference and art’s tortured disclosures. The art historian alert to the everyday crimes of economic life but nonetheless moved by aesthetic experience can discern signs of class struggle in the anguished particulars of paint on canvas or ink on paper. From Clark’s books on French painting to Wallach’s writing on the work of Thomas Cole, the best of this scholarship has yielded moments of trenchant and stirring ekphrasis that have significantly enriched art history. But if our reference point is Marx, we have to worry about the limited political import of these glimpses into the traffic between social economy and aesthetic experience. It would be nice to think that the workers whose labor sustains the material chains of the publishing industry would ultimately benefit from a book or web post proffering a better understanding of the art and reception of Courbet or Cole, and perhaps one day they will. But the causal relationship is tenuous.

This structural tension has lent much Marxist art history a Romantic tenor. A rhetoric of dark prophecy or bitter lament casts the art historian as a heroic figure, who resists the tempting balms of myth and attests instead to the horrible failure of the modern world to abide by the searing honesty of aesthetic revelation or to recognize the heartbreak of its futility. "If I can’t have the proletariat as my chosen people any longer, at least capitalism remains my Satan," Clark wrote defiantly in the wake of socialism’s coffin-nailing moment of 1989. But in what sense was the proletariat ever “his” chosen people? How can we square a Marxist commitment to material transformation with such a Romantic decree?

As these questions might suggest, dream-work entails the troublesome issue of identification. By the 1990s, the conspicuous fact that the Marxists who professed the agony of modernity most stridently in the humanities were white and male became uncomfortable. The great cultural monuments, Fredric Jameson wrote, are "stained with the guilt not merely of culture in particular but of History itself as one long nightmare." Modernity’s “disenchantment of the world is horrible, intolerable,” Clark confirmed. Elsewhere he opined, “Poe’s century, and Wagner’s century, and come to that Picasso’s and Pollock’s century, were obviously vile.” Such jeremiads arose from a recognition of real evils, but they could seem indifferent to systematic disparities or historical trends in suffering. They often paid scant notice to the disproportionate oppression of African Americans, women, and other categorically disempowered peoples, and ignored evidence of the social progress that the civil rights movement, feminism, ACT UP, and other mobilizations had tenaciously earned. For peoples traditionally singled out for subjugation and struggling for new freedoms, Weberian talk of modernity’s “disenchantment” of the world could sound absurd.

A blindness to differential subjugation and to signs of hard-won measures of civil autonomy impaired many a Marxist broadside.

The emergence of feminist art history is especially germane in this respect. Wallach recalls that the centrality of the social history of art in the 1980s was such that some feminist art historians sought to fuse their approach with Marxism. This may be true,
but it is worth remembering that the leading feminist art history of that era often criticized the Marxist strain for its insensitivity to issues of gender. Griselda Pollock’s attack on Clark’s interpretation of Manet’s *Olympia* for its “peculiar closures” with respect to sexuality may be taken as exemplary of this antagonism.\(^{12}\) The fact that the leaders of feminist art history were women only added to the pressure on the Marxists, few of whom could boast much more than a sympathetic political affiliation with the working class. Pollock did not have to claim women as her “chosen people.” By dint of this asymmetry, feminist art history had a compelling claim to enacting more of a material change in social relations, to transforming art history—to use Wallach’s words—“from within.”

These matters belong to the social history of the social history of art—that is, to the broad set of social relations in which the social history of art has been taught and written. Two other aspects of these relations seem worth noting. The first is the historically uneasy reception in America of European notions of class. The idea that America is a classless society is a flimsy myth, as anyone who socializes across class lines immediately learns, but class identification and marking have never operated in America as they have in Europe. It may be, as some Leftists have concluded, that America simply suffers a more complete immersion in ideology than Europe does. But this supposition seems as facile as that of American apologists who assert that the country has been largely free from class conflict.\(^{13}\) Whatever the fundamental class antagonisms in America, the role of art in their negotiation is likely to take a peculiar course. A second and related aspect of these contextual relations is the diminishing prospect for any social transformation in America emerging from a mobilization of the working class. Interpreting the steep decline in union membership or worker protest over the past half-century as evidence of the ruthless and effective subjugation of the proletariat by the ruling classes is a perfectly legitimate Marxist move, but one that does not obviously recuperate the usefulness of class as a concept of political praxis. For Marx, class was not merely a structural category but also a means of fomenting a revolutionary liberation. If class and social transformation have parted ways, to which should a Marxist remain allied?

For the art historian, some of the complexities of Marxism in America can be made vivid through this crude observation: plenty of the American rich don’t give a damn about art. They show few signs of needing to harness it for legitimation, to suppress it to maintain their hold on power, or to use it to cultivate a superior form of taste. Pierre Bourdieu associated cultural capital with distinction, but Warren Buffett has boosted his cultural capital in America by eating McDonald’s hamburgers, drinking cherry Coke, and watching sports on television.\(^{14}\) Many rich people in America wear their populist sensibility as a badge of honor. If the majority of them refuse Buffett’s frugality, they still tend to distinguish themselves through quantity or populist forms of quality. Four houses, an eight-car garage, a private jet, more and bigger screens: these are stock measures of success. The working-class kid who beats the odds and makes it to the Ivy League will almost certainly be baffled by alien taste, habit, and inclination, but in all probability not much of this alienation will concern Old Master painting or avant-garde film. The ideological apparatus legitimating the consolidation and abuse of power may be stronger than ever but may have little need for art.

The screen, we might say, has eclipsed the altarpiece. The Sunday morning sermon about heaven and hell may once have kept the workers in line, but if you want to suppress unrest, 24/7 HiDef entertainment and Facebook fantasy are your best bet
today. What could be more pacifying than the nonstop assurance that life is a football game, a singing contest, a speed date, a boastful display, or a pornographic encounter? Pretty much everything in the land of spectacle is the inverse of economic reality: either scrupulously fair or scripted for our satisfaction or both. Much daily life has become a captivating touch screen of stimulation that taps out profits for the 1 percent. “Where do you want to go today?” Microsoft asked in its mid-1990s advertising campaign. The answer assumed and celebrated was: nowhere. The corporate media urge us to trade sensory connection with the world for ear buds or Google Glass or to otherwise forgo bodily life in favor of deathless streams of diverting triviality administered by hidden networks. Teenagers sit indoors playing with their joysticks, Xboxes, and PlayStations while outside the temperature rises. Art still counts for something in the economic order—the stratospheric prices that auction houses more or less sustain is evidence enough of that—but its principal role seems to be supplying tokens for a superfluous interclass rivalry among a small cosmopolitan subset of the rich. To exert social power, money doesn’t have to pass through class identity the way it once did. It can be mainlined into politics.

If this impatient political assessment is basically correct, Clark’s emphasis on art as dream-work rather than as ideological weapon or structural symptom may be especially apt in the American context. Art’s very marginality could magnify its importance as a practical field wherein ideology can be exposed and the negative spaces of unrealized or forgotten alternatives to capitalism can be imagined. Studying the art of the past can remind us of the history of this dream-work and thereby enrich our understanding of the historical moment we traverse and upon which we hope to improve.

But still we might wonder how exactly a Marxist social history of American art differs from a non-Marxist one, and how we might best weigh the merits of the two. Marxism, we can reasonably assume, entails the beliefs that (1) capitalism is inherently flawed in ways that covertly produce intolerable forms of domination, and (2) a fundamentally different and superior form of social organization is available in the foreseeable future. These beliefs correspond to Clark’s notion of art as a dream-work of disclosure and alternative. Non-Marxist social histories of art presumably depart from one or both of these foundational Marxist beliefs, and thereby shift from Marxism into some form of liberalism.

Is capitalism inherently flawed? No doubt. But as the passages quoted above from Jameson and Clark would suggest, adherence to this Marxist precept, at least among scholars recoiling from post-1968 retrenchment, has in practice often led to unrestrained critiques of life in capitalist society. These totalizing critiques have frequently seemed strained and, at times, indulgent. Excessive historical veneration of coffeehouse snippets of socialism by scholars living pretty high on the bourgeois hog can be hard to take. But the deeper issue is the mismatch between these utterly bleak assessments of capitalist society and lived experience. Is life in America really so vacuous or sterile? Do friendship, community, and art under capitalism really offer no forms of enchantment? Americanist art historians have often favored a more nuanced assessment in their histories. For example, Anthony Lee’s examination of nineteenth-century photographic portraits of Chinese shoemakers in western Massachusetts has led him to dispute the notion that self-representation among the working class is a hopeless business. Such a notion “has always seemed too grim,” he writes, “and gives up too quickly on the ways the sitters and the complicated relations among them helped to drive the [picture] industry from below.”  

15
Although wholesale critiques of life under capitalism have been common in practice, the basic premises of Marxism do not require them. Indeed, hardline Marxists may have been their own worst enemies in this regard. To label those who would acknowledge certain salutary social possibilities under capitalism liberals, as though such an acknowledgment could not possibly coexist with the pursuit of a radical alternative to capitalism, is bootless factionalism and intellectual blackmail. Capitalism may allow or even facilitate forms of wonder, delight, or self-fashioning while remaining fundamentally structured by morally abhorrent forms of domination and deceit.

The pursuit of a more nuanced assessment of capitalism has implications for our use of the notion of class. Wallach stresses that a defining characteristic of Marxism is its staunch use of class as a master concept. As Žižek has put it, “the wager of Marxism is that there is one antagonism (class struggle) which overdetermines all the others and which is as such the ‘concrete universal’ of the entire field.” For the Marxist, the antagonisms of gender, race, or sexual identity are secondary and take their structure and meaning from the basic antagonism of class. As Wallach suggests, Americanist art historians have often turned away from this premise of economic determinism to concentrate on the internal dynamics of other oppressions. For example, Shawn Michelle Smith has used the concept of the archive—and more especially her neologism, the counterarchive—to grapple with the politics of race and representation. In her analysis of W.E.B. Du Bois’s photographic display of African American society for the Paris Exposition of 1900, Smith has articulated the potential and limits of the archive as a means of refashioning racial discourse. Like Lee, by no means insensitive to the issue of class, Smith nonetheless writes a history that departs from the Marxist paradigm.

Is the Marxist adherence to class as a master concept backed by a convincing demonstration of its value? At times, the arguments in support of it are less than vigorous. For example, the claim that the relatively avid embrace of feminism by the upper classes proves that feminism is fundamentally structured by class can be turned on its head. In other words, one could argue that the relatively forceful use of Marxism to attend to the plight of working-class men proves that class is fundamentally structured by the antagonism of gender. At the very least, the continued tendency for class to receive its predominant support as a master concept from the ranks of white men should be a source of concern. To be clear: the point is not that class is a subordinate category, but rather that other categories may intersect it in networks of power that are determined by multiple antagonisms and not a master one. This seems to be the gist of recent scholarship on the social history of American art. It would be shortsighted indeed to underestimate the vital work of scholars such as Kathleen Pyne and Jonathan Weinberg on the grounds that they have focused on antagonisms other than class.

The issue of class as a master category, however, is not so easily dismissed. The Marxist rejoinder to these criticisms is that sexism, racism, and other discriminatory regimes came under liberal attack only as sanctioned by the needs of capital. Diversifying the boardroom may do little to alter the fundamental social relations that keep millions locked in poverty, and doubtless Williams Sonoma and other commercial interests are eager to handle the wedding registries that same-sex marriages will generate. From this perspective, the subsidence of class as a key term of social analysis may be part and parcel of a growing insularity of our universities—many of which are located in prosperous centers of technological innovation—from the economic life of most human beings. As the gap between rich and poor continues to widen, scholars
attending to social categories other than class may need to integrate those categories more explicitly into histories responsive to the bitter economics of our time.

The next question is whether a superior alternative to capitalism is available. On this score the positions of Marxists and liberals have tended to mirror one another. Marxists have tended to view the dramatic historical shortcomings of socialism as contingent and surmountable while deeming the dramatic historical shortcomings of capitalism as systematic and inherent. Liberals, on the other hand, have tended to view the dramatic historical shortcomings of capitalism as contingent and surmountable, while deeming those of socialism inherent. The two positions can seem equally inconsistent and predetermined. But hope hinges on the possibility that a new social contract can be realized.

If we are looking for a nexus between the history of American art and the economic realities of our day, then perhaps the best place to start is the controversy attending the proposed sale of holdings from the Detroit Institute of Arts to finance the bankrupt city’s pension debt. The uproar is indicative of a widespread sense that municipal collections of art are not ordinary assets but rather a cultural commons that, however much assembled through market processes, now exceeds them. One may reasonably hope that this controversy will become part of a broader awakening to the ways in which many repositories of common interest, from the natural environment to public schools, are being degraded due to systemic flaws in our governance. One supportive sign is the emergent recognition that the mismanagement of our new commons, the internet, is throwing the relationships among labor, social value, and economic return violently out of whack. As Jaron Lanier has observed, although users of the internet are collectively generating huge repositories of value, the economic returns are funneled to a tiny few. Whereas Kodak at its height employed more than 140,000 people, Instagram had only thirteen employees when Facebook bought it for a billion dollars in 2012. Like Facebook, Instagram does not pay its users, who essentially manufacture the value of its services. Now might be a propitious time to embark on new lines of historical inquiry regarding how art has dreamt of collectivity and value.

Such lines of inquiry may bring us up against the capacity of art to refuse our fantasies for what it will dream. Eric Rosenberg, for example, has approached the difficult but absorbing structure of Depression-era photographs by Walker Evans through the concept of trauma. As Rosenberg argues, these photographs invite interpretation as an allegory of the traumatic experience of a particular class, but their trauma is precisely to forestall such an interpretation, to render it both cogent and unavailable, locked away, bankrupt, or even obscene in its presumption.

Another question that lingers concerns the limits of the social. By this I do not mean the proposition that there are corners of meaning that the social does not reach, but rather the possibility that the social may not have the whole of meaning to itself, or that its limits are not what we thought. One can approach these limits through any discourse connecting society to its negative spaces. For example, ecology, psychoanalysis, spirituality, or biology can push the social up against a natural, psychic, or metaphysical substrate or boundary. At the moment, ecology exerts a special degree of pressure on our habits of thinking. The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has reflected: “As the [ecological] crisis gathered momentum in the last few years, I realized that all my readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary
conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today.”22 This conjuncture, which Chakrabarty characterizes as one in which “Humans now wield a geological force,” is smudging the boundary between social and natural history.23 It threatens to make any predominant concern for human society seem parochial and chauvinist. To bring out the full import of art as dream-work may now require a matrix of meaning that exceeds what Marx and other paradigmatic thinkers of prior eras bequeathed to us.

Finally, there is a problem of our class, however we might define it—that is, the class of art historians, or of humanists, or of college and university professors and students, or of intellectuals interested in the history of art. Although Wallach and I may analyze the matter differently, we evidently share a sense that the study of American art, despite the exemplary scholarly efforts I have cited—and in some cases as perspicaciously signaled by them—can feel adrift. There is often a mismatch between the nuanced or rarefied agenda of our scholarship and the dire state of our politics. The litany of political woes is familiar: the American political system has become dysfunctional; the gap between the rich and poor continues to widen and social mobility wanes; many of the poor, denied adequate legal representation, languish in prison for petty drug crimes; governments around the globe are responding to the oncoming horrors of climate change with alarming sluggishness; and so on. In the face of this mess, we surely need to renew and redefine our collective responsibilities and our understanding of the commonality that binds us. This could mean reclaiming and reaffirming our critical role as custodians of the values and forms of attention demanded by the dream-work of art.

Time may be of the essence, because wolves are at the door. While I was writing this chapter, the student editorial board of the Harvard Crimson issued an editorial entitled “Let Them Eat Code” that cheerfully spurned worry about the declining numbers of students majoring in the humanities. Asserting that this decline has advances in “medicine, technological efficiency, and environmental sustainability as its natural consequence,” the writers add, “we’re not especially sorry to see the English majors go.”24 Polemical arguments from student editors are nothing new, but such a callous and ill-reasoned volley and the license it presumes cannot help but unsettle those who have devoted much of their working lives to understanding art. Wallach reflects warmly on the moment of 1975–85 when “Marxist art history had posed a threat to art-historical business as usual.” But in an era of start-up billionaires and millions of unemployed youth, threats to art-historical business as usual are arriving willy-nilly from the imagined imperatives of global enterprise. At various moments in the past century and a half, avant-gardes or neo-avant-gardes have dreamt of merging art into life and aesthetics into everyday practice. If the academy starts to disgorge the humanities in favor of an instrumental culture of entrepreneurship, historians of American art may have no choice but to abandon their passion or take it to the streets. In the meantime, these scholars, whether they work in a Marxist mode or not, will need all the resourcefulness and verve they can muster to bridge the troublesome gap between art and politics.

Acknowledgments

This chapter was aided substantially by conversations with Eric Rosenberg and Alan Wallach, who remain entirely blameless for any limitations it may have.
Notes

3 Žižek, 1989, pp. 28–35.
4 Clark, 2012.
5 Clark, 1999, p. 175.
7 For some brief remarks on materiality and representation, see Kelsey, 2013.
11 On the theory of modern disenchantment, see Weber, 2004. For a thoughtful medita-
tion on the use of the terms “enchantment” and “disenchantment” in relation to
modernity, see Saler, 2013.
12 Pollock, 1988, p. 53.
13 For a critique of the apologists, see Manley, 2003.
15 Lee, 2008, p. 221.
18 Although I often find Žižek convincing, I depart from him on this point. See Žižek,
2012, p. 33.
20 Lanier, 2013, p. 2.
22 Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 199. For an argument that ideas about human effects on
climate are not as new as all that, see Locher and Fressoz, 2012.
24 Crimson staff, 2013.

References

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
pp. 197–222.
Clark, T.J. (1973a). Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution. London:
Thames & Hudson.
London: Thames & Hudson.
Clark, T.J. (1985). The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His
Buchloh.” In M. Buskirk and M. Nixon (eds.), The Duchamp Effect: Essays, Interviews,


The Maker’s Share
Tools for the Study of Process in American Art
Ethan W. Lasser

Interpretations of art-making—interpretations that attempt to explain and account for the processes behind works of art from the past—are increasingly prevalent in the American art field. Witness the number of recent publications, exhibitions, and workshops devoted to the study of process. From Lance Mayer and Gay Myers’s second volume on the techniques of American painting, to the Whitney Museum’s 2013 exhibition of Edward Hopper’s working drawings, academics and museum curators are moving beyond the traditional analysis of completed works to “reinsert the making of an object into their interpretations.”¹ This scholarly turn is consistent with larger shifts in the discipline of art history. As historian Pamela Smith has explained, “Historians and museum curators are often confronted with objects and they are increasingly of the opinion that is it no longer enough to understand how an object participated in commercial networks or the role it played in patronage relationships.” Today, there is a growing sense that “an appreciation of the meaning, function, and operation of a historical object can be gained by knowledge of the way it was made.”²

In turning their attention to process, today’s scholars are asking new questions of an old subject. Historians of American art have written about tools and techniques for generations. Studies of process can be found in some of the earliest writing in the field. As Mayer and Myers have explained, William Dunlap “included many observations and anecdotes about technique in his 1834 History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States,” one of the first formal histories of American art.³ Interest in the subject of facture is particularly strong in the decorative arts field. Library shelves bend under the weight of thick tomes that detail the wide-ranging processes used to produce pieces of furniture, silver, and ceramic. Exhibition catalogues explain and illustrate historic materials, tools, and techniques.

The present chapter is written for scholars who are turning to this literature and larger questions of art-making for the first time. My objective is to describe and assess
The primary methods that writers have used to explain how objects from the past were made and to account for their facture. Many of the examples that I cite come from the field of early American decorative arts history. While the literature on historic ceramics, furniture, and silver is often (and often aptly) criticized as overly concerned with old-fashioned questions of connoisseurship and style, this literature also provides a variety of innovative and imaginative approaches to questions of making. Indeed, this chapter will suggest that the subject of making is one arena in which the scholarship on the decorative arts, which is rarely, if ever, looked to as a methodological model, can contribute to the interpretation of American art more generally.

Every tour needs its landmarks, and this survey will begin with and continually come back to a single piece of furniture: a chest of drawers with doors made in Boston sometime between 1650 and 1670 (Figure 6.1).4 Square in shape and set on large, turned ball feet, the chest is one of the most complex and sophisticated pieces of furniture produced in seventeenth-century North America. In an age when the term

Figure 6.1 Chest of drawers with doors, Boston, 1650–70, white oak, red oak, chestnut, eastern white pine, soft maple, probably American black walnut, cedar, probably maple or cherry, beech, cedrela, snakewood, rosewood, and lignum vitae, 48 7/8 × 45 13/16 × 23 11/16 in. (124.1 × 116.3 × 60.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection 1930.2109.
“chest” named a long, low horizontal object with a hinged lid and a single, undivided cavity of storage space, this piece was far ahead of its time. Its interior is divided into six compartments: three drawers on the upper section stand above the three drawers on (and behind the doors enclosing) the lower section.

Even more novel than this design are the turnings and veneers that adorn the surface of the chest. Unlike most pieces of seventeenth-century New England furniture, which were adorned with shallow relief carving, this object is decorated like a building. Its surface is animated by a wide-ranging vocabulary of applied moldings, bosses, and spindles that are all loosely architectural in character. This resonance is particularly direct in the case of the inlaid keystone and capitals that stand at the center of each lower door (Figure 6.2). Composed of dark, dense imported hardwoods including cedrela, snakewood, and lignum vitae from Central and South America, these archways would have looked exotic in an age accustomed to furniture crafted of oak and other local woods.

Given its complexity and avant-garde character, it is not surprising to learn that work on this chest has been widely published. Scholars have discussed its construction, identified its materials, attempted to attribute the piece to a group of Boston makers, and connected its architectonic surface to motifs in the European design books that first became available in Britain and Colonial America in the period when the chest was made.
For the purposes of this chapter, it is useful to set aside this existing literature and imagine that we are seeing the chest for the first time. How can new scholars begin to sort out the tools and techniques behind this object? How can one begin to determine the way in which its remarkable surface was crafted?

Close Analysis

As is often the case in art history, close analysis is the interpreter’s most effective tool. Physical evidence yields more information about the processes that brought an object into being than any text. Seams and exposed joints show the way that an object was assembled, while compass points, scribe lines, and underdrawing show the first steps that the maker took to lay out his design.

A trained eye and attentive hand can yield deeper insights. In his suggestively titled study of early New England furniture, “Manuscripts, Marks, and Material Culture: Sources for Understanding the Joiner’s Trade in Seventeenth-Century America,” furniture historian Peter Follansbee demonstrates that under careful scrutiny the slightest surface distortion or tool mark can reveal a wealth of information. Focusing on a group of Massachusetts chests, Follansbee shows how much can be learned simply by running one’s hand across the surface of an object. Protruding round pegs indicate the presence of a mortise-and-tenon joint, and show that the individual boards that make up the chest were crafted from freshly cut, “green” wood, which subsequently lost moisture and “seasoned and shrank,” pushing the pegs forward. Follansbee’s exploration of the underside of the chest yielded a related insight: the tears on the oak boards that form this part of the object indicate that the boards were split or riven from green wood rather than sawn, a process that would have left the surface of the boards relatively smooth. While these two observations concern the material from which the chest was crafted, Follansbee’s investigations also revealed some of the tools that contributed to the production of the piece. For example, the concave undulations on the back panels point to the action of the foreplane, which was used to flatten the rough boards comprising this part of the object.6

In relying on evidence gleaned from the hand as well as the eye, Follansbee’s article offers an instructive lesson for scholars grappling with questions of process for the first time. While art-historical analysis is generally a business of close looking, questions of art-making bring the sense of touch into play.

The How-To Book

Past scholars have developed two further methods to supplement the information gleaned through close analysis. The first draws on the vast how-to literature of the past. Many scholars are familiar with Diderot’s Encyclopédie, the extraordinarily detailed eighteenth-century account of the luxury trades in France. Less well known is the fact that this volume, while singular in its scope and ambition, is but one example of a much larger genre. In a recent study of a sixteenth-century manuscript on metalworking, Smith notes “a boom in technical writing” during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This period saw the publication of a range of books on “the
making of all kinds of things, from beehive construction to saltpeter making, and from embroidery to cannon casting.”

How-to writing does not always make for the most stimulating reading. (Indeed, in a recent essay, the craft historian Glenn Adamson bemoaned its “lamentable anti-intellectual” qualities.8) But the genre is a key source for historians who want to understand how objects from the past were constructed. Many scholars have drawn on how-to writings to verify their own observations. For example, in the article cited above, Follansbee refers to Joseph Moxon’s 1677 book, *Mechanick Exercises; or, the Doctrine of Handy-Works*, a two-volume account of blacksmithing, carpentry, joining, and turning, to identify some of the tool marks on the surface of the chests he examined. Follansbee specifically uses Moxon’s description and illustration of the foreplane to connect the marks on the backboards of the chest to this tool.9

Other scholars have used the how-to genre as a primary source, and based their accounts of the way in which objects from the past were constructed entirely on the information in these historic texts. John Hill’s 1976 article, “The History and Technique of Japanning and the Restoration of the Pimm Highboy,” exemplifies this approach. Hill, the longtime conservator at the Winterthur Museum, was responsible for treating the Pimm highboy, a masterpiece of eighteenth-century Boston japanning, or imitation lacquerware, named for its likely maker, John Pimm, whose signature sweeps across the back of a lower drawer. In his article, Hill sets out to “examine how this imitative process was [first] accomplished” by closely analyzing John Stalker and George Parker’s 1688 *Treatise of Japanning and Varnishing*, the most widely read treatise on the craft, which held sway among amateurs and aspiring craftsmen into the early decades of the eighteenth century.10

Hill’s account paraphrases Stalker and Parker’s. His is an accessible version of their how-to book, and he manages to clarify and condense many pages of rambling seventeenth-century prose. Hill opens his account with “the first step in the procedure for japanning a piece of furniture,” when the artisan “prepared the surface of the wood” for the layers of varnish that formed the ground for the black and gold imagery. Fourteen pages and thirty-three steps later, Hill arrives at the culmination of the japanning process, when the artisan added layers of “securing varnish” to prevent damage to the piece.11

This clear and concise narrative structure is echoed throughout the scholarly literature on making. Many historic how-to books have been analyzed and distilled in the manner of the *Treatise of Japanning and Varnishing*.12 While this literature has much to offer, future scholars should take care to approach both the how-to genre and the accounts based on these historic sources with a skeptical eye. Texts like Moxon’s *Mechanick Exercises* and Stalker and Parker’s *Treatise* contain a great deal of useful information, but they can be misleading. In reality, the act of making is rarely a linear progression from raw material to finished product. The how-to books standardize and streamline processes interrupted by chance and accident for the sake of clarity and narrative momentum. This reflects their intended audience: as Smith notes in her study, the how-to books were written for a readership of consumers rather than makers. “The appearance of these technical guides has been associated with the growth of urban culture and the cities’ increased population of a middling sort … more isolated from familiar sources of technical knowledge.”13 Written to refine artisanal processes for polite consumption, how-to literature sought to codify and clean up practices that relied on improvisation and intuition.
The accounts of process in the how-to books can also be misleading for a more straightforward reason: writing about making is difficult, sometimes impossibly challenging. As Smith notes in her survey of the genre, “A book is not an optimal means for conveying technique.” “Technical writing can be descriptive only: it points to bodily activity, but cannot accomplish that activity, teach it completely or even describe it fully.” Adamson makes a more concise version of this point in the 2010 anthology, *The Craft Reader*. He identifies a central contradiction at the heart of “craft writing”: “it attempts to convey in words which can only be done by hand.”

In many cases, the authors of the historic how-to books explicitly acknowledged the difficulty of writing about making. Take the *Mechanick Exercises*, for example. Moxon interspersed his lengthy descriptions of process with honest and revealing accounts of the struggles he faced while crafting his prose. He worried about being verbose, wondered whether readers would take any interest in his analysis, and at several points remarked on the sheer difficulty of putting process into words.

I thought to have given these *Exercises* the Title of *the Doctrine of Handy-Crafts*, but when I better considered the true meaning of the word *Handy-Crafts*, I found that *Doctrine* would not bear it, because *Hand-Craft* signifies *Cunning* or *Sleight* or *Craft* of the Hand, which cannot be taught by words, but is only gained by *Practice* and *Exercise*.

To paraphrase: Moxon suggests that it is impossible to explain making with words or “doctrine” because knowledge of making is only gained outside of language, with “practice and exercise.” This statement is not a particularly auspicious way to open a two-volume survey of artisanal techniques. At the very least, it should raise a caution flag for researchers who seek to explain historic processes on the basis of historic texts.

**Reconstruction**

A small but growing number of scholars have started to explore a third approach to the question of process that overcomes the limits of the how-to books, and offers insight into certain types of art-making that were not documented in texts. In collaboration with skilled conservators and contemporary makers, these scholars have attempted to determine how objects from the past were made by actually remaking them. Their studies merit attention because they are among the most innovative and imaginative in the decorative arts field.

Contemporary ceramic artist Michelle Erickson and art historian Robert Hunter are two of the most prolific practitioners of this approach. Committed to the idea that the most effective way to understand how an object from the past was made is to physically reconstruct it, Erickson and Hunter have spent decades crafting perfect replicas of historic ceramics in order to recover methods and techniques that have been lost to time.

The team’s greatest breakthrough came in 2007, when they reconstructed a Bonnin and Morris picklestand (Figure 6.3). Gousse Bonnin and George Anthony Morris were the Philadelphia entrepreneurs behind the short-lived American China Manufactory (ACM), the first attempt to produce porcelain in what is now the United States.
Nineteen objects survive from the ACM, which only operated for two years, from 1770 to 1772, due to lack of capital and competition from imported British ceramics. The most ambitious and extraordinary object that Bonnin and Morris produced was a densely ornamented picklestand, an assemblage of four scallop-shell-shaped dishes fused together by a central columnar shaft encrusted in shell ornament.

Ceramic historians have studied Bonnin and Morris’s wares for decades. But the process behind the picklestand, which was never documented in a text like Stalker and Parker’s Treatise, was an absolute mystery until Erickson and Hunter turned their attention to the piece. Using materials and tools similar to those deployed in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, the team reconstructed a version of the original picklestand and documented the entire process in text and photographs. In doing so, Erickson and Hunter challenged “a fair amount of folklore from various Bonnin and Morris aficionados.” For example, they disproved the long-standing assumption that the large shells at the top of the picklestands were sculpted freehand. After a considerable trial-and-error experiment, Erickson and Hunter determined that “molds were the key technology behind the production” of the piece. By their calculation, the picklestand comprises “more than seventy molded elements,” an extraordinary number for such a small object.

Ultimately, Erickson and Hunter’s study yielded insight into more than just the way in which the picklestand was crafted. Through the process of reconstruction, they also arrived at an understanding of the level of material knowledge and skill necessary to produce the piece. Though crafting the picklestand required a keen sense of the drying rate of clay and an understanding of the relationship between the different clays used to create the object, the piece was not as difficult to produce as past scholars had assumed. A key revelation concerned the tiny shells affixed to the central column.
between the base and the upper shells. Though these shells look as if they were the work of a master craftsman, Erickson and Hunter determined that this section of the piece was probably left to the apprentice. Cast from simple press molds, “these delicate and realistic shells could be created with a modicum of artistic skill … preparation of the individual components of the pickle stand appears to have been a straightforward, if time-consuming task.”

Given the potential for this kind of insight, it is not surprising that attempts at historical reconstruction are becoming more and more common in the American art field.21 Future scholars should take this approach seriously because it brings the interpreter into contact with an elusive body of “tacit knowledge,” a term craft historians use to describe the unspoken hand skill, material knowledge, and “artisanal literacy” that is basic to every art-making process but almost never documented, perhaps, following from Moxon, because it is impossible to describe.22

The Maker’s Share

We are now armed with three methodological tools for exploring the processes behind works of art from the past. This interpretive armature brings us back to the late seventeenth-century chest of drawers. In order to identify the tools and techniques used to create this object, one can follow Follansbee’s lead and look for joints and tool marks, or run one’s hands across the surface of the back and bottom boards to determine how the wood was split. If assessed with a sufficiently skeptical eye, period writings like Moxon’s Mechanick Exercises can help to verify the insights that follow from this close analysis. Finally, if we were able to find a suitably skilled woodworker, we could actually attempt to explain the facture of the chest by reconstructing it.

As is often the case in art-historical inquiry, in answering one set of questions, another is opened up. After examining the tools and techniques behind the construction of the chest, one is naturally inclined to try to account for these tools and techniques. The question of how leads to the question of why. If makers make countless decisions in the course of crafting an object, how can one explain these decisions? Why did the craftsman who made the chest dovetail rather than nail up the drawers? Why, to focus on the ornament, did he work from a published design rather than his own imagination?

In the decorative arts field, convention holds that the answer to these questions rests in the maker’s training. Artisans learned certain techniques at the beginning of their careers in their apprenticeships and (or so the prevailing logic goes) continued to practice these techniques throughout their careers. As the decorative arts historian Philip Zea has explained, “Apprenticeships perpetuated consistency” and passed “fixed concepts of the right way to execute a design” from generation to generation, shop to shop, city to city. The furniture historian Benno Forman echoes this account in his seminal analysis of the seventeenth-century Boston chest: “A craftsman who was trained to make drawers with rabbeted or butted drawer joints is not likely to suddenly make them with dovetails.”

Explanations like these are only partially satisfactory. While the tacit knowledge of working materials, holding tools, and assembling disparate parts was no doubt conveyed and mastered during the apprenticeship, the maker did not necessarily continue to practice these techniques for his entire career. If that were the case, the processes of
art-making would be static and resistant to the introduction of new tools and technologies rather than dynamic and open to technical advances from a variety of different fields.

If not to training, then to what energies and pressures should new scholars look in order to account for the facture of a given object? The second half of this chapter is devoted to this question. In what follows, I will outline three approaches to what the art historian Svetlana Alpers has eloquently described as “the maker’s share.” Building on Michael Baxandall’s theory of “the beholder’s share,” Alpers uses this term to describe “the beliefs and categories of thought that went into producing and creating.” Interpretations that consider these beliefs and categories necessarily lead to more speculative conclusions than those outlined in the first half of this chapter. While it is possible to accurately document the tools and techniques that went into the production of historic objects, few makers documented and few were probably even consciously aware of the larger sets of ideas that lay behind the decisions they made in the workshop.

**Materiality**

A first pathway into the question of the maker’s share focuses on materials and identifies the cultural attitude toward a given material as the primary “category of thought” that structured decisions in the workshop. This literature takes as its starting point the understanding that every time a maker from the past wielded his tool against a block of wood or an ingot of silver he engaged both with a piece of matter and with the collection of physical and social properties that this piece of matter embodied. In his survey of the making and viewing of eighteenth-century sculpture, the art historian Malcolm Baker notes that every material has its own “iconography,” a “cluster of meanings” to which it is tied. This approach seeks to recover and assess those meanings.

Jennifer Anderson’s recent book, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America*, exemplifies the kind of insight that a consideration of the cultural attitude toward a given material can unlock. Anderson examines the cultural beliefs and values that made mahogany one of the most coveted and expensive woods in the eighteenth century in the Atlantic world. Drawing on a range of period images and texts, her study shows that Anglo-Americans valued mahogany and mahogany furniture for its “silky, polished surfaces, deep saturated colors, and intriguingly figured grains,” because these properties “coincided with eighteenth-century Anglo concepts of beauty, gentility, refinement and modernity.”

Throughout her study, Anderson pays close attention to the way eighteenth-century attitudes toward mahogany impacted the workshop. Artisanal decisions about the entire process of crafting mahogany furniture, from the selecting and cutting of mahogany logs to the polishing and assembling of mahogany boards into chairs, chests, and tables, were all tied to and guided by the larger period sense of the wood. “Cabinetmakers favored wood cut from the base of the mahogany tree [because it] took the highest polish” and milled mahogany logs to ensure that the boards that emerged from these logs would reveal “the elaborate grain patterns” favored in the period.

At the same time that eighteenth-century attitudes toward mahogany conditioned the maker’s decisions about which aspects of the material to emphasize, it also impacted
decisions about which aspects of the material to suppress. As Anderson explains, the connection between mahogany and refinement led to the elimination of every trace of the “wild” and “unfettered” natural world from which the mahogany tree was extracted. While earlier furniture makers who worked in oak and walnut left signs of the forest like annual rings and pieces of bark intact, makers who worked with mahogany typically cut these details out. The grain patterns that adorn the surface of mahogany drawer fronts and tabletops are the only trace of the material’s origin in the depths of the forest, and these patterns are highly abstract, their resonance more painterly than botanical (Figure 6.4). Even more striking is the absence of any trace of the labor that went into the production of mahogany in finished pieces of furniture. A vast network of enslaved Africans, itinerant woodcutters, colonists, and planters in the West Indies and Central America, as well as merchants, cabinetmakers, and laborers in England and the northern colonies, lay behind the sourcing, felling, and extraction of mahogany logs. Indeed, according to Anderson, mahogany cannot be understood
apart from “the contentious human circumstances” surrounding its production. Yet few pieces of mahogany furniture “give any hint of the labor invested in them.”29

The Social

Anderson’s approach can be used to illuminate workmanship in a range of different materials.30 But the cultural attitude toward a given species of wood, or a particular type of pigment or clay, was not all that the maker had on his mind when deciding which tool or technique to deploy. A second, related approach to the question of the maker’s share considers the impact of broader social, economic, and ideological pressures on the workshop. To what extent does a community’s position relative to larger patterns of cultural and economic change translate into artisanal decisions? Scholar Edward Cooke shows the value of asking this question in his book *Making Furniture in Preindustrial America: The Social Economy of Newtown and Woodbury, Connecticut.*

Cooke examines the furniture produced in two neighboring communities: the “yeoman town” of Newtown and the “gentry town” of Woodbury. He juxtaposes the design as well as the construction of the furniture produced in each city and shows that cabinetmakers in Newtown and Woodbury went about the task of crafting similar furniture forms in very different ways. These differences are manifest in something as simple and seemingly straightforward and standardized as drawer construction. Modeling the kind of close analysis discussed earlier in this chapter, Cooke explains that in Newtown drawers were sturdily built with “techniques that accounted for the movement of wood across the grain … Dovetails fit tightly, and all drawers were built of the same woods.” If one drawer in a case piece had red oak sides, a yellow poplar back, and a yellow poplar bottom, then so did all the drawers in the object. Locked together with “tight-fitting dovetails,” the drawers of the Newtown pieces have an “over-engineered quality.” This reflects the premium that “Newtowners put … on construction rather than ephemeral decoration.”31

By contrast, in Woodbury “craftsmen favored the easiest and least time consuming method,” which involved rapid cutting rather than the more careful work of smoothing and planing. Drawers were built quickly, often in a rather shoddy fashion. “Drawer bottoms and drawer blades … were often left rough or with evidence of saw marks.” Woods were used inconsistently: with yellow poplar, red oak, and white pine deployed “in no apparent pattern,” and joints were assembled clumsily. In contrast to the joiners in Newtown, the Woodbury artisans did not devote much time to the interior, focusing instead on “visible and ornamental features” of their furniture.32

After pages of painstaking close analysis, Cooke raises the question of the maker’s share. “In Newtown and Woodbury, shifts in joinery practices, furniture design and productivity took place in the context of community development, social stratification, economic opportunity and consumer behavior.” Newtown was a stable community, populated by generations of the same families and wholly resistant to change. In keeping with these demographics and the value placed on “continuity and stability,” the Newtown craftsmen built “furniture that would last.” By contrast, Cooke explains, Woodbury’s “elaborately decorated but shoddily built” furniture reflects the values of an urban and commercial center where fashion-consciousness and inter-class competition privileged showy surfaces over durable forms.33

Taken together, Anderson’s and Cooke’s studies point a way forward for scholars interested in the body of ideas hovering over the workshop. Though tools and techniques have
changed over time, the pressure to respond to period attitudes toward a given material and to larger cultural and economic forces has not. Art historians often invoke materiality and the social in their interpretations of finished works. The studies cited above show that these same questions can be deployed to illuminate the work in its becoming.

Theorizing Process

In conclusion, I want to move outside the field of American art history to consider a third approach to the question of the maker’s share. Drawn from the theoretical writings of anthropologists and archaeologists, this approach, which is just beginning to be deployed by scholars in the American art field, invites us to account for the facture of a given object by thinking through a broader set of ideas about making, and the nature of the maker’s relationship to the tools and materials with which he worked.

Archaeologist Tim Ingold’s essay, “On Weaving a Basket,” exemplifies some of the principal themes and questions that this larger body of literature considers. This text differentiates between two ways of understanding the act of making: “According to the standard view, the form pre-exists in the maker’s mind and is simply impressed on the material.” By this account, one predominant in our own culture, the act of making is an act of translation in which a “preconceived, intellectual solution to a particular design problem” is given form. An alternative view holds that that the act of making is less an imposition than a dialogue or negotiation between the three entities involved in generating form: maker, tool, and material. According to this perspective, “the forms of objects are not imposed from above but grow from the mutual involvement of people and materials in an environment.” There may be a preconceived plan, but that plan is not executed without resistance: “One could say that the form unfolds within a kind of force field, in which the [maker] is caught up in a reciprocal and quite muscular dialogue with the material.” Making is less an act of imposition than an “active and sensuous engagement of practitioner and material.”

Though Ingold writes from an abstract, theoretical perspective that is not linked to any particular culture or period, his theories can be productively engaged to illuminate certain moments in the history of American art. To stay focused on furniture-making, it is possible to read joined pieces from the seventeenth century in terms of the second model of making Ingold describes. Joinery was a process that extended a high degree of agency to materials and tools. The process of riving, through which the joiner split the boards that comprised his furniture, was one whose outcome was shaped less by the body or will of the maker than the internal structure of the log from which the boards were extracted. (Contemporary demonstrations of riving offer the best demonstration of the negotiation between maker and tree that this process entailed.) The ornament that adorns many pieces of seventeenth-century furniture is also the product of the kind of reciprocal dialogue that Ingold describes. In this case, the tool rather than the material is the primary partner in giving form. The ornament that adorns an early New England bible box is exemplary of a larger style of period carving that was essentially composed of tool marks (Figure 6.5). The arcs on the surface of the box were determined by the arc of the compass, the fillets by the
curved profile of the gouge. Executing a design and simultaneously shaping that design, the tool is both an instrument and an agent in the generation of form.

While the oak box is the product of a dialogue between maker, tool, and material, the chest of drawers with doors illustrated in Figure 6.1 correlates with the first sense of making Ingold describes. Translated and transformed from a two-dimensional illustration in a period design book into a piece of three-dimensional marquetry, the archway that adorns the center of the lower doors is literally “impressed” onto the surface of the chest. The maker found the solution to the “problem” of adorning the object in an engraving from a published designed source, and then deployed his tools and worked his materials to realize this plan. Tool and material are, in this case, a means to an end determined by the maker.

The connection between Ingold’s theories and the production of the chest of drawers makes it tempting to speculate that the maker’s decision to work from a pre-existing plan, or at the very least to break away from an earlier process that ceded agency to the material and tool, may reflect some broader cultural turn in the idea of making itself. Reconstituting a process of negotiation as a process of imposition, this turn is consistent with the standard view of the early modern era as a period structured around the cleaving of subject and object.
Conclusion

The brief and admittedly speculative application of Ingold’s writings to the craft of seventeenth-century furniture-making suggests the power of applying anthropological theory to the question of the maker’s share. But this theory should not be applied in isolation. As was the case with the three approaches discussed at the outset of this chapter, the most effective way to account for the maker’s share is to combine the three methods discussed above. How did attitudes toward materials; social, political, and economic pressures and anxieties; and related shifts in the idea of making come together to impact the workshop? How can the seemingly simple decision to select a particular tool, assemble a series of parts in a particular way, or work from a particular design be tied to all three of these factors? Questions like these are a profitable avenue of investigation for any interpreter. Historians of American art have long focused on the interpretation of completed works. In this chapter I hope to have suggested that the interpretation of making—the grand project of explaining and accounting for the facture of works of art from the past—has the potential to become the newest chapter in the history of American art.

Notes

1 Mayer and Myers, 2013; Foster, 2013.
3 Mayer and Myers, 2011, p. xii.
4 This object is discussed in Ward, 1988, pp. 125–128.
10 Hill, 1976, p. 60.
11 Hill, 1976, pp. 61, 71.
12 Many writers have summarized the accounts of process in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* of 1751–72. See, for example, the discussion of metalsmithing in B.M. Ward, 1998, p. 6, and the discussion of marquetry in Chastang, 2001.
15 Moxon, 1701, preface.
16 This sentiment is echoed in a range of later writings, including canonical American texts that would seem to have little to do with questions of workmanship. Take Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, for example: “So I went on for some days cutting and hewing timber, and also studs and rafters, all with my narrow axe, not having many communicable or scholar-like thoughts…” (Thoreau, 1962, p. 136).
18 Hood, 1972.
19 Erickson and Hunter, 2007, p. 147.
20 Erickson and Hunter, 2007, p. 141.
21 Erickson and Hunter, 2007, p. 152.
22 Stoner, 2012.
25 Quoted in Smith, 2004, p. 22 and n. 61. See also Alpers, 1994.
26 Baker, 2000, p. 89.
30 See Baxandall, 1980; Cavanagh and Yonan, 2010.
33 Cooke, 1996, pp. 149–150.
34 Ingold, pp. 342, 347.

References


Dialogue
The Problem with Close Looking

Martin A. Berger

In a 2003 *Art Bulletin* essay charting trends in US art history, John Davis drew attention to the importance of object-centered approaches within the field. While careful to note the difficulties inherent in generalizing about a field that has grown increasingly complex over the last two decades, Davis nonetheless observed a coherent strain within Americanist practice that privileged the visual analysis of artworks. In Davis’s estimation, a methodologically disparate array of scholars—from Barbara Novak and her formalist-driven American exceptionalism to Alexander Nemerov and his deconstructive-based psychoanalysis—placed at the heart of their practice the scrupulous analysis of the object. As Davis writes, “at the risk of being accused of American exceptionalism, I would say that the privileged status of the object is—or at least has been—a defining characteristic of scholarship on American art.”

Object-centered approaches are key to scholarship on US art because of their durability and legitimacy, not because they dominate the Americanist practice today. For every study of US art that attends closely to the visual evidence of objects, there are others that make only cursory use of visual evidence and others still that evince little concern with objects per se. While not universally practiced, approaches privileging the object remain deeply entrenched. Consider how rarely students or scholars of US art today are criticized for looking *too* closely at artworks, despite general poststructural insights into the social roots of discursive and visual systems, specific New Historian warnings on the dangers inherent in reading individual texts for historical insights, and discipline-specific arguments for the social construction of visuality. Colleagues today are at times faulted for not looking closely enough, or for not looking at all, but it is rare for them to face questions over an investment in close looking itself.

Both intrigued and concerned by the privileged place of the object in Americanist practice, I trace the ascendancy of close looking in US art history, explaining its rise in
the 1980s and its seemingly implausible embrace by both those who practiced social art history and deconstruction during these years. From there I go on to speculate on its continuing allure for new generations of Americanists, before providing an art-historical case study to illustrate the practical consequences that flow from grounding one’s examination in what is seen.

I begin my consideration of close looking by following the methodological development of my graduate advisor, Jules D. Prown, the long-serving Paul Mellon Professor of the History of Art at Yale University. Prown provides a convenient point of entry to this discussion, for he is widely credited with producing the field’s most enduring manifesto on an object-centered approach. His influence is considerable—evident in the practice of the many dozens of prominent professors and curators who emerged from his graduate seminars during his more than three-decades-long career and in the position occupied by his scholarship in the field. His methodological essays have been assigned and debated for decades, providing, in the words of Davis, “a provocative heuristic model” even for those who reject his approach. Prown’s most influential articles were published in the Winterthur Portfolio in the early 1980s. “Style as Evidence” and “Mind in Matter” together laid out what is often called the “Prownian method.” Building on one another, the articles make the case for artifacts as the repositories of (recoverable) social meaning and provide a step-by-step procedure for the analysis of art and utilitarian objects that places at its center the importance of close visual analysis. Studied properly, artifacts are “texts” from which one may read the values and concerns of their makers and the society in which they were produced. Before conducting outside research, and with every effort made to suppress one’s cultural biases and assumptions, Prown’s approach begins with close observation, followed by a detailed description of what one sees.

The first generation of Americanist art historians who came of age in the years immediately following World War II were, to varying degrees, all invested in the close examination of objects. Prown may get credit within Americanist practice for articulating a coherent program for close looking, but it is important to note the ways in which his approach was an organic offshoot of intellectual currents then in vogue. Prown completed his undergraduate degree in literature in 1951, during an era when New Criticism held sway in English departments across the United States. New Criticism advocated close reading of “internal evidence” (the text) as the surest route to understanding, while avoiding consideration of “external evidence” (claims on authorial intent) and “contextual evidence” (arguments on the relationship of the text to other texts). New Critics took texts seriously on their own terms, focusing intently on a given work’s imagery, metaphors, meter, and rhyme, isolated from biographical and social context.

Prown’s early training in the close reading of literary texts was only reinforced by his graduate study at the University of Delaware in the Winterthur Program of material culture studies and, subsequently, in the Fine Arts Department at Harvard University. Arriving at Harvard in the late 1950s with degrees in literature and material culture, and little background in the history of art, Prown found encouragement among those professors who placed greater value on students’ powers of observation than on their knowledge of art-historical traditions. At Harvard, Prown gravitated toward Professors Wilhelm Koehler and Benjamin Rowland, both of whom were connoisseurs, and Jakob Rosenberg, a formalist protégé of Heinrich Wölfflin. In describing his studies at Harvard, Prown admiringly recalled Koehler’s penchant for lecturing on a single slide.
for the duration of a two-hour seminar. When Prown confessed his lack of art-historical training in an early seminar, Koehler encouraged him to write a paper comparing three states of a Rembrandt etching, as long as he consulted no outside secondary sources. Along similar lines, an early exercise in Rowland’s class entailed the visual comparison of two drawings depicting scholars from, respectively, Renaissance Italy and ancient China. The skills of connoisseurship he acquired from Koehler and Rowland were important to his methodological development, but Prown’s mature approach owes its greatest debt to the socially grounded formalism he learned in Rosenberg’s class. Prown goes so far as to credit Rosenberg’s required introductory graduate seminar with providing the fundamentals for the approach he would develop in “Mind in Matter.” As Prown recalls of his time at Harvard, for a student with limited art-historical knowledge, but a talent for observation, the object-centered lectures and assignments of his graduate professors were immensely validating.9

Yale hired Prown in 1961, at a time when connoisseurship and iconography were the dominant methods of art history departments and when “high art” painting and sculpture were its nearly exclusive objects of study. In keeping with the priorities of his day, Prown began with a connoisseurial bent, focusing his research and teaching on oil painting and marble sculpture. But over the next decade his interests expanded to include the study of so-called low and non-art objects—decorative arts and those utilitarian objects made without aesthetic intent. This expanded range of primary evidence helped spur his development of a methodological program that regularized the study of objects and provided a theoretical justification for the analysis of high and low artworks and utilitarian objects. In 1976, Prown seized on an invitation to speak to a group of twenty-one scholars gathered at Yale under the auspices of a National Humanities Institute (NHI) seminar to test his nascent method. His “Art as Evidence” lecture provided the first public venue for introducing the approach that would gain wide circulation in the Winterthur Portfolio.

Prown recalls approaching his seminar presentation with trepidation, anxious that the young scholars who made up almost all of the seminar’s participants might not be receptive to a methodological program rooted in traditional approaches to art. In contrast to his method, which drew heavily from long-standing formalist traditions, the younger scholars in attendance at the NHI seminar embraced a range of emergent Marxist- and structuralist-inspired methods popular among academics who came of age in the 1970s. As Prown writes, “I was fearful that my ideas would be received with hostility by the younger scholars who were interested in such things as the ‘New History,’ structuralism, semiotics, Marxist analysis, and common or vernacular materials. … To my relief, I received nothing but encouragement from them.”10

While methodologically progressive art historians today may be tempted to read the political differences between formalism, connoisseurship, and iconography as insignificant, first-generation New Art Historians seized on the distinctions between Prown’s brand of formalism and the academy’s more conservative methods in their hunger for any approach to art that took seriously the social sphere. Consider that while all three approaches ostensibly relied on training one’s eye to “see,” formalism was historically less interested in the qualitative distinctions motivating connoisseurs, less wedded to the recovery of conscious intent that concerned iconographers, and more amenable to the mixing of high and low than either of the other approaches.

Prown’s particular brand of formalism only heightened these distinctions. On the issue of quality, he worked to provide a means of studying a range of objects—regardless
of their status within the hierarchy of “art.” In “Style as Evidence,” he went so far as to argue that utilitarian objects are the most useful indicators of a culture’s value systems, given that their material form is more reflective of their social function than of their makers’ conscious efforts to communicate narrative or symbolic content. Since utilitarian objects were created primarily to serve a clearly defined function, their formal qualities were said to spring directly from the cultural values and aspirations of their era in a way that high-art objects, whose social significance was necessarily shaded by the symbolic meanings that the objects were consciously created to articulate, could not. Because art objects “spoke” of both unconscious values and a conscious symbolic agenda, Prown claimed, “the distinction between art and artifacts is that artifacts do not lie.”11 On the issue of intent, Prown looked for what he took as the “deeper” social values and aspirations embedded in the materiality of objects, while tending to shun the intentions of patrons and their artists that so interest iconographers (and more than a few social art historians). His focus meshed with the New Art Historical concern for breaking the high–low hierarchy of “texts,” in giving serious attention to the experiences of non-elite groups (women, people of color, and those of the working class), and in exploring the structuring logic animating the form of artworks.

The embrace by New Art Historians of close looking in general, and Prown’s methodology in particular, is also tied to the unique manner in which New Art History took root in the United States. While those academics in Great Britain sympathetic to the aims of New Art History tended to pursue Marxist lines of inquiry, which led them to focus on how social and economic processes impacted the production and reception of art, their American colleagues were much more likely to adopt a broader-based social art history, which often entailed reading art for signs of larger social and economic trends. So, while New Art Historians on both sides of the Atlantic were united by an interest in “the social,” the dominant means of getting at that social was fundamentally different—with either social processes revealing something about art, or art revealing something about social conditions. Given the particular development of art history in the United States, Prown’s argument that close looking provided a window onto larger social contexts surely struck a resonant chord for Americanist New Art Historians.12

More surprising than the embrace of close looking by social art historians is its acceptance by the generation of poststructuralist scholars who followed, for their core beliefs were largely antithetical to those of their social-historical colleagues. Beginning in the early 1980s, Americanist practitioners of deconstruction adapted Prown’s approach for the study of art.13 Moving beyond structuralism’s concern to illustrate the ways in which social structures (linguistic, religious, judicial, educational, etc.) employ binary oppositions to create and impose meaning on our lives, deconstruction worked to collapse such oppositions via inconsistencies apparent in a text’s governing logic. Without discounting the real-life power of structures, deconstruction focused on their internal contradictions, through obsessively close readings of texts (often of footnotes or secondary strands of the main argument) to expose the cracks and fissures in their governing logic.14 Within a decade of its introduction to American audiences by Jacques Derrida, deconstruction was closely associated with the “Yale School,” a loosely affiliated group of literary critics in the English Department at Yale, among them Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller. By the time Prown’s Winterthur essays were published, deconstruction was at the height of its influence and controversy.
In contrast to the coherent step-by-step program for the analysis of visual “texts” offered by Prown, deconstruction provided not a coherent method, but a manner of reading. This meant that deconstruction could be readily grafted onto the practice of virtually any method; all that was required was that the practitioner be sympathetic to deconstruction’s aims and that the method of choice be compatible with the close reading of texts. Not only did deconstruction offer a mode of reading that was well suited to Prown’s approach, it provided Americanists with a legitimating discourse. Historians of US art had long labored in the backwater of art history—studying artworks that the field’s dominant historians deemed derivative at best and aesthetically insignificant at worst. For second- and third-generation scholars of this marginalized field, deconstruction lent to Americanists the cachet of cutting-edge Continental theory and the glamour of the Yale School practitioners.

The appeal of augmenting Prown’s method with deconstruction was furthered by the multiple meanings Prown expected to find in his objects. While believing that there were truths to be recovered, and that close looking was the best route to recuperating such meanings, Prown was careful to stress the existence of multiple truths. This belief in many truths was not premised on the relativity of social truths that was a hallmark of poststructuralist thought, but rather on the richness of meaning Prown attributed to objects. For Prown, “the fundamental attitude underlying the study of material culture is … a persuasive determinism. … The basic premise is that every effect observable in or induced by the object has a cause. … In theory, if we could perceive all of the effects we could understand all of the causes; an entire cultural universe is in the object waiting to be discovered.” Believing that many social “causes” produced many physical “effects” in an object’s form, Prown and his followers have always been comfortable reading multiple and even contradictory meanings from artworks. This fluidity of meaning, which was obviously not characteristic of the connoisseurs’ supposedly objective assessment of quality and worth, or iconographers’ unearthing of a finite set of intended meanings, resonated with poststructuralists, who were engaged in their own assault on the fixity of meaning.

Notwithstanding the investment in close looking/reading that Prown and Derrida shared, and the outward interest each held in the multiplicity of meaning, the underlying rationales for Prownian analysis and deconstruction could not be more opposed. As an early foray in the poststructuralist advance, deconstruction rejected the idea of meaning’s recuperation, which was at the heart of Prown’s project, and rejected, as well, the notion that meanings might exist outside of their governing systems. While acknowledging the coherence structures impose on the social world, deconstruction worked to illustrate their arbitrary nature.

Despite Prown’s sensitivity to the ways in which “we, the interpreters … are pervaded by the beliefs of our own social groups—nation, locality, class, religion, politics, occupation, gender, age, race and ethnicity,” he argued that “the study of systems of belief through an analysis of artifacts offers opportunities to circumvent the investigator’s own cultural perspective. By undertaking cultural interpretation through artifacts, we can engage the other culture in the first instance not with our minds, the seat of our cultural biases, but with our senses.” Prown’s approach is driven by the core belief that human sensory experiences are sufficiently static across time and cultures for us to approximate the experience of an object’s original audience, if we hold preconceptions at bay and apprehend the object through pure sensory experiences alone. According to Prown, “affective” identification holds out
the promise of bypassing biases of the mind and giving us access to the experiences and values of the original makers and users.

For many art historians today, the attractions of Prown’s approach, and of close looking in general, continue to hold sway. From a practical standpoint, close looking is a powerful pedagogical tool. As it sharpens students’ visual skills of observation, it simultaneously empowers them by suggesting that they arrive at art history classes with key skills of analysis, even if their knowledge of art and history is limited. If it does not, as its proponents claim, get students closer to historical truths, it is undoubtedly good at motivating student participation and enhancing their self-confidence in analyzing a range of objects. From a philosophical standpoint, it has the virtue of being a more democratic approach, which goes a long way toward leveling the playing field for students and scholars; a keen eye is more important than detailed knowledge of stylistic trends, historical events, or theoretical paradigms. But perhaps most significantly, the approach offers reassurance that art objects are worthy of study. In support of the ongoing efforts of art historians to educate well-meaning academics in adjacent fields who make instrumental use of visual texts to illustrate previously deduced historical trends and attitudes, close looking helps cement the centrality and legitimacy of objects as evidence. By treating objects as important pieces of primary evidence in their own right, close looking validates the project of studying art. I suspect, in the end, that its durability in the field of US art history is more a function of its success in providing personal and disciplinary reassurance to both novice students and seasoned academics than of its efficacy in illuminating the past.

So what, then, are the specific problems of close looking? Assume for a moment that Prown is correct, that it is possible to “circumvent the investigator’s own cultural perspective” by engaging an object with the senses, rather than the mind. A large body of scholarly literature argues that such rigid separations are not a possibility—that we cannot help but see, taste, hear, smell, and touch through our cultural beliefs—but for the sake of argument, let us accept that we may at least move toward this ideal. As Prown writes, “this affective mode of apprehension … allows us to put ourselves, figuratively speaking, inside the skins of individuals who commissioned, made, used or enjoyed these objects, to see with their eyes and touch with their hands, to identify with them empathetically.” In developing his method, Prown was certainly motivated by a philosophical desire to have at his disposal an approach that took seriously both high and low objects. But he was also moved by a practical concern for the ways in which scholars’ readings necessarily alter over time, as each generational or cultural group processes its objects of study through a unique set of beliefs shared by its members. Because public and scholarly interpretation is swayed by social context, Prown worked to create a method that might sidestep those interpretations that were historically contingent.

But if Prown is correct that human beings consistently read old or foreign artworks through cultural lenses, surely we do the same with artworks from our own nation and era. It is thus difficult to know how recourse to pure sensory experience might allow us to “see” through the eyes of another when the other’s vision was necessarily guided by social factors. In other words, if each generation produces a distinct view of an object’s meaning, because of the ways in which its members filter the object through their period-specific values, the original meaning of an object must necessarily be produced by such non-sensory value systems as well. To argue otherwise is to claim that at their moment of creation, objects are experienced
exclusively through the senses of viewers and only in later generations or cultures experienced through systems of belief.

Prown’s approach also leaves it unclear why sensory experience would return one only to the original experience (and significance) of an object. One can imagine each generation of viewers having the same sensory experience of an object only if objects possess fixed, transhistorical meanings. If this were the case, then a pure sensory experience might allow one to arrive at their “truth.” But since Prown sees objects as vessels holding the unarticulated cultural beliefs and values of their original makers and consumers, it is difficult to conceptualize how a pure, sensory experience of an object (which in Prown’s terms is decidedly outside of historically contingent beliefs) might allow one access to something that is historically specific. How do we explain that the sensory experiences of researchers in 2013 and 1913 are equally capable of getting us back to the sensory experience of an artwork’s maker in 1813 and to the object’s social significance during the early nineteenth century? It is clearly not tenable that a shared sensory experience might take one back to an earlier social meaning.

Because consideration of context comes later in the process for those who begin with close looking, there is little to check the range of possible meanings that a given scholar may “read” from a “sensory” experience of the object of study. By looking closely first, scholars set the direction of inquiry based on readings that are necessarily more presentist than they need be. In contrast to inquiries that first establish the historically specific parameters for what an object could potentially mean in a given time and place (ideally through the consideration of a range of evidence), close looking relies on a viewer’s ability to hold cultural biases at bay during the sensory experience of the object. This would matter little if Prown’s argument for affective experience offering a means for arriving at the social significance of objects was tenable, but this is clearly not the case.

In the decades since the publication of Prown’s Winterthur Portfolio articles, the practice of Americanist art historians has grown more sophisticated and complex. Models of close looking refined in American studies, literature, film studies, and visual studies have entered the field, providing more nuanced ways of reading art and artifacts. Comparatively few of those scholars working today who ground their inquiries in the visual evidence of objects note any overt debt to Prown. And yet the refinement of close looking has solved the essential problem of its presentism only by degrees; many of the inconsistencies I have traced in Prown’s method haunt the contemporary practice of those who start their inquiries with the object.

Every approach that begins with close looking necessarily promotes an evidentiary bias toward visual evidence, which accords undue influence to that which is seen. To be sure, most proponents of close looking are quick to note that sensory experience is merely the first step in the examination of an object. Even in its earliest incarnation, the method developed by Prown outlined the need to branch out beyond visual analysis, after establishing a sensory connection with the past. Scholars who embrace close looking expect the hypotheses reached through visual analysis to undergo modification, once extra-textual evidence is taken into account. But the extent to which non-visual data are permitted to modify vision-based assumptions in practice is necessarily limited, given the need for visual evidence to maintain its place of privilege. After all, external contextual evidence cannot “overrule” what is learned from close looking without making arbitrary the commitment to begin with the object. If the visual field truly offers something unique—unavailable from other types of evidence
alone—it makes no sense to allow external evidence to alter vision-based insights. In privileging the visual form of objects, practitioners of close looking slight the many ways in which an artwork’s social significance is molded by non-visual cues.

I wish to conclude with an art-historical case study that makes concrete my methodological concerns. My aim is less to “correctly” interpret the meaning of an artwork than to illustrate in practice the multiple shortcomings of close looking in the recuperation of history, and to build a case for how factors external to an artwork play the determining role in molding its social meanings.

My selected case study focuses on Andy Warhol’s Race Riot series and the complex discursive contexts in which it was first created and viewed. Warhol completed at least thirteen silkscreen Race Riots by the summer of 1963 (the Little Race Riots and a series of unsigned prints would follow in 1964). The Race Riot canvases (Figure 7.1) each make prominent use of one to three photographs appropriated from Charles Moore, a white freelance news photographer who specialized in covering the civil rights movement in the South. Warhol discovered the Moore photographs illustrating a Life magazine article published in May of 1963. The article chronicled the use of police dogs and firehouses against peaceful black anti-segregationist protestors in Birmingham, Alabama. The artist ripped a two-page spread of lunging police dogs from Life and marked it up with instructions to his studio assistants (Figure 7.2).

To analyze the Race Riots through close looking would—at a minimum—require consideration of the particularities of the source images selected by the artist and the specific ways in which they were modified, arranged, and reproduced in the finished silkscreens. It would not be sufficient to merely note that the selected Moore photographs each illustrate Birmingham police K-9 units menacing black protestors, for close looking is rooted in the conviction that the meaning of an artwork resides in its visual singularity. And yet, for the artist at least, there is considerable evidence that the particularities of the photographs had little to do with this intended meanings. The editors of the Warhol catalogue raisonné note that the artist indiscriminately referred to his Race Riots, variously, as his “Birmingham,” “Selma,” or “Montgomery” pictures, despite the fact that all of them made use of Moore’s photographs from Birmingham. The editors go on to assert that Warhol’s visual “shorthand shows how [he] grasped the fundamental subject of these images—Negroes, dogs, civil rights—without recalling its particular context whether Birmingham, Selma or Montgomery.” Since police dogs played no role in the Montgomery bus boycott, Selma’s “Bloody Sunday,” or the Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march, Warhol’s “fundamental subject” effaced the specificity of news photographs that chronicled the black fight for economic opportunities and desegregated facilities in Birmingham.

Warhol’s indifference to visual evidence (and to geography and current events) suggests that he conceived of the photographs generating meaning through their evocation of generalized themes, rather than through particularized events. The artist’s silkscreen reproduction process appears as an expression of this value system, given the degree to which it degraded the source images’ photographic detail. The visual shorthand of “Negroes” and “dogs” gave viewers all of the visual information that the artist deemed necessary.

Artworks gain meanings with viewers through processes that are often quite distinct from those imagined by their creators. But the public reception of Moore’s dog-attack photographs in 1963 suggests that whether or not viewers looked closely at the Race Riots, the key to decoding their social significance does not rest on a close
examination of the artworks. Consider that at the moment when Warhol appropriated Moore’s photographs of Birmingham, there existed no consensus as to what the images meant. This was likely by design. The Race Riots belong to the artist’s Death and Disaster series, which drew together imagery of lunging police dogs, suicides, electric chairs, and atomic blasts. Each thematic cluster of photographs was of a type that circulated widely in the press to illustrate sensationalistic stories that gripped the attention of the media and its public. Not only were the photographs topical and lurid, but all of the selected images illustrated news stories that generated social
debate. Significantly, each depicted a controversial topic, which necessarily ensured that they supported contradictory social meanings.

Some period viewers saw in the dog-attack photographs meanings that are commensurate with our dominant understanding of them today—reading them as irrefutable evidence of the brutality and racism of white police and the dignity and restraint of black activists in the South. In May 1963, Denise Goode summed up this perspective in a letter to the editor published by the *Washington Post*: “I was very displeased to see the front page picture of a police dog lunging at a Negro who was marching for civil rights and human dignity. It is a disgrace that here in the United States where we speak of liberty and justice for all that human beings should be attacked by dogs without committing a crime.” But in the days and weeks following publication of the dog-attack photographs, northern newspapers printed almost as many letters to the editor that read the pictures as evidence of black violence and incitement as of white repression. As one northern reader commented on the photographs to the editors of *Life*: “it is such a shame that Negroes who could be out earning money and, in some cases, respect, are participating in such things as the Birmingham violence. … All they can think of is violence.” A second observer saw in the photographs the “unruly, inflammatory, riotous actions of the [black] mob.” While it is tempting to dismiss such politically unpalatable interpretations as unrepresentative of their era, they expressed the sentiments of tens of millions of Americans in 1963. Such quotations provide compelling evidence of the dramatic range of meanings viewers were then able to see in the photographs.

Even if both progressive and reactionary interpretations resulted from audiences’ scrupulous attention to visual evidence, the perceptual divide they reveal makes evident the futility of close looking as a route to the artworks’ original significance. Simply put, viewers with distinctive political and racial perspectives saw different things in the images. Whether period audiences merely glanced at the *Race Riots* images to take in their general theme—while ignoring their details—or looked closely at their visual evidence, the utter lack of consensus as to what the works meant in 1963 calls into question the utility of close looking for scholars of the series today. Given that there is no dominant meaning awaiting recovery, scholars must begin their studies by explicating the distinctive value systems that viewers brought with them to the photographs and silkscreens. Because meanings spring from these invisible discursive systems, their recuperation is an essential first step in determining what period viewers were capable of seeing. This is ultimately the only means of ensuring that the visual evidence gathered through close looking is harnessed to explain the heterogeneous, and evolving, experiences of viewers in the past.

Close looking emerged as a tool of Americanists during an era in which objects were less likely to be read as primary evidence and in which US art was of marginal scholarly interest. It helped provide legitimacy for the nascent field—systematizing the study of objects, ushering in a more expansive notion of “evidence,” and solidifying the legitimacy of American cultural products. Close looking survives in the twenty-first century in a much-altered academic landscape. Today artworks and utilitarian objects are routinely treated as primary evidence, US visual culture is a respectable topic of study, and, most significant, the scholarly investment in the “specialness” of texts has waned. The endurance of close looking is testament to the institutional power of its champions, its efficacy in engaging students, and, perhaps, the normative status it has acquired after decades of use. But for newer generations of scholars less
invested in objects per se than in what an eclectic range of evidence reveals of social processes, close looking comes with significant risks. Through their reliance on vision, object-centered approaches increase the likelihood of presentist readings, given that human senses are always guided by social context. More significantly still, they constrict the range of evidence used and the questions asked in their efforts to account for the appearance of objects. While methods that begin with a consideration of context run the risk of slighting the unique expressions of individual artworks, object-centered approaches raise the far more consequential peril of limiting our understanding of the social world. If one’s ultimate goal is to illuminate some aspect of the social order, then the limitations of close looking should be clear.

Notes

1 Davis, 2003, pp. 555–557. Novak, 1969; Nemerov, 1991. Writing six years before Davis, the art historian Michael Leja (1997) observed that the field of US art history had become so methodologically diverse and extensive that “synthetic overviews of the field … once merely heroic, now seem impossible.” While my focus is on the practice of historians of US art, “close looking” holds great allure throughout the humanities and social sciences (not to mention in the sciences). For prominent examples of it in the humanities, see Lentricchia and DuBois, 2002.


3 Jason LaFountain has helpfully reminded me that object-centered methodologies reach back to the nineteenth century. As he noted in a personal communication, “although it is a history as yet unwritten, the anti-textbook pedagogy of Harvard professor Louis Agassiz is a productive starting point for thinking about how the museum studies curriculum at that institution was developed. Agassiz famously passed out fish (rather than texts about fish, or diagrams) to his biology students.” For a study of pedagogy and such methods in the nineteenth century, see the recent dissertation, Carter, 2010.


5 Davis, 2003, p. 557. Prown’s approach to art has certainly had its critics. For a respectful yet pointed critique, see Dillon and Reed, 1998.


7 Contemporaries of Prown who practiced—to varying degrees—object-centered approaches include Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., William Gerdts, Barbara Novak, William Innes Homer, Stuart Feld, John Wilmerding, and Theodore Stebbins, each of whom received their PhD from Harvard and went on to serve as a pioneer in the development of US art history.

8 Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1946.


12 Johns, 1991, 2002; Burns, 1996, 2004. The reticence of historians of US art to engage in Marxist readings may, in part, be a collateral result of the value placed on close looking, given the concern of Marxist art historians to prioritize social
processes that have no necessary link to narrative. While the obstacles are certainly not insurmountable, scholars who begin by presenting a detailed explication of the visible face challenges in making apparently random segues to issues unconnected to the artwork’s visual narrative. Rather than interpreting the lack of Marxist analysis as an exclusive function of the US political climate, we do well to appreciate the complications that close looking present to Marxist analyses of art. See the exchange between Alan Wallach and Robin Kelsey in Chapters 4 and 5 above.

15 Prown, 1982, p. 6. It is plausible that Prown’s interest in multiple meanings was fueled also by his exposure to New Criticism, with its own investment in ambiguity and multiple interpretations.
17 Howes, 2005; Smith, 2007; Classen, 2012.
19 Prown lays out the three stages of his analytical program: description, deduction, and speculation. At the conclusion of his third stage, Prown advocates a “program of research” on the object that “shifts the inquiry from analysis of internal evidence to the search for and investigation of external evidence.” At this point, according to Prown, “there should be continual shunting back and forth between the outside evidence and the artifact as research suggests to the investigator the need for more descriptive information or indicates other hypotheses that need to be tested affectively” (Prown, 1982, p. 10).
22 Wagner, 1996.
26 Berger, 2011.

References


The argument that drives Martin Berger’s contribution to this volume—that the work of art’s “social significance is molded by non-visual cues,” that the researcher must, essentially, look away from the object to locate its original social stakes and meanings—extends an idea that Berger works through in his most recent books, which address race and the politics of vision. These studies, which ask readers to consider how racialized perspectives inform everything from mid-nineteenth-century landscape imagery to civil rights-era photography, demonstrate the importance of attending to the “invisible discursive systems” that always structure the view. His efforts are part of a broader trend in humanities scholarship, which acknowledges the visual record’s potential to distort history. The special issue of the interdisciplinary journal *Representations* edited by the art historians Huey Copeland, Krista Thompson, and Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby—on “New World Slavery and the Matter of the Visual”—put pressure on the art historian’s conventional task of elucidating meaning via inherited visual material and called on practitioners in the discipline to rethink their faith in the visual as a repository of historical evidence. This is particularly pressing when addressing the archive of slavery, which can only offer a skewed perspective on history since it is fundamentally lacking in material produced by the enslaved. To build interpretations on this record is to risk reproducing the distortion that structures the archive and its visual contents—to risk retracing, interpretively, the brutal perspectives of the ruling class that produced it.

And yet, while acknowledging the limitations of the archive, most of the essays in this special issue ended up (perhaps inevitably) drawing on and working with it, to show how objects such as photographs, for example, thematize the absence at the heart of the archive or bring to the fore the contorted, reductive mechanics of visual media trained on the subject of slavery. How could it be otherwise? Although art historians are capable of crafting arguments not dependent on visual material and...
frequently investigate issues relevant to artistic practice that do not concern the style, structure, or content of visual objects, we are, you could say, disciplinarily wired to perceive how complex historical meaning might materialize in visual form. Simply put, it is challenging for art historians to resist recruiting visual information in their analyses; we usually end up relying on it in some shape or form.

Berger suggests that this reliance is particularly prevalent in scholarship on American art, and that this is due to the influence of Jules Prown and his many essays that explain, model, and legitimate an interpretive approach that prioritizes intense, sustained engagement with visual and material objects. “Intense engagement” I think better describes Prown’s approach than does “close looking,” since Prown was not only concerned with seeing but also with feeling (literally touching, in some cases) the objects he analyzed. “Sustained proximity” to the work of art might be another way to describe his practice, an immersive mode of interpretation that—while rhetorically framed as a method approaching scientific precision in terms of steps and outcomes—depends on slippages, conflations, and immersive, empathic synergies of various sorts.

In this chapter I want to bring Prown’s approach up to date by drawing on affect theory—whose current wave emerged just as Prown completed his series of landmark methodological treatises, in the mid-1990s—and also by thinking through the recent move by scholars of literature toward “surface” readings (which focus on manifest content, emphasizing what is literally there in the text) and away from “symptomatic” ones (which strive to identify symptoms of latent cultural belief). Although Prown was surely a symptomatic reader (as is Berger and, I would argue, most scholars working in the field of American art history today, myself included), aspects of his writing anticipate certain strains of surface reading, particularly those that emphasize the importance of description to criticism and that make something of the affective encounter between objects and their interpreters. By fleshing out Berger’s historicization of Prown’s approach according to these lines of thought, I aim to complicate his assessment of Prown’s legacy and to suggest what we may still have to learn from the so-called Prownian method.

In so doing, I ultimately hope to demonstrate how much we would miss if we were to adopt Berger’s stark conceptions of both “the visual” and “social significance”—what these things are, how they work, where they are located, and how they might be perceived by interpreters. Indeed, there is a neatness to Berger’s methodological prescriptions that reinstates the programmatic clarity of the Prownian approach he critiques, but more important is how this neatness resists lining up with the material concerning race relations that he addresses. Some of the most exciting recent work by theorists of the history of racial prejudice and its visual record in the United States disavows neat historical constants and tries to avoid speaking from a position of invulnerable authority separate from the object and the historical experience it investigates, sometimes by undertaking surface readings invested in affective relationships and dialogues. Alessandra Raengo’s book, On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value (2013) is an example of such work, which I will discuss before considering the art of Glenn Ligon as exemplifying the value of this kind of approach. Far from simply exhibiting the interests of the contemporary interpreter and thus failing to supply a valid interpretation of history, as is sometimes charged, interpretation in this vein can open onto historical experience in intense, affecting ways that are worth considering as a counter-model to Berger’s proposition.
“Deduction” as Intense Engagement

It may seem somewhat odd to suggest that aspects of Prown’s approach might be useful when considering works concerned with race since one of the main problems critics have had with his method is its inattention to the social and historical features that differentiate individuals. Prown acknowledged the challenge that differences of “nation, locality, class, religion, politics, occupation, gender, age, race [and] ethnicity” posed to his faith in human beings’ ability to connect, one to the other, through shared physiologies and experiences. (Scholars working today would surely add to his list—disability studies comes to mind as providing another experiential variable we might consider, which Prown gestured to in a late piece, “The Promise and Perils of Context.”) But I think it is fair to say, as Berger suggests, that Prown largely waved away these social identifiers as incidental to deeper features shared by every human being (the simple fact of being born, of living until we die, of requiring sustenance to endure, and so on).

The questions Berger raises about Prown’s transhistorical humanism—and the problem of thinking that we might be able to figuratively inhabit “the skins of individuals who commissioned, made, used or enjoyed” the objects we study—recall the critique John Dixon Hunt published as a response to Prown’s “The Truth of Material Culture: History of Fiction?” (1993). “The very themes he wished to extract from the card tables were very American” Hunt writes, asking, “would I as an Englishman have viewed them exactly in the same way?” Jennifer Roberts has also drawn attention to the problem of relativity, from her perspective of having been one of Prown’s female students, in her contribution to the College Art Association’s Distinguished Scholar Session honoring Prown in 2010. Alluding to Prown’s famous interpretation of a late eighteenth-century pewter teapot as metaphorically conjuring the form of a woman’s breast (Figure 8.1), Roberts noted her resistance to this line of interpretation: “All of my scholarship is based on the fact that works of art are first and foremost heavy chunks of matter that bear an inconvenient relationship to gravity, decay, and other mundane aspects of physical existence. But I am fundamentally uncomfortable with associating that substrate of untranscended matter with the bodies of women,” she asserted, confirming how difficult it can be not only to put oneself into the skin of the historical maker or user, but also into the skin of a contemporary scholar prescribing an approach based on his own singular positionality.

Glenn Adamson has taken a different angle on the notion that that the object might not speak to all of us in the same way by insisting on the fundamental muteness of material culture, a quality which, he points out, is central to Prown’s conception of how the teapot, for example, reveals cultural belief: “He sees the teapot as pointing to a truth so fundamental that it was inadmissible to discourse in its own day,” as a “sublimated symbol of maternal care” that connects warm tea with a comforting maternal body. Instead of making something of the unspoken utterance, however, Adamson wants to sit with “muteness,” to essentially respect the object’s resistance to dialogue. “If material culture is valuable to the historian precisely by its acts of repression, its covering-over of truths,” he writes, “then perhaps the real ‘cleverness’ of an object is in its obscurantism, its failure to come across with the interpretable goods—in a word, its dumbness.” This “dumbness” is the fundamental difference between teapots and paintings, which—in the case of nineteenth-century works like Eastman Johnson’s Old Stagecoach (1871), the example Adamson mentions—are, in some ways, he feels,
less resistant and thus more intelligible. After all, narrative paintings like Johnson’s literally have stories to tell while the teapot does not, at least (Prown might say) not in the same way, certainly not right away.

In Adamson’s extension of Prown’s interpretive logic, the politics of difference remain in the background, and yet the very idea of respecting the object’s muteness and resistance to translation creates a new field of relations between the object and interpreter, potentially destabilizing the patriarchal mastery of the Prownian approach. In Adamson’s framework, the interpreter might never actually get to know the object, and it takes time to come to this realization and any others that might emerge in their meeting.11 Duration matters most, for Prown, in the “deduction” phase of his interpretive model. Deduction is the stage focused on the “relationship between the object and the perceiver … [involving] the empathetic linking of the material (actual) or represented world of the object with the perceiver’s world of existence and experience.” He spelled this out in “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” which divides the interpretive act into three steps—“description,” “deduction,” and “speculation”—echoing the rhetorical structure of the scientific method prioritizing objectivity, rigor, and repeatable, calculable results.12 Providing structural support for “speculation” with two preceding stages grounded in the material specificity of and experience with the object, Prown sought to legitimate art-historical analysis as something like an objective procedure, though he noted, at just about every turn, the impossibility—and even undesirability—of maintaining this position. “[I]n practice, while striving to achieve objectivity and to maintain the scientific method as an ideal, the investigator should not be so rigorous and doctrinaire in the application of methodological rigor as to inhibit the process,” he wrote, arguing that “[v]igilance, not martial law, is the appropriate attitude.”13

This aptly describes Prown’s tone throughout his methodological writings. If the structure of a piece like “Mind in Matter” seems to promise a surefire roadmap to successful analysis—indeed, many students come away from this essay thinking just

![Figure 8.1](image-url)
that—in the details, Prown doubles back on his assertions, taking the reader on circuitous micro-journeys that complicate forward movement and a swift interpretive resolution. The “deduction” phase thus makes its imprint on Prown’s writings, the phase focused on the “empathetic linking” of the world of the object and that of the perceiver. Although Prown takes pains to specify how this empathetic linking happens and might be productively translated into observations about the past by “meet[ing] the test of reasonableness and common sense,” deduction is in practice a messy, almost unmanageable procedure. Indeed, it is the unstable center of Prown’s interpretive geography.

By trying to connect with the object and the world to which it originally belonged, the perceiver has to negotiate and, ultimately, find a way through an Alice-in-Wonderland-like landscape of conceptual associations and multi-sensorial effects to parse, if she can, the difference between past and present, between types of surfaces or skins, say, between modes of being and styles of expression, between sense and nonsense—and all of this knowing full well that (1) we can never be fully cognizant of how our own cultural biases color our observations and (2) the object will not (Prown writes “may not”) “testify with complete accuracy about its culture.” However, it can, he argues, “divulge something” and “[i]t is the analyst’s task to find out what it can tell and, perhaps, deduce what it can no longer tell.”

How, exactly, to do this? How to know which “something” the object “divulges” is worth paying attention to, worth following through into the “speculation” phase? These questions and more throw themselves up for consideration in the deduction stage of an interpretive model that depends on, even revels in, I would say, the unpredictability of the process. This is what I meant when I said that Prown’s writing takes the reader on circuitous micro-journeys complicating swift interpretive resolution. The deduction phase will not be systematized, and Prown knows it. Because of this, deduction might be seen to allow for myriad forms of difference, perhaps especially those forms that elude precise categorization but are no less deeply felt. It is in this vital, elastic space of reverberating, inter-material and inter-subjective relations that the real work and challenge of the Prownian method occurs, and it is here that we find the most compelling link to contemporary affect theory.

**Affective Encounters and Differentiations, or the Politics of Engaging Surfaces**

The current wave of affect theory, which the editors of *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010) credit two texts published in 1995 with initiating—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold” and Brian Massumi’s “The Autonomy of Affect”—emerged just as Prown completed the last of his methodological treatises. Scholars of affect are concerned with the claustral forces that shape lived experience “beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing.” This sounds a lot like Prown, who strove to override “conscious knowing” and what he took to be its limiting preconceptions by offering a way to sense the past “mindlessly.” As he put it: “Instead of our minds making intellectual contact with minds of the past, our senses make affective contact with senses of the past.” Like Prown, contemporary writers on affect are interested in the intensities that pass between bodies and across skins—in all of those forces that evade precise location and categorization,
making powerfully visceral impressions along the way. Thinking about affect invites one to move beyond a bipolar conception of “relations of subject to object, self to other, and active to passive,” as Sedgwick and Frank suggest, for the bipolar quickly gives way to messier overlaps, interleavings, and extensions—to a model of multiplex differentiation that can account for mixed feelings and fluid relationships.¹⁹

In the “deduction” phase, Prown allows for these sorts of interstitial meanderings, although he largely maintains the humanist hierarchical relation between object and perceiver that many writers on affect today are concerned to disturb by emphasizing the agentic capacity of objects, which exist in an “always more-than-human collectivity.”²⁰ Alan Braddock, in his contribution to the present volume, mentions Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) as an important example of this line of new materialist thinking, which “finds considerable regard for earthly matter and inanimate things as having vital agency and force, contrary to the dominant Cartesian/Newtonian view” in classical Western philosophy, which demotes such matter to the status of a resource to be used and abused by human agents.²¹ In an effort to demonstrate the political stakes of this ontological reorientation, Bennett asks, “How, for example, would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash, or ‘the recycling,’ but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter?”²² To endow things with such vitality restructures the landscape of social relations and puts special pressure on the ethics of what we do to and with the objects around us. And this restructuring not only destabilizes the hierarchy according to which art historians are accustomed to working but also the divide between things and their social contexts. Conceiving of their material as always on the move and elastic, without beginning or definitive end, writers on affect see “things” and “social context” (as well as their interpretations of them) as all part of the affective flux.

This way of thinking is quite distanced from Berger’s approach. His argumentation is structured according to a bipolar logic of the non-visual versus the visual, the socially significant versus the socially insignificant—a binary structure that informs his scholarship in other ways as well, particularly his recent work on civil rights photography. Berger compellingly argues in *Seeing Through Race* that “the white press … frame[d] the civil rights movement as nonthreatening,” an interpretive valence that “had the collateral result of casting blacks in roles of limited power.”²³ But over the course of his book, the argument that these photographs depended on an active versus passive racialized arrangement reifying stereotypes of black victimhood at times feels somewhat restrictive. Ariella Azoulay has argued that Berger’s approach to civil rights photography tends to reinforce “the stable division of roles between two civil populations along the dividing lines set by the regime that differentiates them,” a framework that she feels keeps him from recognizing black activists in terms beyond those established by period whites.²⁴ As a trope of passivity in the white imagination, the black figure can only “overcome,” in a political sense, by achieving agency in Berger’s interpretive arrangement. But to conceive of social action along these lines would be to simply flip the terms of the binary, maintaining it in the reversal. Azoulay’s conception of the “civil contract of photography” seeks to destabilize these sorts of configurations by reimagining how we relate to the subjects pictured in documentary photographs, as part of a collective, activated citizenry with the capacity to work around the ruling regime. We are interpellated by the photographed subject, made accountable to the portrayed event and folded into a citizenry with the ability to do
something about it. Questions remain about the applicability of Azoulay’s perspective, informed by her work on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, to American civil rights-era photography, and yet I find quite compelling her insistence that we reconsider how the medium of photography and the social come together. Although the phenomenological mechanics of affect theory are far removed from Azoulay’s approach, her reorientation of subject–object relations nevertheless seeks to destabilize interpretive practice along similarly productive lines.

In his previous book, *Sight Unseen*, Berger foregrounds his own identity politics in an effort to both specify his interpretive position and explain his investment in racial justice. But despite the democratic undertones of Berger’s scholarship, the interpretive position he takes somewhat undercuts his political goals. His ideal interpreter never relinquishes his authority as objective judge of historical material, never puts himself at the mercy of his objects of study or the subjects figured by them to let them impress themselves on and jostle his thinking. Berger’s interpreter knows what counts as evidence and what is socially significant—he knows that it is not here, in the visual, but over there, in the non-visual. I am simplifying his argument, to be sure, but I do so in order to draw attention to its neat clarity—indeed, his ideal interpreter sees things with remarkable precision, in outlines that seem to me far removed from both (1) how the visual works, as a multidimensional phenomenological field, and (2) the murkiness of history and how it makes itself felt in the present. The scholar invested in intense engagement sees (and feels) differently as she tries to succumb to the object’s logic (or illogic) as a means of coming to perceive, in some modest, necessarily incomplete way, how it did (and does) its historical work.

In their account of recent approaches to surface reading, the literary scholars Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus explore the ethics of “accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects.” This interpretive model “refuses the depth model of truth,” which seeks to move beyond surface into the ideology it buries or masks. Adamson’s attempt to respect the object’s resistance to dialogue, and his notion that the object is clever precisely because it is “dumb,” is surely some species of surface reading. An interest in the obdurate materiality of the thing, which is critical to Adamson’s ideas, also informs literary approaches to surface reading, which might catalogue a book’s material qualities—the paper, the ink, and so on—as a cover story for an otherwise unspeakable desire between women. Heather Love’s proposal that we read “close but not deep” reinforces this “descriptive turn” in criticism away from hermeneutics by drawing attention to the richness that exists at the level of manifest content in a novel or in raw sociological data, say—all of that “flat” information right on the surface of things but potentially unnoticed by scholars on the hunt for symptoms of larger ideological concerns.

Description has a special place in Prown’s method as the first step in his interpretive process, but it is definitely preliminary, a task one undertakes en route to more multidimensional symptomatic interpretation. This is unsurprising since Prown published his first methodological treatises in the early 1980s, when scholars were primed to spot the gaps in texts and, in their interpretations inflected by the thinking of Sigmund
Freud and Karl Marx, to “restore to the surface the deep history that the text represses.” ☞ “Just reading” would not have been an adequate critical move for him, and even today surface reading has its critics who dismiss it “as politically quietist, too willing to accept things as they are,” as Best and Marcus acknowledge. The scholar who critically describes or mines data might be charged with not perceiving, or, possibly worse, censoring, the ideological stakes of a text. But Best and Marcus believe (following Sedgwick) that “demystifying protocols” are largely unnecessary in our current era, after the Bush Administration, which made obvious “the point that not all situations require the subtle ingenuity associated with symptomatic reading.”

I hear a bit of Berger in this anticipated critique, and I can imagine him leveling a related charge against scholars who prioritize visual and material information in their analyses. Their work, for him, risks evading the political stakes of a given photograph, for example, because they are “too willing to accept things as they are,” too beholden to what they literally see in the photograph. For Berger, it is by prioritizing surface that Americanists of the Prownian stripe commit the interpretive crime of misreading the symptoms because they are too focused on what is visually and/or materially present. But an affective attention to surface, which might blur visual and material boundaries, and destabilize subject–object relations between the interpreter and the work of art, could get to the heart of historical social significance, activating it in the present. Because it is situated in and through bodies in time, affect is always historically conditioned, a shuttle that, we could say, brings history into being. Thus, to pay affective attention to surface would not be to unduly prioritize presentist concerns but rather to make a case for the presentness of history. This idea is especially critical to histories of racial prejudice in the United States and its materialization both visibly and invisibly.

Racialized Ontologies of the Visual

Berger works to demonstrate the pitfalls of prioritizing surface by using, as his case study, Andy Warhol’s *Pink Race Riot* (1963), a large-scale (128¼ x 83 in.) silkscreen on canvas, which mingles cadmium red with white to produce what the editors of the Warhol catalogue raisonné call an “irregular surface” that stands out from the artist’s usually “flat, unmodulated” technique (see Figure 7.1 above). The piece incorporates photographs taken by the white photographer Charles Moore in Birmingham, Alabama, of hostilities between African American protestors of segregation and white police officers with their attack dogs. The photographs originally appeared in *Life* on May 17, 1963 (see Figure 7.2 above), and Warhol has reorganized the sequencing of the double-page, three-photo spread, complicating the original narrative flow with staggered repetitions of the images, leaving portions of the canvas untouched by black ink, so that rectangular blocks of striated red and white open up space here and there. A wide band of saturated red at the very top of the composition is picked up in the horizontal band of images directly below, which stretches across the width of the canvas. But the dominant axis is the vertical, with a long line of photographic representations, stacked one on top of the other, just right of center. This pronounced verticality, which is determined by the orientation of the canvas itself, meets the viewer’s body with a format that echoes her position, with inflated bodily scale. That the images incorporated here are weighted toward the bottom, with the final row—a
repetition of the same image—touching the composition’s bottom edge, makes the whole feel grounded in the viewer’s space, even as the scale dwarfs the person standing before it, towering over her with hot—and, I would say, in characteristically Warhol fashion—simultaneously cold insistence.

Berger argues that “[t]o analyze the Race Riots through close looking would—at a minimum—require consideration of the particularities of the source images selected by the artist and the specific ways in which they were modified, arranged, and reproduced in the finished silkscreens.” In my description of Pink Race Riot above, which mentions some of the visual and material properties that Berger does not address, I have tried to produce the kind of thing I believe he has in mind. (Readers should look to the scholarship of Thomas Crow, Hal Foster, and Anne Wagner for more thorough consideration of the work.35) By trying to consider the impression the work makes on the viewer, however, I quickly departed from what Berger thinks close looking—what I have been calling intense engagement—would do. I am not as interested in looking through the object, to its source material, as a means of understanding the creative alterations made by Warhol, as I am with the end result, the work’s effects and affects. These do not interest Berger because this is not where “social significance” for him resides—that is, in one’s contemporary experience of the work of art. He is most concerned with the range of responses with which Moore’s photographs were met when they were originally published.

Berger, I think, treats discourse with less nuance than it requires here, replacing the visual figure he largely distrusts with a textual one. The quotations he offers represent for him perceptual irresolution. “Such quotations provide compelling evidence of the dramatic range of meanings viewers were then able to see in the photographs,” he writes, concluding that the “perceptual divide” evident in the responses demonstrates “the futility of close looking as a route to the artworks’ original significance.” But if we look closely at how the “quotation” operates in Berger’s text, we see that it not only represents perceptual irresolution. It is also made into a figure for “truth” whose value is obvious and whose substance is irrefutable.

It is common practice for historians to depend on period insights to reinforce their arguments about a specific historical view. We fetishize the critic of the day who provides a way into a worldview, who seems to sum up, sometimes with such telling strangeness, a historical perspective (this definitely informs my own writing).36 And yet, there is something about Berger’s faith in the quotation to represent the real that undermines his critical position on the discursive systems that shape points of view. How is the discursive, as manifested in the period insight, recorded in text and rendered quotable, more trustworthy than the discursive as it appears in the visual? If the quotation is a primary resource shaped by invisible discursive systems why should we not look away from it too? What safeguards does it offer to the interpreter seeking to avoid a “presentist” reading? It is surely the quotations that best support our view that jump out to us as relevant to the arguments we make. We could even say that the quotation, discovered in some archival document, is a species of visual thing, cutting a figure against a sea of words, which recede in ostensible insignificance. Is the selection of this or that quotation to represent history less problematic than equating some visual detail in a painting with this or that historical concern? And couldn’t this be seen as imposing a particular ontology of the visual onto text and the social world generally, as it materializes at the level of the quotation, which so neatly condenses for the interpreter the historical point of view?
The argument implied by my last question—that Berger imposes an ontology of the visual onto the social world—may have a racialized valence. I draw here on the visual media scholar Alessandra Raengo’s deployment of a concept formulated by Frantz Fanon, whose mid-twentieth-century writings on the black experience, informed by psychoanalysis and phenomenology, remain a crucial resource for scholars exploring the complex nexus between race and representation. In *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value*, Raengo examines the ways in which contemporary artists and filmmakers work to “dislodge the black body from its central position as the paradigmatic visual sign.” They do so, she argues, by conceiving of the visual as not simply “a representational concept”—where blackness is a “visual property” figured as coincident with and expressive of a body, a self, a subjectivity. Rather, they conceive of the visual as a site of relation, as it was for Fanon. Registering as “a visual relation,” blackness for Fanon is “formed in, not simply as, difference,” in the “place between the interpellator and the interpellated.” For it is only a “phantasmatic blackness” that surfaces when a startled child points out Fanon as “a Negro!” This is an image, as Raengo writes, “that is available to no one”—not to Fanon himself, nor to “the child who has projected it, nor to the narrator who can only see its reflection onto the child’s reaction to it.”37 Instead blackness exists in the relations between all of these parties; unlocatable in any fixed or transparent sense, it exists in and as in-between-ness.

Raengo helps us to see the racialized valence of particular ontologies of the visual, which conceive of the visual realm as a site for representation. A racialized ontology of the visual sees it as a space for the readily perceivable, nameable, and knowable, a space for fixed and locatable properties. In this formulation, the visual risks becoming a figure for what is “other” to the interpreter who points it out, interprets it. The ethics of this hierarchy of relations are, I think, clear. What may be more opaque is how this interpretive position might actually be seen to recapitulate a persistent ontology of the visual that is grounded in the black body as “both proof and product of the visuality of race.”38 If the black body is the paradigmatic visual sign, as Raengo argues, then thinking about black identity and visuality together is always going to require considerable interpretive caution and self-reflection about how one understands the visual to operate. This is why, when addressing the politics of racial prejudice, a more expansive conception of the visual is required, one that does not make blackness, for example, into a figure, but rather acknowledges its function as phantasm, produced in and through social relations.

Berger would surely support this idea—the attention he pays to “invisible discursive systems” demonstrates his concern to reveal how atmospheres of racial prejudice structure the visual record of civil rights. But the way he conceives of “the visual” and even of “social significance” compromises his efforts. His conception of the visual presents it as a container for representation instead of a ragged field of relations, of phantasms, of in-between-ness. His interpretive perspective positions the interpreter out there, separate from the history ostensibly encapsulated by the object, which Berger interpellates as a kind of being that is fundamentally other. The skin of the object and the skin of the human interpreter never really touch in the interpreter’s assumption of critical mastery; indeed, sensing is beyond this field of interpretive relations.39 I would go so far as to say that Berger’s understanding of social significance is undergirded by a rather reductive ontology of the visual, as he recruits period quotations to represent historical truth, for example, making figures out of the
phantasmatic stuff of social relationships. Therefore, although Berger seeks to unmask the racial prejudice informing the compositional structure and pictorial tropes we find in civil rights photography, his way of seeing this material is restricted according to what might be conceived as a racialized ontology of the visual, which equates signs and referents, seeing them as fundamentally connected to material reality.

It is perhaps not surprising that Berger is less concerned with Warhol’s *Pink Race Riot* than he is with the photographic source material on which the artist drew, and more specifically the historical commentaries we have about those photographs. His interpretive framework would not get us very far with Warhol, one of whose fundamental creative gestures was to deny the authority of the referent. I want to close by considering an artist in Warhol’s line who demonstrates what we have to gain from an expanded conception of the visual and its relation to historical experience.

**Messy Histories, Viscerally Felt**

I am thinking of Glenn Ligon, whose work attends to and theorizes many of the concerns I have explored thus far. Take *Stranger #21* (Figure 8.2), one of a series of works devoted to the writer James Baldwin’s meditations on “phantasmic space[s]” of black culture—from the Harlem of his birth to the small Swiss village of Loèche-les-Bains, where he lived for a time as the only black man, a discomfiting experience that shaped his essay, “Stranger in the Village” (1953). Baldwin’s words, from the “Stranger” essay, serve as a literal ground for *Stranger #21*; they are stenciled onto canvas via oil stick pushed through the letter forms, creating a thick, textural surface that is amplified by the additional substances of acrylic and coal dust. The intense materiality of this work—which, like many of Ligon’s other canvases, is scaled to corporeal dimensions—appears unstable as it oscillates, in the perceptual encounter, between obdurate matter and something like a shimmering atmosphere that can seem to shift its shape as the human body moves around it.

These works are surely about “being seen and not seen at the same time,” and about the relationship between queerness and metaphor, too. (As Hilton Als points out, Baldwin was doubly estranged as a queer black man living in the Swiss Alps with a man he had met in Paris.) These works may also be about the sensation of estrangement that is more generally evoked in Baldwin’s text. Ligon materializes this sensation, grants it a form of embodiment that makes a physical impression on the would-be “reader” who cannot, in this case, read since the text is largely indecipherable. Ligon, who has called these paintings “stubborn” objects that “refuse an easy entry into Baldwin’s work or into my thinking about Baldwin’s work,” creates an opportunity, with this impenetrability, for a more sensorially loaded encounter. The works not only invite us to “see the black body as it is enmeshed in American racial narratives,” as Okwui Enwezor has written, but they also suggest, perhaps, how to feel this in some necessarily estranged and estranging way.

The works’ insistence that we feel something may be clearer in Ligon’s more conspicuously spatial figurations as he works to make museum visitors aware of their own positionalities by destabilizing them, thereby complicating the distance between their present and the ostensible past. In an exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1992, for example, Ligon painted lines from one of Baldwin’s interviews onto a wall off in a corner of the space, locating the visitor according to the condition Baldwin
describes, of being “painted into a corner” as a black writer expected to “deliver” something like “an official version of the black experience.” Reading Baldwin’s words while physically embodying in-a-corner-ness, the museum visitor bridged historical moments by being pulled between ways of “knowing,” conceptual and physical. If the relationship between Ligon and Baldwin was underscored in this arrangement, the dialogic thickness of the space was amplified as the museum visitor was asked to consider her relation to this site of restriction, which nevertheless became a site of vibrant expansion, historically and physically, in Ligon’s installation.

Darby English and others have noted “[t]he tendency in Ligon’s work to equivocate between past and present,” among other categories of experience, in his intertextual, appropriative art of deferral, which positions the subject on the move, refusing to settle into locatable, knowable form. But Ligon complicates this fugitive dispersal with materially impressive surfaces and surface effects (for I think we could consider his positioning of the museum visitor in a corner as a kind of surface effect, a physical literalization, however estranged, of what the text describes). This is a foundational...
tension of work that, as English writes, “requires sustained encounters,” which he feels result in both “pleasure” and “unrelieved frustration.” Thus, if “Ligon’s paintings stage the murkiness of racial thinking” and demonstrate that, if “black being cannot be accessed rationally [then] its affective contours can be intimated,” as Huey Copeland has written, they do so by staging an affective confrontation with the people who stand before them. It is crucial to consider carefully the impression the works make, or seek to make, on their perceivers as a mode of historical recovery that is at times actually centered in the perceiver’s body. What we have here is an art that mobilizes discourse and linguistic shifting as a critique of an “essential black subject” (and beyond this of course the very concept of the essentialized subject generally); it is also a phenomenological art that troubles ontologies, conflates temporalities, and produces affective distancings and overlaps.

This is the tone and tenor of Stranger #21. It is an invocation and interpretation of historical experience, and the most compelling analyses of the series to which the painting belongs extend its resonances in their own textual forms by, for example, building up layers of descriptors, heavy chunks of linguistic matter, that feel somehow fleeting at the same time, willing to be replaced by new words and ideas as they come; by circling this description back on itself in virtual cul-de-sacs of prose that still manage to take us somewhere; by creating a space of non-linear experience where Ligon, Baldwin, the interpreter, and maybe even the interpreter’s interpreter can come together in mutual apprehension and misapprehension. This is not to say that art-historical writing should necessarily echo the formal strategies of the work of art; indeed, there are many cases in which that would be a dubious practice, both ethically and stylistically. (One would not want to reproduce, in some reductive way, the “figures” perceived in the work of art.) But, for interpretation to be adequate to the challenge, complication, and tone of a work like Stranger #21, it would have to abandon stark binaries and evidentiary hierarchies that crystallize historical meaning with false precision.

Conclusion

If we were to expand our conception of “the visual” as a site of relation instead of mere representation, we might come to perceive all of the untidy loose ends and productive blurrings that reverberate in the historian’s peripheral vision. All we have to do is step into the sensorial flux of historical experience as full-fledged participants willing to be bumped about and even thrown off balance. I think Prown understood the visual in this way, although not quite in these terms. Indeed, his conception of affective engagement takes a rather odd turn when he suggests that in order to empathize with a painting—something that cannot be handled or used in the same way as a teapot—the perceiver has to mentally project herself into the represented scene, to imagine living the narrative, as it were. It is in moments like these that one feels the tension within the Prownian method, which is so invested in the unpredictable insights of the “deduction” phase and yet works to package itself as an objective model approaching scientific precision.

But I’m not sure the field of American art history is quite ready to be done with the Prownian method; indeed, I’ve tried to show how some of Prown’s ideas endure in and sync up with recent theorizing about the interpretive act, its mechanics and
ethics, across the humanities. There is something useful even in Prown’s conception of how the interpreter might connect to the world of a painting, via mental projection of the body into the sights, sounds, smells, and so on of the depicted scene. For it is clear here that Prown perceives the boundaries between the painting and the interpreter to be fundamentally permeable. He thus conceives of the interpretive encounter as a phenomenological forcefield of porous interrelations. While the politics of this encounter go largely undiscussed in his writings, interpreters today might consider how works of art address their positioning and invite them to think about the ethics of the processes by which they come to know the past. Making visible the messiness of these procedures right on the surface of one’s writing instead of plunging laser-like into focused, streamlined depth, such an approach could, I think, do justice to the complexity of the works of art it engages. It might even be adequate to history itself as the past presses imperfectly into the present, into the space occupied by the interpreter, under her very skin.

Acknowledgments

I thank Martin Berger for his willingness to enter into this debate (and others over the years). Bryan Wolf gave me the opportunity to think critically about the Prownian method at the College Art Association Distinguished Scholar session honoring Prown in 2010. I thank him and the other panel participants, whose papers that day gave me much food for thought as I prepared this chapter. The students in my 2013 graduate seminar on Gordon Parks and the politics of race in popular media fundamentally informed the shape of my ideas, and Lauren Applebaum, John Davis, Lilya Kaganovsky, Jason LaFountain, Prita Meier, Angela Miller, Justine Murison, Sascha Scott, Andrea Stevens, and Terri Weissman offered advice and criticism along the way.

Notes

1 Berger, 2005, 2011. See also the exhibition catalogue, Berger, 2013, and the essay by Tanya Sheehan (Chapter 3 in this volume) for an account of Berger’s important contributions to scholarship on race.
2 Copeland, Thompson, and Grigsby, 2011.
3 See Best, 2011.
4 See, for example, Thompson, 2011, and Grigsby, 2011.
5 The very fact that Prown addressed meta-critical matters and explained his procedures has much to do with his method’s staying power. Indeed, as Berger notes, his essays focused on methodology are powerful teaching tools. They are collected in Prown, 2001.
9 Roberts, 2010, pp. 4–5. Davis, 2003, p. 575n49, noted that Prown’s female students “seem to have distanced themselves from the psychosexual variant of his methodology.” Analysis of the pewter teapot appears in Prown, 1993, pp. 6–11.
10 Adamson, 2013, pp. 672–673.
11 On the value of spending time with one’s object of study, see also Jennifer Roberts’s essay (Chapter 2 in this volume) and Roberts, 2013.


21 See Alan Braddock’s essay (Chapter 26 in this volume).

22 Bennett, 2010, p. viii.


27 Best and Marcus, 2009, p. 10.

28 Best and Marcus, 2009, pp. 10, 12; Marcus, 2007, especially pp. 73–108.


31 Best and Marcus, 2009, p. 16.


33 I hasten to point out that in my use of the concept of surface I am now departing from some of the dominant understandings of surface reading, which (as Love, 2010, notes, referring to Bruno Latour’s insistence on flatness) tend to work against phenomenological conceptions of “deep” human experience. See Best and Marcus, 2009, pp. 10–11, for description of a strain of surface reading concerned with “affective responses,” which is more in tune with my thinking here.

34 Frei and Printz, 2002, no. 421.

35 Crow, 1990; Foster, 1996; Wagner, 1996. While their interpretations differ widely, each is interested in the degree to (and methods by) which Warhol can be said to engage social trauma.

36 Didi-Huberman, 2003, p. 35, calls this investment in the authoritative period voice a quest for “euchronistic consonance.”


38 Raengo, 2013, p. 4.

39 It is perhaps worth noting that my thinking about the ethics of writing about race has developed since the publication of Greenhill, 2007. Greenhill, 2011, more closely approaches the kind of argumentation I am proposing.


41 I encountered Stranger #21 at the exhibition 30 Americans, at the Milwaukee Art Museum in August 2013, and that experience forms the basis for my observations here.


44 Enwezor, 2011, p. 62.


English, 2005, p. 42.

Copeland, 2011, p. 87.

English, 2005, exemplifies such writing, in my view. See also English, 2007, and Als, 2011, which structures observations in an impressionistic list format.

See Ellison, 1952, p. 4, for a powerful literary consideration of the racialized politics of such “bumping.”


References


Looking for Thomas Eakins
The Lure of the Archive and the Object

Kathleen A. Foster

We were looking for Thomas Eakins (Figure 9.1) that spring afternoon in 1983, when Elizabeth (Lily) Milroy and I stood on the steps of Mary Bregler’s South Philadelphia row house and nervously rang the bell. More particularly, we were looking for a trove of papers and art from Eakins’s studio, gathered up by his student Charles Bregler (1864–1958) after the death of the artist’s wife and the sale of his house in 1938. After Bregler’s own death, the cache had been closely guarded by his widow, who had famously chased another curious graduate student down the street with a broom and summarily ejected a New York dealer with a briefcase full of money. I was assistant curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), and Lily was a graduate student and an assistant at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA). Both of us were hoping to learn more about Philadelphia’s greatest artist by seeing material last examined by a scholar—the artist’s first biographer, Lloyd Goodrich—more than fifty years earlier. When the collection finally emerged from under the bed and behind the washing machine in 1985, we were thrilled to find much more than Goodrich had ever seen. PAFA, the institution where Eakins had studied in the 1860s and taught from 1876 to 1886, purchased the collection, and Lily and I began to study it. The material was rich, occasionally sensational, and sometimes transformative; and, like many research discoveries, it raised questions that had never been posed. As the Bregler material was published in three different volumes over the next twelve years, ripples swept through the field, stimulating a wave of publication: four new biographies, two books based on the artist’s manuscripts, and many more focused studies of the artist’s work. A panorama of recent methods and concerns in American art history emerges in this new bibliography, illustrating the opportunities—and the tantalizing limitations—found in both archive- and object-based analysis.

The search—and the torrent of scholarship—was not just about the new material: we were also seeking to reconsider, revise, and perhaps reconstruct the image of
Looking for Thomas Eakins

147

Thomas Eakins that had been limned by Goodrich and the critics and historians of American art since Eakins’s death in 1916. Looking for heroes for the nation’s art history and antecedents to the rising generation of American modernists, Goodrich and his contemporaries of the 1930s found a pantheon in Eakins, Winslow Homer, and Albert Ryder, artists who expressed the national art as fundamentally realist or visionary and commendably maverick. The heroic persona of Goodrich’s biography, *Thomas Eakins*, of 1933, reiterated in numerous mid-twentieth-century commentaries, was based on a number of components that informed the Eakins mythology. This characterization began with a premise of independence and originality: innocent of European influence, Eakins is seen to have returned from three years’ study in France and Spain unswayed by the teachings of his professor at the École des Beaux-Arts, Jean-Léon Gérôme, or any figure in contemporary art save perhaps Courbet. Steering by his own star and disdaining affectation, the legendary Eakins returned from Paris in 1870 to paint what he knew, what lay before him in Philadelphia, producing an uninflected record of American life. His dedication to “honesty” and truth to nature got him into trouble with the establishment, however, as sitters and art critics complained about his unflattering, warts-and-all portraits or his perplexingly ugly modern subjects. Most of all, his insistence on study from

Figure 9.1 Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), *Self-Portrait*, 1902, oil on canvas, 76.2 × 63.5 cm. Source: National Academy Museum, New York, USA / Bridgeman Images.
anatomical dissection and nude models offended his prudish Victorian contemporaries. Forced to leave his position as professor and director of the schools of the Pennsylvania Academy in 1886 for removing the loincloth of a male model in a co-ed lecture at the academy, he argued that such study was the core of an artist’s education. The loincloth incident, retold by other artists over time, made Eakins a saint to younger generations, especially the realists in the circle of Robert Henri and their followers, including the artists Alan Burroughs and Lloyd Goodrich, who would become the first cataloguers of Eakins’s work. The grand, simple contour sketched (with the assistance of Susan Eakins) by Goodrich in his brief biography of 1933 emphasized Eakins’s power as a realist, his integrity as an artist and teacher, and his all-American individualism.

All legend is based on a core of truth, and it can be demonstrated that Eakins’s reputation as an unflinching naturalist, dedicated teacher, and stubborn personality took shape well before the scandals of 1886. But all the premises and conclusions of his posthumous legend were to be attacked, refined, or substantially reconfigured a century later, fueled by the revelations of the Bregler Collection. The reconstruction began as part of the greater sophistication of the field of American art history after 1970. The wish for a subtler understanding of the canonical figures of American art, coupled with new interpretive strategies (including perspectives or theoretical methods learned from feminist and gender studies, literary criticism, sociology, psychology, and especially anthropology, linguistics and semiology), infused the field, joining a hunger in both academic and popular culture to tear away the veils of privacy, revealing the heroes of history, politics, and the arts as complex, flawed, and often ill. Eakins, in his eminence, made a fascinating target for reappraisal, and some found it likewise gratifying to attack the patriotic or modernist bias of the early scholars.

The generation gap opened with the work of Barbara Novak, whose *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* of 1969 looked harder at the “realist” myth and countered with an assessment of the deeply conceptual aspects of Eakins’s work. At the same moment, as part of a related sea change in the scholarship of European nineteenth-century painting, previously disparaged academic and Salon artists became respectable topics of study. In 1933 Goodrich could find nothing of merit in the work of Gérôme; in 1969, Gerald Ackerman looked again, noting his popularity as an artist and teacher and drawing important parallels between the work of the master and his American pupil, first demonstrated in Eakins’s celebrated rowing paintings (Figure 9.2). Ackerman’s work inspired my own work on Eakins and the lessons of Paris and Spain, particularly the personal and artistic model set by Gérôme that would inspire Eakins for decades. H. Barbara Weinberg and Elizabeth (Lily) Milroy developed this theme, placing Eakins in the context of other Americans trained in Europe in an academic mode. *William Rush Carving his Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill* (see Figure 26.2) follows the lead of Gérôme’s historical genre; *The Crucifixion* (PMA) pursues the shocking naturalism of his other teacher in Paris, Léon Bonnat. More recently, Akela Reason has explored such historical subjects as a reflection of Eakins’s own sense of place within the tradition of Western art. My early analysis was based on selected transcripts of the Paris letters made by about 1930 by Susan Eakins or Goodrich (which he would not allow others to publish); the emergence in 1985 of the original letters, full of new detail, would change the game for Milroy and all later scholars. Now fully accessible, the Paris letters remain the largest and richest collection of texts from Eakins, showing the range of his
Looking for Thomas Eakins

interests and prejudices as a cocky, struggling, 22- to 26-year-old American bohemian. Both ambitious and insecure, the Eakins we meet in these letters is a sportsman and a music-lover, affectionately condescending to his mother and sisters, respectfully beholden to his father, in awe of his master Gérôme, and thoroughly alive to the contemporary art life of Paris.7

Responding to mounting interest in the details of Eakins’s life, Goodrich revised and expanded his earlier work as a two-volume study published in 1982. Drawing more extensively on letter transcripts and notes from his interviews with Mrs. Eakins and many of the artist’s students, sitters, friends, and enemies, Goodrich shared his sources and opened the door to a new era of scholarship.8 A year later, Elizabeth Johns published Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life, which turned away from the biographical survey to think thematically about Eakins’s work and seek the cultural context of his subjects, particularly in sport, medicine, science, and music.9 This learned step into social history was soon followed by Michael Fried’s groundbreaking Freudian analysis of The Gross Clinic (Figure 9.3). Fried found a “family romance” in the painting, in which Eakins identifies with Gross as a father figure, and also with the abject patient; the horrified female spectator is read as a projection of Eakins’s mother. More richly, Fried identified a system of symbolic implements in the painting—scalpels, probes, pencils, pens—conveying themes of penetration, knowledge, and control. Building on Novak’s thesis, Fried defined a tension between the conceptual, “known” world of the mind and the sensual reality of materials that underlies the captivating instability of Eakins’s work.10

Figure 9.2  Thomas Eakins, The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake, 1873, oil on canvas, 117 × 167 cm (framed), 101.3 × 151.4 cm (unframed). Source: Cleveland Museum of Art, OH, USA / Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection / Bridgeman Images.
Fried’s stimulation to the field was compounded by the emergence of the Bregler Collection in 1985, which added new material to fuel the conversation begun by Novak, Goodrich, and Johns. Given the curiosity of many scholars, the first component of the collection to be published included the manuscripts—the Paris letters, and many other texts by, to, or about Eakins that threw light on some of the darkest moments in his career. These included the scandals surrounding his forced departure from PAFA in 1886, largely because of his use of nude models (including his women students), and the suicide of his niece Ella Crowell in 1897, which her parents blamed on Eakins’s corrupting influence. These papers presented a muddier view of the legendary black and white opposition between Eakins and his critics, casting a shadow over Eakins’s behavior that cannot be dispelled by his own high-minded statements in defense.

Especially murky and miserable were the papers relating to the Crowell tragedy, including a tormented private testimonial by Susan Eakins protesting the accusations made against her husband and describing Ella’s mental disintegration. Such passionate documents, like others in the collection, are difficult to weigh, since clearly there

Figure 9.3  Thomas Eakins, Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross (The Gross Clinic), 1875, oil on canvas, 8 ft × 6 ft 6 in. (243.8 × 191.1 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of the Alumni Association to Jefferson Medical College in 1878 and purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2007 with the generous support of more than 3,600 donors, 2007-1-1. Source: Philadelphia Museum of Art.
was duplicity and manipulation on all sides, and the principal voices (of Eakins and his 
niece) are missing or cited at second hand. As in the case of Eakins’s dismissal, multiple 
readings of the documents are possible, and some scholars have chosen to pursue 
the darkest possible story, accusing Eakins of abuse of his students and his wife, molest-
tation of his niece, and a panoply of mental disorders.\footnote{11}

The impulse to explore available documents for confirmation of our worst suspi-
cions about Eakins’s behavior is irresistible. Unfortunately, as provocative as the paper 
record is, it remains tantalizingly incomplete. No new documents have come to light 
concerning the most important event of Eakins’s family life, the death of his mother 
from “mania” in 1872.\footnote{12} Little candid writing survives from Eakins himself after the 
dense correspondence of his youthful Paris years; his letters after 1870 are mostly 
brief, business-like messages or polished public statements that seem in equal parts 
defensive polemic and self-denial. The grave accusations of the Philadelphia Sketch 
Club members, who insisted in 1886 that his conduct (probably in relation to his 
student models) was unbecoming to a gentleman, were (to Eakins’s fury and frustra-
tion) never recorded; the statement written in his defense by his father does not 
survive. The women students most implicated by the posing scandal immediately took 
cover, understandably hoping to transfer scrutiny away from themselves. Other testi-
mony came long after the events, including accounts of Eakins’s aggressive behavior 
late in life (particularly stories of marching out in the nude to shock women visitors to 
his studio) from persons interviewed decades later by Lloyd Goodrich. The partisan 
Susan Eakins, dedicated to building the new heroic persona while burying old gossip, 
shared little of what she knew about these dark days; the extent of her suppression 
became clear with the discovery of a box of papers about the Crowell tragedy marked 
“burn after reading.” Some, such as his student Bregler, worshiped Eakins from a 
respectful distance and knew little intimate information; others, such as cranky George 
Wood, disapproved of him mightily from an even more distant vantage. In this war of 
opinions, it may be necessary to shake salt on the testimonies of Eakins’s most ardent 
defenders, and query the biases of his worst enemies. Nonetheless, all the smoke hints 
at a serious fire, and the new documents portray a career much more miserable and a 
personality far more complicated than we had previously known.\footnote{13}

Judging disputed events in the past is difficult; the psychoanalysis of long-dead 
subjects is even more fraught. Today, a succession of doctors may assess the mental 
health of a living patient and propose alternate diagnoses; with fragmentary evidence, 
the project of putting a label on Eakins from afar must necessarily be speculative. This 
has not stopped those determined to describe his behavior as pathological, in keeping 
with the Romantic impulse to characterize great artists as marginal, tormented, and 
emotionally unbridled. Finding more sinister implications in behavior that an earlier 
generation celebrated as unconventional and Bohemian, the current diagnoses of 
Eakins predictably reflect the syndromes most in the popular consciousness at the 
turn of the twenty-first century (schizophrenia, autism, depression, bipolar disorder), 
revealing the concerns and yardsticks of our own day as we look for a new Thomas 
Eakins.\footnote{14}

The use of modern psychological and medical diagnoses or the application of novel 
interpretive methods to the evidence from documents in the Bregler Collection 
represent one type of approach to reassessing Eakins, emphasizing biography and 
personality; language (in letters and other written or printed texts) becomes the 
primary pathway into the mind of the artist. Historians are trained to rely on words,
and they tend to prioritize them. For such scholars, these papers make for intoxicating, voyeuristic travel down the rabbit hole of biographical research: so much is revealed, and yet so much is missing or glimmering between the lines. Relative to other important figures in this period—particularly writers and politicians—Eakins has a small paper record, which makes the revelations in these papers loom even larger. And the material has been exciting, offering detail and nuance, facts and historical context, even if much is deceptive, unreliable, or simply distracting. Unsurprisingly then, it has been the archive—the “writing about Eakins”—that has spurred most of the new scholarship since the emergence of the Bregler Collection; no doubt these papers will remain stimulating for decades to come, inviting new analysis and interpretation.

Such a trove illustrates well the potential for breakthroughs in understanding following from the discovery of an artist’s papers, but it also demonstrates the limits of even the most complete archive. When the search for Eakins—or any artist—begins in the realm of words, the scholar tends to scan the artwork for supporting evidence, and the paintings become illustrations to the text. However, not all of these documents can be read in Eakins’s work, and the artworks have multiple messages, often unexpressed in the papers; while some texts describe his behavior, remarkably few comment directly on his art, and many seem distant or tangential. The overlap between language and image or object is never perfect, and for Eakins much remains unexplained by the archive.

Attempting to fill in the gaps, art historians who are trained in visual analysis can take another path, giving priority to evidence gained from objects. This approach seeks the artist’s identity in his work, finding personality traits, values, and creative habits revealed across a large body of material, such as the avalanche of new photographs, drawings, oil paintings, and sculptures that emerged in the Bregler Collection. Most numerous and most novel in this trove were hundreds of photographs by Eakins and his circle, the majority from after 1880, when Eakins acquired his own camera. The scale of his activity, the subjects, and the uses of these photographs spoke volumes about Eakins’s attraction to photography and his unconventional, inquiring mind. Most provocative was a series of images on glass negatives, some unknown in vintage prints, showing Eakins and a woman, both nude, in the PAFA studios (Figure 9.4), evidently proof of the controversial practices that would get Eakins fired in 1886. PAFA’s new curator, Susan Danly, and the archivist, Cheryl Leibold, produced a book in 1994 with a checklist of the photographs and analytical essays by Anne McCauley, Elizabeth Johns, and Mary Panzer.\(^\text{15}\) This book revolutionized the study of Eakins as a photographer, supplanting the brief text and incomplete listing of Gordon Hendricks that had stood since 1969 as the principal reference on the subject. Recognizing the complexity of authorship and the difficult connoisseurship in sorting work created by Eakins and his collaborating students (as in Figure 9.4), Danly and Leibold sharpened titles and dates but held speculation on possible sitters or photographers in check, often backing out of Hendricks’s identifications to describe items as simply “circle of Eakins.” A major stride forward in the consideration of Eakins’s work with the camera, this book opened the way to a better understanding of the contexts of French photography (particularly nude studies) and American scientific research, and laid the groundwork for a still-needed comprehensive study of all the known photographs from this active “circle.”
I considered the place of photography in Eakins’s method and aesthetic in the third book on the Bregler Collection, *Thomas Eakins Rediscovered* (1998), which included all of the paintings, drawings, sculptures, and memorabilia. After the elusiveness of the documents, it was refreshing to launch an object-centered study that might begin from another corner in searching for the mind of the artist. Beginning with a careful description of the work, this book shuffled the cards and dealt them out in several ways: by medium, to define Eakins’s habits in different materials; by chronology, to examine the quality of his education and track the development of his method; and by project, to unite work in different mediums to demonstrate his process as he tackled different kinds of subjects, from the rowing scenes, portraits, and landscapes to historical genre (such as Figure 9.2 above, and Figure 26.2 below). This division and reintegration demonstrated the elaborateness of Eakins’s method and its compartmentalized logic, as it became apparent that each medium served very different purposes. Building on Fried’s more theoretical opposition of the conceptual (encompassing writing, drawing, and schematic space) and the material (involving sculpture, painting, and the physical plane of the canvas), the presentation of process showed the step-by-step method...
Eakins developed as he gradually introduced new techniques (first watercolor, then photography) into his arsenal.

His work habits revealed a fundamentally academic mindset, akin to the method of Gérôme, but surprisingly quirky: famous as a draftsman, Eakins actually abandoned drawing early in favor of painting, sculpture, and photography, and he based his naturalism on science and technology, to guarantee its modernity. Deeply planned, laboriously prepared, and complexly contrived, his realism was the reverse of the straightforward, intuitive “honesty” attributed to the legendary Eakins. Considering his choices and changes as a manifestation of his thinking, I looked for meaning and found a cautious, controlling mind, seeking exactness, mistrusting spontaneity, and deeply engaged by the pleasure of preparation and labor, all beautifully displayed in his obsessive perspective drawings. At the same time, Eakins responded sensuously to the physicality of clay and oil paint, and ambitiously pressed his artificial, conceptual method to capture powerfully tactile, emotional effects. Looking from the personal to the cultural significance of his subjects, I could also reach for wider contexts, such as the meaning of coaching, horsemanship, motion photography, the history of transportation, and the authority of his patron Fairman Rogers, all embedded in *May Morning in the Park* (PMA).17

I discovered many photographs in the Bregler Collection that clearly were studies for painting projects, but the most startling revelation of Eakins’s use of the camera would come with research for the major Eakins retrospective organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2001–02. For the curator Darrel Sewell and his assistant Douglass Paschall, the hundreds of new photographs that had emerged since the previous large survey exhibition in 1982 were the biggest news in the exhibition, made even more compelling by the discoveries of the PMA conservators, Mark Tucker and Nica Gutman, who figured out how Eakins actually used his photographic studies. Examining his paintings under a microscope, they discovered tiny incisions on the paint surface, evidently the registration marks Eakins scratched around key points in the photographic images he projected onto his canvas with a magic lantern. Apparently, he then painted the forms in daylight, with the projector turned off, when the small ticks were mostly buried in subsequent brushwork. This tedious, exacting, and covert technique, evidently Eakins’s own invention, unknown to his students, disclaimed by his wife, and never mentioned in his papers, gave further confirmation of the artist’s multi-disciplinary method and his obsessive wish to be correct, using the most modern and “scientific” aids. Although the press in 2001 seized on this use of photography as “cheating,” Eakins seems to have been only one of many artists surreptitiously using photography in this era. Remarkable for his creative strategy (and his success in remaining undetected), his results show him turning his tools to artistic ends: in *Mending the Net* (PMA) of 1881, dozens of photographs were combined in this fashion for a magically natural and emotional effect.18

The surprising news of the photographic studies, presented within an assembly of essays by a dozen scholars summarizing two decades of research, framed by a new biographical and critical through-story by Marc Simpson, made the catalogue of the retrospective exhibition of 2001–02 the best introduction to Eakins and his work to date. The exhibition was criticized for what it did not address, however, particularly recent scrutiny of Eakins’s sexuality and the issues surrounding gender in his life and work. In fact, the organizers of the exhibition had invited an essay on these topics from a senior scholar who withdrew at the last minute.19 The catalogue included,
however, many examples of Eakins’s photographs of nudes, including new images that had emerged in the Bregler Collection, such as the views of Eakins and his students posing nude in the landscape, and the incendiary image reproduced in Figure 9.4. However, laconic exhibition labels and the absence of focused discussion in the catalogue (or scattered analysis throughout an unfortunately unindexed text) left some scholars dissatisfied. The homoerotic undercurrent detected in the male nudes, first suggested by Gordon Hendricks in 1974, had become by 2001 a compelling theme to scholars such as Martin Berger, who proposed a fraught biography of failed manliness, including evaded military service, financial dependence on his father, a late and childless marriage, and a suspiciously feminine career path, all met with fierce compensatory behavior in the artist’s work habits and subject choices.20 Whitney Davis went further, reading a complex narrative of homosexual flirtation in Eakins’s photographs of his students boxing, wrestling, and swimming.21 

The artist’s most provocative painting, *Swimming* of 1885 (Figure 9.5), based on these photographs, received a monographic study edited by Doreen Bolger and Sarah Cash (1996) that included Elizabeth Johns’s meditation on Eakins, the poet...
Walt Whitman (the artist’s friend and a famous spokesman for liberated sexuality), and all the meanings of a “Platonic” gathering of men in the outdoors. By 2007, William S. McFeely’s slender, melancholy biography of the artist accepted Eakins’s homosexual identity as a given. By 2010, in the widely discussed Smithsonian exhibition, *Hide/Seek*, the artist’s work led off Jonathan Katz’s discussion of gay and lesbian identity in American art. Other biographers—Goodrich, Adams, Kirkpatrick—do not share this conclusion, and certainly consensus seems impossible. Period voices are silent on the subject and, as Jennifer Doyle has noted, they would not have recognized the sexual identities defined in the twentieth century, now anachronistically read into the past. However, subjective efforts to measure the sexual temperature of a photograph or a work of art cannot be disputed; to say that such judgments are in the eye of the beholder is to allow the work to be provocative and meaningful to all viewers over time. And from period accounts, Eakins was (like his paintings) attractive to some, repulsive to others; he maintained close friendships with men and women, and was fascinated by nudes of both sexes. From the intensity of his interest in the nude and anatomical study as well as his repeated scandals, it may be concluded that he was alert to human sexuality across the board—“pansexual” as Trevor Fairbrother and Peter Schjeldahl would have it, dangerously “lusty,” as Jonathan Katz prefers—and quietly, magnetically intense. Genteel persons of both sexes reported that he was intentionally boorish, obstinate, deliberately baiting. Bohemian art students, on the other hand, loved his stubborn defense of professional practices and remembered his gentleness. Given the contentious opinions of his contemporaries, it should be no surprise that viewers continue to differ on the sexual meaning of his work; if we had Eakins in the room with us today, we might disagree about his affect.

In a similar fashion, the contemporary interest in issues of class and race has led to a re-evaluation of the work of Eakins, who has again become a mirror reflecting present consciousness. For example, Eakins’s frequently valorized dedication to anatomical study and dissection was reassessed in 2005 by Alan Braddock, who found a pattern of racism and class condescension in the practice of upper-class doctors and artists seeking cadavers for study; their victims, all too frequently, were working-class (often African American) communities tormented by grave-robbing. Braddock’s more recent study, *Thomas Eakins and the Cultures of Modernity*, recovers the Darwinian and positivist ideology of class and race that preceded the intellectual revolution sparked by anthropologists at the turn of the twentieth century. It is hard to be shocked to find sexism or prudery in the late nineteenth century, and likewise it is not surprising to detect class tension or racism, but it is useful, again, to strip away our anachronistic projections on the past. Braddock finds Eakins to represent the progressive intellectual values of his pre-modern period, not ours; a built-in disdain and a measure of professional exploitation, not twentieth-century liberalism, underlies the artist’s images of African Americans. Braddock also reminds us how attitudes in the past shaped imagery, and how this imagery has perpetuated ideas into the present, a message he has taken into the new arena of ecocritical art history. Reinterpreting Eakins’s paintings of the river landscapes around Philadelphia, he notes the deliberate exclusion of evidence of the industrial pollution that plagued the area in the nineteenth century. That these paintings have come to represent the “truth” of the landscape’s past is one part of a story that deserves revision; likewise reconsidered, again, is Eakins’s reputation as an honest realist.
Looking for Thomas Eakins

For such topics as realism, science, and sexuality, no single painting has been more versatile and stimulating as a key to the artist and also a mirror of spectator concerns over time than Eakins’s greatest work, *The Gross Clinic* (Figure 9.3). Fried’s study of 1985 launched the era of postmodern theoretical approaches to the painting, compensating for the unusual dearth of surviving preparatory material and (more typically) the almost complete absence of personal commentary from the artist. Many scholars have scoured newspapers and institutional records to reconstruct the story of the painting, its reception, and the significance of the persons depicted. Others have turned to the larger culture of medicine and science that framed Eakins’s own interests in anatomy, surgery, and photography.\(^29\) Some, including Adams, Burns, Doyle, Fried, and Rosenberg, mentioned above, have applied modern psychosexual or mental-illness frameworks to understand the extraordinary aggressiveness of *The Gross Clinic*. Like the *Portrait of Dr. D. Hayes Agnew (The Agnew Clinic)* (University of Pennsylvania), the painting has also been a rich field for the discussion of gender stereotypes, circling between the hysterical “mother” cowering at the left behind Dr. Gross and the anaesthetized mastectomy patient at the right in *The Agnew Clinic*, lying beneath the gaze of many men and one woman, the stolid Nurse Clymer, who brings a new note of female professional competence to the grim proceedings.\(^30\)

The sale of *The Gross Clinic* in 2006–07 added a new layer of interpretive significance to the painting as it became a symbol of Philadelphia’s heritage of art and science. Thomas Jefferson University announced a purchase agreement with Alice Walton, for her Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington. In response, the cultural community of Philadelphia rallied to match the offer (a record-breaking $68 million) in a mandated—and breathtaking—forty-five days. The campaign to save the painting for Philadelphia trumpeted Eakins’s importance as the city’s greatest artist, the significance of the painting in the context of the Centennial Exposition of 1876 where it made its debut, the eminence of Samuel Gross as Philadelphia’s most famous nineteenth-century surgeon and teacher, and the iconic status of *The Gross Clinic*, lauded as the greatest American painting of all time.\(^31\)

The success of the campaign inspired a fresh look at the painting, hoping to apply the insights gained into Eakins’s method from the previous decade. It also created an occasion to take *The Gross Clinic* into the conservation lab to study its material qualities, as another path to understanding the artist. Examination of the painting, backed by the exploration of institutional records, revealed that it had undergone major treatments at least three times in the twentieth century. The first, and most damaging, took place about 1925, when the proud administration of Jefferson Medical College prepared for the school’s centenary with a cleaning of its most famous portraits. Evidently confusing grime and darkened varnish with the artist’s final toning layers, restorers over-cleaned the surface, blurring detail and disordering the composition of lights and darks. Fortunately, a large black and white glass negative made at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1917 survived to record both the fine detail and value relationships within the painting. By comparison, the present condition showed that much of the background had been badly abraded; the two figures in the tunnel leading into the surgical amphitheater, originally constructed as pale presences emerging from shadow, had been reduced to dark silhouettes against a glowing reddish doorway. Seeking stronger, cleaner colors for the painting in an era accustomed to Impressionist and modern art, the restorer in the 1920s had driven
through to the foundational layers of Eakins’s painting. We realized that, for the past eighty-five years, the world had been admiring, writing about, and reproducing a painting that had been substantially altered.\

The examination was the first phase in a careful attempt to identify and restore the lost layers of glazing, hoping to recover, as far as possible, the impact of *The Gross Clinic* prior to 1925. No 135-year-old painting can be entirely “restored” to its original appearance, nor can the intentions of the artist ever be entirely comprehended, but the evidence of research into Eakins’s methods and the clues on the canvas itself gave us guidance in correcting the mistakes of the 1920s and steering the painting back into balance. Only areas of loss were “in-painted,” and the treatment was fully documented and entirely reversible, so that the work of 2009–10 can be undone and rethought in the future without harm to the surviving surface. At the end of the project, we put the painting on view with lighting that simulated the daylight Eakins would have known, and stood back to take in the effect. Observers—some of whom had known the painting for decades—agreed that the change was electrifying.

The book that was produced to tell the story of the purchase of the painting and its restoration became another exercise in finding Thomas Eakins in his work. This approach might be characterized as a museum strategy because it begins in a conservation studio, not in a library or archive, and the first revelations involve materials and processes. Conservators identify basic evidence, sorting the authentic from the fake, measuring the impact of time, damage, and alteration. Their study tells us things about the artist that are concrete, not speculative, and that bear immediately on his personality. The red underpainting exposed by the cleaning shows an original method of working from a base tint that Eakins would patiently subdue with layers of glaze until it fell into the proper relationship to the whole. Darkened, this underpainting nonetheless adds a glimmer of warmth to the distance, just as the glazing gives a sense of depth that more direct painting could never achieve. Eakins invented this system by trial and error, inspired by Old Master paintings. He was never taught this technique, which contradicts in some ways the manner of the Baroque masters, such as Velázquez, whom he was attempting to emulate.33 Traces of his similarly novel method of projecting photographs were also discovered in faint incisions at key points around the foreground figures in *The Gross Clinic*, although no photos survive for this project. Equally eccentric, the painting’s perspective system seems to be made up from the merger of three different vantages. Surprising changes to his composition revealed by X-radiography recover the artist’s choices—such as a complete revision of the foreground—as he grappled with a composition far bigger and more complex than anything he had ever done. Reconfirming the creativity of his solution as well as his fastidiousness, these discoveries expose the massive manipulations at every level of this painting, from the construction of the space to the incremental build-up of detail and tonal balance. Far from being like a photograph of a particular event in a very specific place—as viewers from 1875 to the present have claimed—the painting is revealed to be intensely personal and artful in the extreme. This is not what Eakins saw; it is what he contrived for us to see.34

The method revealed in *The Gross Clinic* dismantles in detail the “honest realist” image of the artist and tells us implicitly of his ambition to be an American Old Master. It also speaks of his youth and isolation in the United States, building by novel means an effect that emulated the work of his European heroes. It reconfirms the ornate problem-solving system discovered in the Bregler Collection materials.
and, in the implied array of lost photos and perspectives and the delicate build-up of tones to orchestrate a sense of space and mass, it reveals a 31-year-old man determined to be in control and bent on making a sensational effect. The recovery of the impact of the painting, with its astonishing naturalism and glowering mood, its violence and majesty, refreshed the shock of *The Gross Clinic* and launched a new look at the content and affect of the painting. Object-based study turned for affirmation and suggestion to documents, art history and criticism, social context, psycho-biographical speculation—all the tools in the scholar’s kit. As a case study in the braiding of insight and method from conservation science and art history, the museum and the academy, the project introduces a complex, problematic, but very palpable Thomas Eakins.

The hybrid method of study seen in *The Gross Clinic* project, which spiraled between period documents and object analysis while knitting together interdisciplinary interpretive strategies, can be seen as the most recent product of the discovery of the Bregler Collection and, in a sense, the accumulation of lessons from the past twenty-five years of study. Although it could be said that the relatively young field of American art history has been built on a series of “discoveries” of national achievement, there has been no other “find” of such importance in the past three decades. To explain its impact, we might begin with Eakins’s stature as an artist and his reputation as a lightning rod of opinion, for provocative new material concerning a major, controversial figure will always be alluring. But there is more: the timing of the emergence of the collection, at a moment of growth and sophistication in the field, the variety of evidence, inviting many interpretive approaches, and the pertinence of the material to a broad range of topics of contemporary interest, has drawn an unusually large and diverse array of scholars. Their work illustrates the range of strategies available to the art historian, and collectively they offer a fresh and probing composite representation of Thomas Eakins. It is a portrait full of new detail, but riven with contradictions, elusive and unfinished, inviting further study.

**Notes**

1 Susan Casteras, a fellow graduate student at Yale in the 1970s, told me of her flight from Mrs. Bregler; James Maroney recounted his visit in “Memories of Marie Picozzi Bregler,” at a session on Eakins topics at the College Art Association, 96th Annual Conference, Dallas-Fort Worth, February 20–23, 2008. The story of the Bregler Collection is told in Foster and Leibold, 1989, pp. 1–22. This book catalogued and analyzed the manuscripts, with transcripts of key items and a complete set of reproductions on supplementary microfiche. The photographs and glass negatives were published in Danly and Leibold, 1994. The artwork and memorabilia, along with an assessment of the meaning of the entire collection, appeared in Foster, 1998. Drawings from the Bregler Collection were united with Eakins’s manuscripts at the PMA and PAFA in Foster, 2005.

2 Goodrich, 1933. On the formation of his reputation, see Hardin, 1995, and Troyen, 2001. Troyen subtly characterizes the nationalist anxiety in the art criticism of the 1930s and the role of Susan Eakins in shaping the record of her husband’s life.


4 Ackerman, 1969.
Foster, 1972. The gist of this paper was expanded in Foster, 1998, pp. 32–48 and 225–231.


7 See Homer, 2009.

8 Goodrich, 1982. He planned a third volume to update his catalogue raisonné, though he suspended work on this project in 1985 and donated his archive to the PMA, which continues to track the artist’s work. An online checklist first posted on Wikipedia in 2010 by Mark Pellegrini includes basic information from the PMA Goodrich archive and the art market. Goodrich’s biography remains the cornerstone text on the artist, although more recent research informs a popular biography by Kirkpatrick, 2006.

9 Johns, 1983.

10 Fried, 1985. Pursuing a structural/Freudian approach, Rosenberg, 1995, found the figure of the hysterical mother key to the gender polarities of the painting.

11 For an introduction to the manuscripts relating to the scandals, the biases inherent in these papers, and alternate readings possible from this material, see Foster and Leibold, 1989, pp. 1–18, 39–40, 69–90, and 95–122. Homer, 1992, the first scholar to use the Bregler papers in a new biography of the artist, found misogynistic patterns in these documents. Burns, 2004, pp. 207–220, persuasively outlined pathological patterns in Eakins’s behavior but overreached with a diagnosis of Asperger’s syndrome. Burns, 2005, p. 92, also detected obsessive anxieties about health, mental illness, and femininity. Adams, 2005, relying heavily on Goodrich’s notes from interviews with disapproving informants such as Wood, speculated freely on possible childhood abuse, bipolar, exhibitionistic, and obsessive-compulsive disorders. For a critique of Adams’s logical lapses, see Roberts, 2005.

12 Goodrich, 1982, vol. 1, pp. 76–79, noted the death of Eakins’s mother Caroline in 1872 “from exhaustion from mania” and speculated that she was manic depressive, but little information survives to give additional texture to this family tragedy, which surely had an impact on the artist.


14 In addition to the sources cited above, new studies have investigated the popular diagnoses of the past, particularly “neurasthenia” seen in both Eakins and his sitters. See Spies, 2004.

15 Danly and Leibold, 1994. Including fine reproductions of the most important images, the book suffered only from failing to include thumbnail images of all the items.

16 In an appendix, Mark Bockrath analyzed the materials and techniques of the oils. Still unpublished from this trove is the significant body of work by Charles Bregler (paintings, pastels, sculptures, photographs, and papers) and Susan Eakins, although the most important of her paintings and an analysis of her work appeared in Toohey, 2001.


19 I was not working at the PMA at the time, but I knew of the disappointment over the absence of an anticipated text on Eakins’s late career because the editorial team
asked me to divide my essay for the catalogue into two chapters so that the turn-of-the-century portraits would be highlighted in a concluding essay. Without knowing of this last-minute loss in the roster of contributors, the museum’s critics imagined indifference, hostility, or suppression, voiced in David Lubin’s exhibition review of 2002, which offers a useful survey of additional scholarship prior to 2001. See Lubin, 2002.


Davis, 1994, boldly identified figures from photo to photo, including Eakins himself, although I do not recognize Eakins (or some of the named students) in any of the photos that constitute the basis of Davis’s argument. Nonetheless, his thesis that Eakins made his photographic images of nude men more conventionally decorous in his final painting is certainly true.

Katz (Katz and Ward, 2010, pp. 17–21), complains about the “silence” on the subject of sexuality and surveys the disputing opinions in the Eakins literature. Noting the intensity of Eakins’s images of both male and female nudes, he admits the difficulty in characterizing his “dissident eroticism,” citing the subtle scholarship of Jennifer Doyle, 1999, who first drew attention to the anachronistic sexual categories and behaviors read by modern viewers into Eakins’s work.

Doyle, 1999.

Themes of gender appear frequently in the analysis of the artist’s nudes and athletes, as seen in the useful e-reader compiled and edited by Ilene Susan Fort, 2010. Eakins was known to be condescending to women from his boyhood, and his arrogance annoyed both men and women. However, he insisted on equal access for women to all resources at PAFA, which allowed them an education in the arts more liberal than any European academy.


See Braddock, 2005, 2009b.

However, while berating modern scholars for projecting their values onto Eakins’s “sympathetic” depictions of African Americans, Braddock loses sight of the relative difference between Eakins’s work and the more caricatural imagery of his contemporaries.

Unfortunately, the recent tendency to analyze what is not shown sometimes leads to suggestions of a cover-up, as if the artists were conspiring to deceive. However, artists have rarely been social critics, and most have to earn a living by courting patrons. See Braddock, 2009a.

Berkowitz, 1999, pp. 162–192, culled the records at Jefferson and surveyed earlier sources on the painting. For a review of the scholarship, a comprehensive bibliography, and an appendix publishing lifetime commentary, see Foster and Tucker, 2012a.

Commentary on The Agnew Clinic has emphasized feminist topics including the history of breast surgery and the education of women in medicine. For a review of the literature and a defense of the “medical gaze,” see Werbel, 2007, pp. 28–52. Mark Schreiner, 2012, surveys the history of surgery embraced by the two clinic paintings. For additional bibliography and discussion see Foster, 2012a.

The Gross Clinic was described as the greatest painting ever made in the United States when it made its debut in 1876, and though this assertion was met by horrified counter-opinions within the next five years, this estimation had been consolidated
among art critics by the time of Eakins’s death in 1917. More recently, see Kimmelman, 2001. For an account of the campaign to save the painting, see Foster and Tucker, 2012a, pp. vii, 1–3, and Conn, 2012.

32 See Foster, 2012b. Tucker now recognizes a pattern of over-cleaning seen in most of the artist’s works today. The resulting loss of detail and glazes requires some caution to avoid misreading the surface of Eakins’s work, such as The Champion Single Sculls, which also suffered damage before 1930. For example, see Leja, 2004, pp. 62–68.

33 On Eakins’s technique, see Tucker and Gutman, 2001b.

34 See Foster and Tucker, 2012b.


References


Dialogue
The discipline of art history—indeed, its very name—assumes a relationship between the making and viewing of art and the affairs of history. It goes without saying that fathoming the nature of this relationship constitutes one of the chief tasks of the art historian. Yet just how one goes about doing this—how one construes the terrain between “art” and “history” and attempts to traverse this terrain within the work of interpretation—persists as a matter of doubt and debate. While it would be counterproductive, even foolhardy, to presume the existence of a right way to proceed, art history’s continuing richness and efficacy as a mode of scholarly inquiry depends on constant scrutiny of various attendant concerns. In what follows, I return to a moment in the history of the study of American art, the 1980s, during which certain of the key questions regarding art and history (and, also, art history and theory) not only rose to the surface but presented themselves as newly urgent and essential, laying the groundwork for multiple decades’-worth of debate. Characterized by the publication of several key and controversial books, including Bryan Wolf’s *Romantic Re-Vision: Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature* (1982), David Lubin’s *Act of Portrayal: Eakins, Sargent, James* (1985), and Michael Fried’s *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (1987), each influenced in its way by ideas and methods imported from beyond the usual boundaries of art history, this moment, and Wolf’s work in particular, offer an ideal arena of scrutiny where matters of art, history, and interpretation are concerned.

I first encountered Wolf’s work during my first year of graduate school, when assigned to report on *Romantic Re-Vision*, which led me to his article “All the World’s a Code: Art and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century American Painting” (1984). *Romantic Re-Vision*, published during Wolf’s tenure in the American studies and English departments at Yale, considers the work of three artists, Washington Allston, Thomas Cole, and John Quidor, in terms of what he calls the “peculiar
modernity of American Romantic painting,” describing their art as marked by self-consciousness, self-referentiality, psychic conflict, and a constant negotiation between the individual and the social (or social change).\textsuperscript{1} This constitutes the “revisionary” impulse of the book: American Romantic art imagined as something more than a moody celebration of the beauty and sublimity of the natural world. Through close and extended analyses of a small selection of paintings by each of the artists under discussion, Wolf posits the formal structures of their works as in part determined by and thus revelatory of the cultural forces that constituted and molded them and also their makers, both as individuals and members of a societal group.

Significant here is Wolf’s particular approach to interpretation. Drawing on theories of language and linguistic meaning in use within departments of literature—structuralism, poststructuralism, and semiotics especially—he treats these paintings as pictorial “texts,” agglomerations of pictorial signs or symbols the careful decoding of which revealed their latent or hidden meaning. As with an actual text, a painting by Cole (or any other artist), in Wolf’s analysis, generates and transmits meaning through a particular organization of its parts—its pictorial vocabulary—from which arises a logic or system of relationships (arbitrary or not) among those parts that serves to signify. In treating paintings as texts to be read, Wolf makes an important decision about how one should imagine the nature of an image—about what images essentially \textit{are}—that has major implications for his account and for art-historical interpretation more generally, especially with regard to how one envisions the relationship between art and history (or “text” and “context”) within the act of interpretation. This decision comes also with substantial consequences for historical analysis writ large, what Wolf identifies in “All the World’s a Code” as one of his chief concerns.

Wolf’s decoding of American Romantic painting results in a psycho-formal analysis of both artist and society, one that reveals the desires, doubts, conflicts, discontinuities, and states of mind of the nineteenth-century subject and, by extension, the psychosocial tensions and fissures of the American nation in the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus, the self-referential quality of Allston’s paintings—their borrowing and misuse of past styles—amounts to an aesthetics of parody that acknowledges the boundedness of vision by language and locates imaginative freedom in the transfiguration of convention. Wolf’s Qidor suffers a “catastrophe” of vision while navigating the transition from a pre-industrial to an industrial society, what in Wolf’s account comprises a breakdown of known forms and codes. Wolf’s Cole, by way of Milton’s \textit{Paradise Lost}, pictorializes the discontinuity characteristic of a fall into experience and knowledge, what constitutes a turn inward, away from nature and toward language and, also, toward the self-consciousness of modernity, expressing this through variations of amassed mountain peaks described by Wolf in Freudian and Lacanian terms.

As a graduate student, I found Wolf’s study compelling for many reasons. For one, by paying attention to particular structures of representation that inhered in both painting and writing, Wolf insisted on the reintegration of form and meaning, text and the so-called extra-textual (as well as on the recombination of New Criticism and social history). In so doing, he offered a model for narrativizing seemingly non-narrative landscape imagery as well as a template for the productive cross-pollination of literary theory, or theory as such, and art history. His study also demonstrated the manner in which what a so-called American studies approach to cultural artifacts might provide insight into the meaning and motivation of American artistic practices. In such an approach, a work of art is understood alongside and even equivalent (if not
identical) to other cultural productions, including literature, rather than as essentially
distinct if not untouched by these things. Under this model, all aspects of culture
manifest prevailing or latent patterns of thinking, belief systems, or ideologies, mak-
ing a painting important not just as art but also for what it reveals about history and
society, and making other cultural artifacts, including what is termed “visual culture”—
a category that includes all visual imagery or events, that is, all media, technologies,
or techniques addressed primarily to the visual sense—equal to major works of art in
their historical significance and for what they can tell us about the past. To my mind,
then, Wolf posited something critically important for the way we look at pictures and,
in particular, for the way we look at landscape art.

Years later, I find myself standing by this statement, and would argue that it applies
equally well to the article “All the World’s a Code.” Published two years after
Romantic Re-Vision, the article considers the situatedness of a selection of works of art
in a context of transition from “communal and artisanal forms of information exchange
to increasingly impersonal ones” as brought about by the new market forces of early
industrial capitalism. This art, Wolf writes, “bears witness to a conflict of changing
codes of knowledge in mid-nineteenth-century America”—the “informational”
replacing the “epiphanic”—and does so by way of both content and form, such that
the formal structures of the paintings under discussion register the epistemological
conditions of the transforming mid-century historical moment. In this way, Wolf’s
article updates the arguments as well as the methodologies of his book, perhaps partly
in response to those reviewers who found Romantic Re-Vision to be ahistorical in its
argument and overly attentive to the psychological or semiotic.

In point of fact, the article is not necessarily more “historical,” whatever that means,
than the book, but “history” sits closer to the surface in “All the World’s a Code” than
it did in Romantic Re-Vision, and it is also posited as far more determinant of the mean-
ing or message of works of visual art. If the Thomas Cole, Washington Allston, and
John Quidor of Romantic Re-Vision were, to quote Wolf (evoking Theodor Adorno),
“barometer[s] of social change,” the Asher B. Durand, Richard Caton Woodville, John
Quidor, and David Gilmour Blythe of “All the World’s a Code” might be called light-
ning rods of the same. I say this because the merit and import of “All the World’s a
Code” has persisted over time. It is an article that professors still assign and students
continue to read and productively use, and it continues to speak eloquently to concep-
tual, methodological, and historical issues beyond its immediate focus and scope. This
is the case, I believe, because what Wolf offered in the early 1980s (and both the book
and the article are products of this particular academic moment), when scholarship on
American art attended chiefly to matters of subject, style, or influence (quite often with
an eye to discerning the “Americanness” of American art), was a way to fathom and
articulate, in his words, “the social content of visual forms.” By this I do not mean that
he simply showed us how to consider works of art in terms of their socio-historical
contexts—that would not have been anything too new nor too revelatory, with scholars
like Erwin Panofsky, Meyer Schapiro, Michael Baxandall, Robert Herbert, and Linda
Nochlin as precedents, albeit variously fitting. Rather, by drawing on the conclusions of
literary theory, Wolf presented a way to imagine works of art not simply as reflections,
by-products, or symptoms of their historical conditions but as fundamentally constitut-
tive of cultural discourse and social formation. In other words, by positing paintings as
discursive utterances—conglomerations or congealings of signs, referred to as “code”
in his title, that collectively produce culturally specific meanings—he presented a means
by which to imagine paintings as texts, literally written by and thus embodying (again, not simply reflecting), even living, their socio-historical moment. Durand’s *Kindred Spirits* (Figure 10.1), for example, “uses its own aphoristic quality, its easy intelligibility, to situate itself within a specific cultural context … [It] thus bears witness to a conflict between changing codes of knowledge in mid-nineteenth-century America. … It addresses a changing social audience while retaining its Romantic epistemology.” Formal and iconographic analysis were thus for Wolf a form of cultural analysis, and elucidating the subject or structure of a painting wound up as a matter of illuminating how one sees—or, rather, reads—that work and consequently determined what that work ultimately signified. So, in *Kindred Spirits*, which depicts Cole and the poet William Cullen Bryant standing on a rocky promontory and appearing to discuss the landscape before them, a compositional tension between “surface image” and “recessional movement” ultimately resolves, by way of a series of circular and zigzagging diagonal thrusts into the depths of the picture, into a protective,
“womblike” enclosure, a striking departure from the sublime and often unaccommodating wilderness settings offered up by Cole’s landscapes. The resulting visual access narrates the journey of the self from the contemplation of nature to an understanding of spiritual values and laws, which comes by way of said contemplation and amounts, in Wolf’s analysis, to an “epiphanic moment central to Romantic experience.”

Yet, in creating a continuous, harmonious, and inviting view of nature, Durand moves a step away from the discontinuities and ruptures of Romanticism and toward a new way of seeing, one that honors the collective as much as the individual and that figures the widespread availability of information, from spiritual truths to the daily news, in a newly imagined public sphere and marketplace. What we witness in Durand, Wolf writes, “is the recovery of the landscape for public purposes,” what Wolf understands to be a product of the transformations of codes of knowledge brought about by the communications revolution and the market transformations of the antebellum period. Likewise, Richard Caton Woodville’s War News from Mexico (Figure 10.2), in Wolf’s account, concerns itself with questions of knowing; it evokes the transforming scope and economics of news readership by way of the penny paper at the center of the drama depicted and thus articulates the commodification of
knowledge these transformations wrought, what was accompanied by the making over of the epiphanic into the informational, making revelation part of everyday experience. Paintings by John Quidor, who makes a reappearance here, and David Gilmour Blythe similarly embody or comment on these new modes of knowing and communicating, with Quidor valorizing human perception over penny-press reading and Blythe rendering an apocalyptic vision of the real’s vanquishing by counterfeit and endlessly exchangeable representations.

To look at these pictures, in Wolf’s analysis, is to gain access to the transformations and attendant anxieties of their time. Seeing, thus, for Wolf, is reading, and art, thus, is culture, inasmuch as culture is understood to be a matter of signification, the manipulation and dissemination of signs. That is, the art of Durand, Woodville, Quidor, and Blythe indexes transforming cognitive codes; as a result, reading these works allows us access to these very codes and thus to the textures and vocabularies and machinations of history itself. Or, alternatively, these artists index or embody, and here I sample Wolf’s vocabulary throughout his essay, “ways of understanding”; “manners of vision”; “patterns of knowledge”; “codes of knowledge”; “cognitive structures”; “cognitive relations”; “knowledge structures”; “forms of perception”; “codes of reality”; “perceptual codes”; and “ways of seeing.”

To be frank, this is a slippery and underdefined mass of terms. One could justifiably envision greater terminological specificity being brought to bear—both conceptually and historically—so that perception, language, and communication are not muddled and collapsed into the single, general, and ahistorical category of “signification.” Something like a tyranny of semiotics could be said to be at work here, where all forms of language or notation—pictorial, visual, verbal, or otherwise—as well as all kinds of acts—making, viewing, seeing, perceiving, reading, speaking, knowing—are flattened into a single phenomenon and treated as if identical and interchangeable, when they are by no means such. Defining—both historically and conceptually—what is meant by these terms would bring needed clarity—both historical and conceptual—to the claims of Wolf’s text. This would also address a more general problem that attends art-historical interpretation within and outside of the field of American art. This is what I term the “painting as …” problem, by which I mean the tendency or compulsion on the part of scholars to see a work of art, in this case a painting, as something else: a text, a simulacrum, a spectacle, an agent, a cultural construction, and so forth.

There is nothing wrong with adopting a model or a template for use in describing certain properties or operations manifest in a work of art. My recent thinking about Arthur Dove, for example, depends heavily on the idea of painting as a material, embodied, and generative presence, one that exists and operates within a network of other presences: in other words, painting as thing, painting as motile agent. But the very act of analogizing or metaphorizing at the outset of interpretation fundamentally shapes the manner in which we envision and describe the objects of our study. If a painting is a text, it must behave like one, an operating assumption that may make one potentially blind to qualities and modes of being or meaning particular to painting qua painting. Here I do not presume the possibility of or advocate some kind of direct, unmediated experience of the essence of painting—hardly—but simply draw attention to the concerns that arise when we assume that a painting behaves unproblematically like something that it is categorically not. Paying attention to and aiding in articulating the particular nature, limits, and procedures of painting, as opposed to
other media or other sorts of imagery, is one of the tasks that distinguishes the discipline of art history from the fields with which it has become closely associated, namely material culture and visual culture studies. Historians of American art would be well served to engage and embrace rather than be embarrassed by this distinction.

As with *Romantic Re-Vision*, the insights of literary theory, semiotics included, underpin and drive the arguments of “All the World’s a Code.” Indeed, theory plays a double role in Wolf’s analysis here, making possible two separate but not unrelated claims: one methodological, the other historical. I have already described how literary theory allowed paintings to be seen by Wolf as texts and, thus, to be read as cultural code; this is the methodological side of things. Second, and this is the historical part, the attention paid by semiotics to the processes of signification—to language, to signs—as well as what semiotics claims about the nature of meaning and communication (that meaning is contingent, a matter of the deployment of culturally determined codes, and that the medium is the message), allowed Wolf to identify signification itself as the historical subject of the paintings he discusses, as the thing that these paintings are ultimately about. That is to say, it is not simply that we can understand the formal operations of a painting like Blythe’s *Prospecting* (1861–63) to be constituted by new patterns of knowledge or ways of seeing. Blythe, Wolf argues, takes as his very subject the idea that meaning is contingent and conventional and reality nothing but a “series of semiotic codes,” and he does so, again, by imagining the co-optation of representation by a market context, such that all forms of communication—speaking, writing, reading—and, ultimately, all knowing, rest on a rickety foundation of speculation and counterfeiting, one governed by artifice rather than by reference or recourse to the real.11

I would be satisfied with the latter interpretation—that Blythe’s picture, and also those of Durand, Quidor, and Woodville, are about signification—if Wolf had made a clear-cut case for the cultural constructedness (in the Foucauldian sense) of these works. This constitutes a typical model of historicization within the field of American art history and runs something like this: these works were made during this particular historical moment, therefore they embody the discourse and ideology—the grounds of knowing and being—of said moment, no matter what their makers thought they were up to when putting brush to canvas, not least because these makers were themselves culturally and discursively constituted, and thus limited to knowing and seeing according to the codes and signifiers of their time. (The concept of “visuality”—not what we see, but what and how our historical moment allows us to see—is of course pertinent here.12)

However, these are not Wolf’s claims exactly, at least as I understand them. And I say this because, for him, or at least for him in this particular article, artists are agents, and they do act consciously and deliberately, manipulating the very codes and signs that constitute their “textualized” version of reality and thus constitute themselves. Wolf calls this manipulation an “artistic strategy,” thus implying that these artists consciously, and self-consciously, produced commentaries on the world in which they lived (this, for him, constitutes their proto-modernity); they intentionally painted pictures about the perceptual and/or cognitive conditions of their moment, and they did so as a kind of power-grab, as a way to exert control by asserting mastery over representation (and thus over the real, which was representation).13 “Durand domesticates,” “Cole requires,” “Quidor denies”: such phrasing implicates these artists as agents with intentionality. The same goes for the descriptor “Durand’s project,” which implies conscious motivation and deliberate execution.14
I draw attention to the eruption of agency in an article about cultural and discursive construction—about images as cultural and culturally constructed texts—not because I believe that the scholar must choose one or the other approach to meaning: meaning is intentional, on the one hand, or, on the other, meaning is discursively constructed and/or unintentional. To be sure, the best art-historical writing—on American art and otherwise—traces meaning to multiple sources and forces. What I am interested in here are the implications of Wolf’s assertion of artistic agency for our understanding of history and historical consciousness, for the sort of historical inquiry in which he invests.

Let me explain what I mean: We, as historians of art and culture immersed in the literature of our field and that of other disciplines, most often envision and understand history as a series of major transformations, ones that are visible, definable, and comprehensible to us, and we do so because we have the advantage of hindsight, and because we tend to like to package history neatly, such that we can describe it in terms of eras, epochs, and seismic shifts, analogous in a way to the partitioning of prehistoric time periods according to moments of mass extinction or monumental climate change: the early republic, Jacksonian America, the Gilded Age, the communications revolution, the market revolution, the industrial revolution, the rise of consumer capitalism, the shift from artisanal and communal forms of exchange to impersonal ones, and so forth. But did Durand, Woodville, Quidor, and Blythe have similar access to history, or even to the consciousness of their era as history, as constituted and propelled by historical transformation and shift? Can history see itself in such a fashion? That is to say, can we assume that the past and its actors had the ability to fathom their moment as undergoing, say, a “communications” or a “market” revolution, such that its implications were palpably and visibly clear to them? I do not suggest that these historical actors were deaf and blind to the conditions of their existence, but that it may have been impossible for them to produce the sort of meta-analysis of life on the ground that would consequently allow for the sweeping generalizations that we, today, have the ability to bestow on the muddle that was the past, and to do so such that the results of this meta-analysis became the very subject of their art. To put it more simply (and crudely): What made it possible for Durand to decide, as Wolf has him doing, that he was going to paint a picture about—that his project would constitute—the rejection of Romantic, Colean landscapes of consciousness that narrated the artist’s own identity formation and thus embodied the very idea of the Romantic subject or self and the subsequent embrace of forms of knowledge and knowing more public, accessible, democratic, and pluralistic, thus evoking a “changing social audience”? He would almost have to have read Romantic Re-Vision in order to understand that this was the challenge he undertook to pose. But, barring this, how did he come to decide to paint an epistemological shift, and know that he was doing so—how could he have done and known this?

To query thusly is not to reject the idea that paintings can mean something other than what their makers intended or to stifle the suggestion that forces present yet invisible to a culture can yet be constitutive of its products. Rather, it is simply to pose a series of questions about how the source of pictorial meaning is imagined and assembled by Wolf, and by historians of American art more broadly. All of these questions hinge on a larger query concerning the very availability of history—to historical actors and to interpreters of that history—and also on how we imagine the relationships between “then” and “now,” historicity and subjectivity, authorial intention and
historical determinism, and, ultimately, art and history itself. These are big questions, and to my mind demand recourse to theoretical formulations of both existence (this is how the world works) and interpretation (this is how one might go about making sense of that world). Of course, the wholesale translation of a theoretical paradigm into art-historical analysis has its limitations. As I have already suggested, these are the limitations or problems I see as attending the issues of meaning, intention, and agency raised for me by Wolf’s “All the World’s a Code” and by the practice of art-historical inquiry more generally. It would be injudicious to suggest, for instance, following the paradigm of poststructuralism, that meaning can be purely extra-authorial and, by extension, that a work of art can exist as the result of the non-intentional effects of something like mechanical processes, as if produced automatically by, say, “market forces” or other socio-cultural vectors and pressures, such that all text (or image) is code that eludes and exceeds all authorial control. To be sure, Wolf’s account of the paintings he discusses makes no such claim, but his article does swerve toward such a paradigm in its have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too positing of authorial agency, where (1) Durand and company meant to put in their pictures the meaning that Wolf finds there, and (2) said meaning is nothing more and nothing less than what the machine of culture or history itself would have produced were it to pick up brush and paint.

Revisiting Wolf’s work, then, compels one to think broadly and deeply about the challenges that face the historian of American art now, especially the manner in which the field has conventionally understood the roles of agency and intentionality in the production of meaning and, by extension, how it has understood the very ontology of painting, or the nature and limits of representation as such. Reversing the directionality of Wolf’s argument, for instance, through reading the pictures he considers from the inside out, rather than from the outside in (at least at first), can aid in explaining what I am getting at here. While still an attempt to fathom the historical situatedness of these paintings by characterizing the historical situatedness of their makers, this reverse tack would not posit these makers as discursively or ideologically constructed subjects who construct images that in turn reveal those discursive and ideological constructions, but would instead attempt to grasp—and I say this in all seriousness—just what might have been in Durand’s head, or Woodville’s or Quidor’s or Blythe’s, when they created their paintings. Not by holding a seance, of course, or by imagining that this information is at all fully available to the twenty-first-century scholar, or by stopping to worry whether these artists are inside or outside of discourse, resistant to or unconsciously compliant with the codes or patterns of knowledge of their day (survey says: all of the above). Rather, I would do this by listening to them and to their contemporaneous viewers and critics: I would read what they might have written or read; reconstruct how they might have thought given the grounds of knowing of the moment; and pay attention to all aspects of the historical fabric of which they were a part—not just to market forces and information revolutions, but to things that would have been directly available and visible to them, historically as well as conceptually. These could include, for example, those strains of philosophy, science, and literature that might have shaped how they imagined their artistic projects and, to return to the subject of Wolf’s analysis, that might have shaped how they, themselves, imagined or theorized representation. I would also pay attention to the more mundane: to the materials available to them, to the objects or apparatuses with which they interacted, and to the networks of spaces and settings in which their practice unfolded. Such an approach would engage recent thinking about the objecthood, materiality,
and thing-ness of works of art as well as questions of mobility, circulation, and intermedia as prompted by the insights, past and present, of other fields of inquiry, including philosophy, the history of science and science studies, sociology, anthropology, and cultural geography.

In Durand’s case, for example, I might introduce a middle step between formal analysis and recourse to socio-cultural context—between, say, Wolf’s description of an enframing foreground and a zigzagging recession into depth in _Kindred Spirits_ and his linking of these compositional features to a transforming social sphere—one constituted by attention to an intervening micro-contextual layer the scrutiny of which might further illuminate Durand’s famous painting.¹⁷ This middle ground or transitional explanation could take shape in the following manner:

I would consider _Kindred Spirits_—understood here as a visual rendering of nature but also as a narrative consisting of a language of pictorial signs—in light of the poetry of William Cullen Bryant, who is featured so prominently in the painting (and with whom Durand undertook to produce an illustrated volume entitled _The American Landscape_).¹⁸ As Wolf recounts in a footnote, the painting was commissioned by the New York collector Jonathan Sturges and presented to Bryant by Sturges in appreciation of the eulogy the poet delivered at a memorial service to Cole on May 4, 1848 (Cole had died unexpectedly several months earlier, on February 11).¹⁹ It thus stands to reason that the painting itself—its content as well as its form—might bear some relation to the content and form of Bryant’s writing, and to that of the eulogy in particular. If, as Wolf suggests, Durand’s picture engages contemporaneous modes of communicating and knowing, why not look at the linguistic formation directly responsible for its genesis? And why not consider John Keats’s sonnet “To Solitude” (first published in 1816), a line from which provided the painting’s title? This would assist us in determining the kinds of relationships among expressive modes (painting, writing, and so forth) that interested Durand and consequently underpinned the creation of _Kindred Spirits_, and might also aid in bringing some specificity to the term “Romanticism,” which appears with frequency in _Romantic Re-Vision_ and “All the World’s a Code” and in writing about Durand in general, but remains woefully underdefined (this, of course, is a problem not at all unique to Wolf). But even prior to a turn to Bryant and Keats, might we wish to have a look at Durand’s own writing, especially his “Letters on Landscape Painting,” which themselves constitute an attempt to communicate knowledge by way of a textual, periodical format (if not to a non-specialized, popular audience)? Other scholars have, of course, considered the relationship of these “Letters” to Durand’s paintings, and one could easily imagine such a consideration unfolding in the space of Wolf’s analysis, especially given that in “Letter III” Durand imagines nature as an alphabet (not at all uncommon in nineteenth-century America), and the process of learning to render it as akin to language acquisition. I quote at length:

There can be no dissent from the maxim, that a knowledge of integral parts is essential for the construction of a whole—that the alphabet must be understood before learning to spell, and the meaning of words before being able to read—not to admit this would be absurd; yet many a young artist goes to work in the face of an equal absurdity—filling a canvas just as an idle boy might fill a sheet of paper with unmeaning scrawls, occasionally hitting the form of a letter, and, perhaps, even a word, so
that the whole mass, at a little distance, may have the semblance of writing; and so, after he has wasted sufficient materials to have served, by well-directed study, to effect the attainment of the knowledge he lacks, he feels this deficiency, and goes back, or more correctly speaking, takes the first step forward, and begins with his letters. You have learned these letters, and how to spell, in the practice of drawing, and you have found out the meaning of many words, but there are yet many more, with phrases and whole sentences to learn … before you can write and entirely express your thoughts.

To gain this capacity to express thought, Durand then suggests, the student must proceed to the study of foreground objects—“a fragment of rock, or trunk of a tree”—as the first step in the process of acquiring the aforementioned language of landscape art. Durand speaks metaphorically here, of course, but there is reason to believe, given the frequency with which language served as a metaphor for the natural world as well as the act of painting a landscape during this period, that a case might be made for a particular kind of engagement with the verbal on Durand’s part, one that could sit alongside (and only partially contradict) Wolf’s consideration of Durand’s imbrication in transforming verbal networks and the emergence of the penny press.

I would consider the role that Durand’s experience as a professional engraver might have had on his practice as a painter. This would include his experience designing bank-notes, which strikes me as potentially relevant to what Wolf wants to say about a relation between Kindred Spirits and transformations in the economic sphere, especially with regard to the matter of representation, with bank-notes representing monetary or exchange value in a manner similar if not identical to Durand’s still Romantic representation of impalpable states or truths. There surely exists a connection between the meticulous realism of his paintings (especially his “Studies from Nature,” made en plein air) and his training and consummate skill as an engraver. Yet my interest in Durand’s printmaking would attend more to what might be said about the idea of intermedia in his work; that is to say, I would be interested in exploring how the art or act of engraving is evoked or made manifest in Kindred Spirits such that painting and engraving come to coexist and combine as media and as artistic techniques (even if engraving does so only figuratively), thus serving to articulate an analogous intertwining relationship between word and image, text and painting, something that is patently the subject of the picture.

I have always been struck (as was Wolf) by the disparity in Kindred Spirits between the foreground/middle ground objects, which sit close to the surface of the canvas and seem as if pressed into a narrow plane of space, and the dramatic, swift plunge into depth initiated as the rocky cliffs in the middle ground give way to the far less meticulously rendered trees immediately behind them, as if a hand has grasped, from behind, the center of the canvas and stretched it back so as to create a telescoping, funnel-like space or, alternatively, as if a hole has been punched or cut through the center to create a slice of space beyond. This latter effect, combined with the point-counterpoint of ever-receding diagonals—blasted trunk, tree repoussoirs, angled cliff tops, walking staff, brim of hat, zigzagging creek bed, distant peaks, the wings of two birds—calls to mind the slice of an engraver’s burin into a steel or copper plate, one cut following another, the depth of each slash and slice calibrated according to desired darks and lights, as well as the hatching or cross-hatching employed to create
tonal variation, with sets of intersecting parallel lines in Durand (the diagonals described above) evoking those of this particular engraving technique. In Durand’s leftmost tree, the names “Bryant” and “Cole” have been carved, the implied work of a penknife here evoking the cut of the burin such that painting (Durand’s trompe l’œil rendering of the two names) and engraving (the evoked burin cut) become as one. To what end? Well, that is an open question, but my sense is that such a gesture toward the mixing or combining of media has something to do with what is being said in Kindred Spirits about the relationship between the visual and the verbal, with the resultant new understanding of the painting’s, and Durand’s, interest in language (understood broadly to include the pictorial) and linguistic forms, the painting itself an experiment in imagining the nature of various representational modes and the varying relationships among these modes.

3 My scrutiny of Kindred Spirits might also include a consideration of time. Durand’s account of the process of learning to paint and of the act of painting a landscape in his “Letters on Landscape Painting” is manifestly marked by the temporal, or, more precisely, the temporally sequential, as was the case with many art-instructional methods in use at the time in both Europe and America: first do this, then do that, and then only after that do this other thing. As I have discussed elsewhere, landscape itself was conceived of in temporal terms during this period, with entrance and traversal figured as movement through space and time; we have already encountered Durand’s step-by-step, letter-by-letter approach and, as the author of “The Landscape Element in American Poetry: Bryant,” which also appeared in The Crayon in 1855, remarked, “In landscape, we generally begin with foregrounds, and the poet, as the painter, should paint them well before he goes further.”

Essays on the relationship between poetry (and/or literature) and painting appeared with some frequency in this particular periodical, which also excerpted and provided commentary on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s Laocoön (1766), then considered a canonical statement on the nature and limits of the two arts, and which understood the difference between them in terms of their registration of time: literature and poetry register transience, art should not. For the most part, art-critical writing on American landscape departed from Lessing’s dictate, and understood the two representational systems to be of a piece—ut pictura poesis—with successful landscape paintings narrating through compositional devices the movement of an imagined occupant (the viewer) from foreground to distance and, in so doing, articulating the passage of time. So it is with Kindred Spirits, wherein multiple temporalities coexist, including the sort of duration just described. Adjacent spatial zones—foreground cavern, middle-ground basin, and background vortex or slice—compel entrance and movement through, an effect reinforced by the implied flow of water through the length of the scene, while Cole’s upraised arm and walking staff, along with two birds arrested mid-flight (and a third poised for takeoff on the branch of a dead tree at right), connote instantaneousness. The very facture of the painting melds two temporal modes; meticulous brushwork in the foreground that bears no trace of an artist’s hand and thus seems as if suspended in an eternal present makes way for far looser, more spontaneous-seeming strokes in the distance, commencing with the rough-hewn rock face at right, which evoke the time of painting as well as the time of human existence. Here, the rendering of multiple kinds of time in the space of a painting about the bond between a painter and a poet may well amount to a theoretical declaration on Durand’s part, one that addresses the very nature of the representational systems—language and images—he sets in relation to one another in this work.
Wolf’s scholarship, in that it posits paintings as active agents in culture as well as machines that actively assist human seeing and knowing, has been instrumental in my own thinking about pictorial agency. I believe he is right to suggest that certain nineteenth-century American paintings behave as if they are sentient beings, and I would add a more detailed and deep exploration of this idea to any discussion of Durand and company, with an eye to complicating the model of agency that posits art as simply a cog in the cultural wheel, mechanistically recapitulating and regenerating social forces and drives. We all know, of course, that paintings are not alive—they do not literally think and act—but we also know that works of art can have the kind of impact in the world that makes one feel as if they do live and breathe, and that the relations they establish with their makers and viewers can approximate intersubjectivity, proposals to which increasing scholarly attention has been given of late. Imagining Kindred Spirits as possessed of agency (of an as yet undefined sort) might assist in establishing the interpretive, micro-contextual middle ground that I seek, not least because it would allow for manifold intentionalities (not just that of the artist-author) even as it insisted on fathoming extra-authorial, pictorial agency in historical rather than poststructuralist terms. What this historical fathoming would look like, I am not yet sure—how does one historicize the actions and thoughts of a painting (and do so while remaining cognizant of the “painting as …” problem)?—but the question is a captivating one.

By positing these four interpretive possibilities or avenues, I do not mean to supplant those suggested by Wolf in “All the World’s a Code,” nor do I mean to imply that they hold more water, are “more right” than the methodologies that he and other like-minded historians of art have employed in their work. To be sure, I may be wrong on one, two, three, or all four counts. Rather, I present these thought experiments as illustrative of the approach that I described above, which takes as its guiding light the idea of historical possibility and sets no small store by the ability to say, yes, that artist could have imagined himself or herself doing and intending thusly and also, in the license, to deem equally significant the material and the ideological, the very matter of art-making as well as its meta-contexts. Again, such an approach, characteristic of my own scholarly work, does not pretend to substitute for Wolf’s or render untenable his reading of Kindred Spirits and the other works discussed in his article, nor does it aim to be prescriptive beyond Wolf and stake an inviolable methodological claim within the larger realm of art-historical inquiry. Rather, what I have proffered seeks to supplement or complement what Wolf has said, thus offering up another way to speak of the historical character of works of art, that is, another way to speak to and characterize the historical specificity of particular pictorial practices. Put another way, what I describe might serve as another way to characterize the viewing, or reading, of these works by Durand, Woodville, Quidor, and Blythe, which for us, today, decode in a certain fashion, but perhaps to their contemporaneous viewers—with their particular, historically specific habits of viewing and reading—and in the eyes of the makers themselves, might have told a slightly or perhaps wholly different, if not incompatible, story. As I noted at the outset of this chapter, art history’s brief is a historical one: figure out how to imagine, analyze, and describe the relationship (or relationships) between art and history, in history as well as within the project of historical inquiry. There are a variety of ways of doing so, and my proposals characterize just some of the many means presently at our disposal.
Notes

5 Wolf, 1984, p. 328.
6 This follows his assertion in Romantic Re-Vision that “Works of art are texts, and they are meant to be read.” (Wolf, 1982, p. xiii; italics in original.)
7 Wolf, 1984, p. 330. “Situating,” “bearing witness,” and “addressing” are of course not identical acts, and Wolf’s use of these various terms to describe the nature of the relation Kindred Spirits bears to the social complicates his insistence that works of art do not simply reflect social forces, but constitute them.
9 Wolf, 1984, pp. 331, 332.
10 See for example Bal and Bryson, 1991.
12 See for example Alpers, 1983; Baxandall, 1988; Pollock, 1988; Crary, 1990; Foster, 1999; Foucault, 2006.
14 Wolf, 1984, 329, 334
16 See Knapp and Michaels, 1982, 1987, for a pointed discussion of these issues.
17 I would of course not be the first to adopt such an approach; see for example Lawall, 1966; Miller, 1993; Bedell, 2001; and Peck, 2005. For more on Durand and Kindred Spirits, see Howat, 1987; Foshay and Novak, 2000; Barringer and Wilton, 2002; Vedder, 2004; and Ferber, 2007.
18 Craven, 1975, pp. 52–53.
20 Durand, 1855.
22 DeLue, 2004, ch. 4; The Crayon: Anon., 1855, p. 3.
23 See for example The Crayon: Anon., 1856a, and Anon., 1856b.
24 See for example Brown, 2003; Daston, 2004; Mitchell, 2005; and Stafford, 2007. Ascribing agency to pictures is not the same thing as saying, pace Derrida, that works of art can (and always do) wriggle free of our grasp and produce meaning on their own. For art and object relations, see Ellenbogen and Tugendhaft, 2011, to which I contributed.

References


Response
Writing History, Reading Art

Bryan Wolf

Allow me two caveats before beginning:

Caveat number 1: I am rooting for the other team. I would love to think, as DeLue suggests, that the question of intention lies quietly, like a purring cat, within the purview of historical inquiry. If we can understand the range of a culture’s knowledge—what it read, what it thought, how it saw—then we can also understand what it intended.
Caveat number 2: But I don’t think so.

DeLue’s account of “All the World’s a Code” is extraordinarily smart and insightful, as any reader of her work would expect. It is also more than that. In her response, DeLue concludes by posing two versions of how art historians might approach a work of art: complementary methods that she describes as reading a picture from the “inside out” and the “outside in.” DeLue means by the former (from the inside out) a method very close to her own, a reconstructive effort to understand the meanings, beliefs, and discourses that painters and their audiences shared, so that their world is not only comprehensible to us but, literally, visible to us as it was to them in their art. “My account,” she notes in George Inness and the Science of Landscape, “imputes intentions—I say something about how Inness might have conceived of his pictures—but I also attempt to demonstrate how these paintings were assigned meaning by audiences and individuals [of the period] other than the artist.”1 To work from the “inside out” is to understand the age, as much as possible, as the age saw itself. (I will return to this.)

To work from the outside in, on the other hand, sounds more like me, or that part of my work concerned with the circulation of codes that live independently of the work of art, granting it agency as one voice among many in a larger cultural


© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
CACOPHONY. These codes are fluid, mobile, and contradictory; they are also inseparable from ideology and tend, at the deepest level, to establish the formal or representational parameters within which works of art live. “Code” then actually has two meanings: in a more limited fashion, it refers to the ways that social forces achieve representational form in an image (or text); in its larger reach, it refers to the very limits of representation itself, to the formal parameters that any social or cognitive moment (a communications revolution, for example) places upon how space is conceived and how the armature of a painting hangs together.

So let me backtrack for a moment to 1984. I am going to suggest that encoded within my own article is a larger historical debate that I did not fully understand at the time, and that this unrecognized dimension to the article, as much as its explicit content, serves as the engine that drives its analyses. What I see in retrospect is the way that “All the World’s a Code” is really a piece of writing framed by other debates from the 1980s. Though it has had the happy fate of living beyond the moment of its writing, I now view it as a form of scholarly ventriloquism (as readers of Charles Brockden Brown’s Wieland know, we should be wary of disembodied voices). “All the World’s a Code” found in the discourses of the 1840s a voice for addressing issues from the 1980s.

When I wrote the article, I was trying to figure out how someone who is not a historian by training can nonetheless think historically. I was a dyed-in-the-wool formalist in graduate school, a student of both the New Criticism (its reading practices) and poststructuralism (its deconstructive strategies), but my notion of history, as critics of Romantic Re-Vision rightly pointed out, was primarily intellectual, a history of ideas largely abstracted from social processes. Formalism succeeds by misreading history: converting history into a version of hermeneutics, mistaking the murkiness of class antagonism, for example, for the unruliness of a text. I wanted to break out of that in “All the World’s a Code.” But I also did not want to write what I think of as “unmediated history,” the sort of narrative that tends to be unresponsive to the power of half-hidden reading practices in shaping the narratives we tell. I now think of history as something akin to electromagnetic waves: certain frequencies are visible to the naked eye, and certain frequencies are not. And I suspect that intentionality, as a method or logic of analysis, tends to claim the visible frequencies, which are then codified and normalized as what history is or should be about (belief systems, political philosophies, etc.). Those of us intrigued by Freud as a critic—a guide into the uncanniness of texts—tend to pursue the invisible frequencies: suppressed narratives, unacknowledged perceptual practices, cognitive shifts in how the world is apprehended. If we believe in hermeneutics not as an inquiry into what the world is about but how it is available to us (i.e., those stories again), then we are likely to practice our history as a form of decoding, a way of unraveling history by reading it. Our primary archive then becomes the image or text itself. Not because images form the only archive (we too love to grub among dusty documents), but because the image is, to quote Emily Dickinson, where the meaning “lies” (in all senses of the word). “Tell all the Truth,” Dickinson reminds us, “but tell it slant—Success in Circuit lies.”

DeLue, I believe, has invented something that I think of as “neo-intentionalism.” She has revived the question of intention while expanding it far beyond what critics like William Wimsatt, a founding father of New Criticism, once imagined. DeLue understands this method of historical recovery as getting into the heads of her artists and their viewers. In the process, she pushes Wimsatt in a direction different from his
intent. Wimsatt resisted any temptation to reduce the work of art to the conscious designs of its maker. DeLue, as a neo-intentionalist, tacks in a different direction. She wants to understand two things: what was going on in the maker’s mind and what systems of belief the larger culture provided. In this way, neo-intentionalism expands the field of intention from the artist proper (what he or she was thinking) to the system of cultural belief that surrounds and informs the artist (what the social world permitted him or her to think).

I understand historical recovery in somewhat different terms, as unpacking the codes circulating through the artist’s culture, codes usually shared by those within the same class, gender, racial, or national group. The difference is not that one of us believes in codes and intentionality and the other doesn’t, but that in DeLue’s revisionist account of intentionality, the codes that circulate within a particular culture are also generally understood by it. Neo-intentionalism makes a twofold move: it seeks to view the world through the eyes of the artist at the same time as it expands the question of the artist’s intent to include the larger range of meanings available within the artist’s culture at the moment of a work’s creation. Neo-intentionalism thus grows out of a worldview that I am going to call, borrowing from Derrida, “logocentric.” It assumes a congruence between what an artist intended, what a culture believed, and what a critic can ascertain. For that congruence to work, the eye, the world, and the scholarly exegesis need to line up in good order. We become Emersonians, insisting, as the Representative Man of Concord did in Nature (if I may paraphrase) that (1) words are signs of facts, (2) particular artists’ words are signs of larger historical facts, and (3) history can be found by plowing through (not under) the maker’s intentions. Without buying into Emerson’s metaphysic, we endorse, nonetheless, his vision of coherence. We assume that the more we can see of the artist’s world—the closer we get to a vision-of-the-whole replicating his—the more firmly we can grasp his intentions.

And this is where I beg to disagree. For me, the codes that circulate in a particular culture are usually not understood by it (to exaggerate for the sake of emphasis). In fact, these codes cannot be understood by those who inhabit them: not because the participants in history are intellectually blind or stupid, but because the ultimate power of social codes lies precisely in their capacity to naturalize their proceedings and in this way to disguise the larger, deeper social work that they perform.

To get at these codes I need, then, to revise DeLue’s terms of “inside” and “outside.” I believe that the codes that are often the most interesting, or most informative, or most significant historically are precisely those which are not consciously intended by their makers but which crucially inform an artist’s work nonetheless. We need, as historians and critics, to work from the “inside out” (I agree completely with DeLue here) because it is only on the inside that we discover those codes that cut against the grain of a painting’s conscious meaning; we discover how to read the painting’s unrecognized (disallowed) internal contradictions and suppressions. We capture the full dialectic of the painting only when we explore the tensions that set submerged codes against plotted or “intended” ones. Close reading for me, as a mode of working from the inside out that stands slightly aslant from DeLue’s own procedures, is the only method I know of that captures the critical or contradictory dimensions of a painting by capturing what it suppresses but will not—or cannot—name directly. Close reading, in other words, allows a work of art to waive its right to the Fifth Amendment and testify against itself.
Let me cite an example.

Remember the Krell? They were an advanced civilization that flourished on Altair-IV, an earth-like planet many light years away from our own solar system in the 1956 sci-fi film, Forbidden Planet. The Krell had it all: a technology so advanced that they no longer required labor, and an intellect so developed that they no longer depended on bodies. What they forgot in their apparent perfection was the underside of their own rationality: “monsters from the id.” In a single night, the Krell were wiped out when their unacknowledged passions came to life, literally. The Krell were destroyed by the “subconscious” forces of the “primitive mind,” forces which returned, like the repressed, to destroy the very civilization that had earlier sought to banish them.

The problem with intentionality, as I understand it, is that there are too many Krell lingering around its edges. Those “monsters from the id” are real. They no longer inhabit anything as quaint and unwieldy as a 1950s “primitive mind.” They dwell instead within “the political unconscious”: the “repressed and buried” structures that determine our “lived relationship to transpersonal realities,” whether those realities concern local social forms or “the collective logic of History.” Today’s monsters from the id resemble those unseen historical structures that not only shape our comings and goings, but determine how we subsequently imagine and report those behaviors.

So let’s return to the submerged text of “All the World’s a Code.” When I read the article now, I see the focus on two cognitive regimes with all their historical underpinnings—something we can loosely call “artisanal” and “informational”—as also a historicization of something else. And that something else is the relation of high modernist art to postmodernity. The 1980s was a period of enormous intellectual and generational struggle in the humanities, a struggle waged between those who viewed the work of art as privileged—the last great stance against kitsch and its onslaught—and those eager to understand the historical conditions under which the very idea of art’s autonomy arose.

The 1980s, in other words, marked in the academy a moment of fierce, and often angry, debate about two epistemic orders: one eager to maintain the integrity of the artwork and its universalizing claims to truth, and one that was skeptical about all the above and interested in demythologizing the very myth of modernity itself. I think that “All the World’s a Code” engages that shift: that its deepest conversation is not only with Durand, Woodville, and Blythe, but with partisans on both sides of the modernist–postmodernist debate. I tried to understand a fundamental cognitive shift in the nineteenth century because I needed to explore a parallel one that was happening—in what felt like seismic fashion—on the very ground I was walking. Or to phrase it another way: I came to view the nineteenth century through a semiotic lens (all those “codes of knowledge” and “cognitive structures” and “ways of seeing” that DeLue notes) because the status of the work of art as transcending or not transcending the terms of its culture was the central aesthetic debate of the late twentieth century, and semiotics provided a method for “reading”—and entering—that debate.

And this in turn suggests something about how we art historians work. We have two choices: we can either write a displaced form of autobiography (that act of ventriloquism I mentioned earlier, an effort to give voice to one set of concerns by couching them in terms of another), or we can attempt to ground our own cultural battles in a genealogical narrative that sees in the past the outlines of and the formative conditions for the present. “All the World’s a Code,” as DeLue suggests, wants to have its cake and
eat it at the same time. I wrote a displaced form of autobiography (that 1980s debate) that I then justified or legitimated by pursuing a mode of historical genealogy: how the present has been shaped by an early modernity that we still inhabit. I wanted, as DeLue notes, to affirm the artist’s agency within the world at the same time as I insisted on maintaining the power of prior—and unacknowledged—ideological codes. The former was my way of insisting on the heroism of all art-making, and the latter was my way of admitting, like a reborn Calvinist, a fallen world prior to our arrival and resistant to our wills. This postlapsarian world makes mincemeat of all discourses of agency (Jonathan Edwards and Calvinism recognize this in their talk of “predestination”). If we think of predestination as a way of framing, within a theological context, what we today think of as the “always already thereness” of ideology, then I suspect we are on the right track. It is simply a question of discourse. From one side of our mouth we say things like “Durand’s project” or “Cole’s intention” because we need to believe that artists make their worlds, and in the process, we hope, redeem ours. But even as we use the language of doers and actors, we also know that we possess no more power than puss with her tail (as Emerson sadly noted), chasing our own illusions of agency in a world that may be only motion without purpose (or codes without understanding), socially determined forces beyond our post-Enlightenment dreams of agency. That, I take it, is the poverty of the postmodern.

There is another concern at play here. I think of it as our endless reinvention of narratives of the Fall. When asked to interpret change over time, historians of all stripes, including art historians, often cast an earlier regime as “authentic” and a later or successive regime as debased or derivative. Foucault did this in the first volume of his History of Sexuality. Recall his nostalgia for a classical episteme prior to the world of “discourse” and “technology.” And art historians reinvoke the logic of the Fall in their debates about postmodernity. Supporters of modernity tended to characterize that which succeeded it as a woefully inadequate and deeply iniquitous mode. Let me cite an example from the other side the Atlantic. Recall the Sensation exhibition, the provocative art show at the Royal Academy in London and the Brooklyn Museum of Art that featured Charles Saatchi’s collection of works by Young British Artists of the 1990s. British critic Julian Stallabrass excoriated the exhibition as “High Art Lite,” a crass, market-driven wrong-turn in the history of twentieth-century British avant-garde practice. Stallabrass’s writing invokes terms like “autonomy,” “critical thinking,” and “authenticity” when referring to everything that High Art Lite is not. His text, in other words, sets two visual registers next to each other and then links them together through a narrative of the Fall. From the empyrean heights of what I think of as Stallabrass’s high modernist Marxism, High Art Lite lashes out at what it construes as the debased, commercial and informational world of the Young British Artists.

“All the World’s a Code” also examines a shifting of the epistemological guard, and it also sees the latter of its two regimes as tied to market-driven “information” and “codes.” But the article attempted—and I was very self-conscious about this at the time—not to allow those changing visual orders to be characterized by loss, or an emptying out of meaning, or any other pattern that resembled historical diminution. I was distrustful of all such narratives, ways of thinking all too familiar to me from the culture wars of the 1980s, and I was looking for other ways to understand history. Semiotics, with it promise of decoding from within an image and its distance from value judgments (“authentic” or not), answered the need in a variety of ways. I remain
a “textualist” today, believing that critical analysis begins with a text or image, which possesses an internal “hegemonic” order. Texts create shared meanings for their audiences by suppressing their own internal dissent. Our task as critics is twofold: (1) to unearth the historical voices that lie buried within texts, and (2) to map the relation between layers, to articulate the internal structural conflicts that inform each text or image. We must reimagine “hegemony,” then, not only as a political or ideological process, but as a textual one.

We might phrase the matter this way: Freud becomes useful to us only when we mistake him for Fredric Jameson. What the psychoanalytic tradition teaches us is not something about the mysteries of the mind, but something about the processes of hermeneutics: how to interpret by paying close attention to what the text—or patient as text—whispers. We must listen as closely for what the patient hides as what he offers. What Jameson provides, in turn, is a single injunction—“always historicize”—that then confounds its own goals by admitting that history is never where we expect it to be, or never, at least, within full range of our hearing. Poof! Two things happen. One: we come to history now as a text, and to close reading as a form of talk therapy, as we listen carefully for indications of what the patient is not saying. And two: that logocentric world of successive circles of meaning disappears, and what we are left with in the end is an image, a disjointed historical world-within-the-image, and the need to make sense of it all, i.e., to decode. What else is there to do?

Let me end then with a question that overlaps with DeLue’s. I think that DeLue’s suggestions about how to pursue Kindred Spirits, for example, beyond what I did in “All the World’s a Code”—with a closer eye to the issue of cultural intent—are superb. Turning to Durand’s own writing, as DeLue suggests, yields ever deepening insights into Kindred Spirits and its ambitions as Durand saw them. DeLue also helps us understand better the new class of cultural producers—Matthew Arnold’s “clerisy”—that the painting imagines. DeLue has opened an important door here.

But I think that something else is missing from my account, or at least inadequately explored, and that is the question of class. American Studies scholarship in the years after World War II was defined by a “myth and symbol” approach. Classic texts like R.W.B. Lewis’s The American Adam and Leo Marx’s The Machine in the Garden focused on those metaphors and images—the cultural imaginary—that organized antebellum national life. Eric Lott in Love and Theft has reminded us more recently of the ways that American culture invented modern notions of race in an effort not to have to think about “class.” In the mid-twentieth century, class was rendered invisible again by a shared sense of “Americanness” that, I suspect, allowed scholars to mistake the expansion of the middle classes in the years after World War II for an ongoing history dating back to the Jacksonian era. “All the World’s a Code” shares in this larger scholarly blindness. Were I to write the article today, I would focus far more on what it means to think of class as both a historical condition and a category of cultural analysis.

This lack of class awareness in the article is not innocent. I wonder how much the choice of a cognitive framework, the decision to address the differences (and affinities) between Durand and Woodville as differences in ways of seeing (tied historically to a communications revolution) in fact blinded me to issues of class. We might want to cite Foucault again here. Foucault’s epistemic regimes tend to dissolve questions of agency and intention, as we all know. What Foucault provides us with instead is a new and powerful way to discuss the social work performed by culture itself. Foucault
understands the bourgeoisie as the social group whose identity is constructed first and foremost by language, by its own discursive self-begetting. But I wonder what we lose by this way of thinking, and I mention class as an example, something that tends to disappear—in Foucault’s work and elsewhere—when we convert history into a language game, a form of social semiotics.

Where shall we end, then, this exercise in retrospection and historical self-awareness? Where else but with our ears close to the ground, or the text, or wherever it is that history can best be overheard. And what shall we hear? Not just the mutterings of the past, always indistinct and often aslant, but our own quiet breathing. Our task is to attend to both: what we hear (or think we hear) as well as the tap, tap, tap of our keyboards as the subterranean world of our political unconscious rumbles on.

Notes

1 DeLue, 2004, p. 5.
2 Wimsatt, 1954, pp. 2–18.
5 In an informal comment on an earlier version of this chapter, Rachael DeLue noted the irony that I am “unearthing” my own “intention” in an essay skeptical about intentional arguments.
6 Emerson, 1903–04.
7 Foucault, 1978.
9 Stallabrass, 1999.
10 Knights, 2010.
12 Lott, 1993.

References


Part II

Geographies: Rethinking Americanness
Imagine a darkened seminar room occupied by a dozen graduate students and two professors. The students come from a range of fields: art history, English, American history, and material culture studies. The professors are specialists in Spanish colonial and Anglo-American art. The room is busy with dialogue as a pair of images is projected onto the screen (Figures 12.1 and 12.2). A portrait by John Hesselius depicts young Charles Calvert, regal heir to a wealthy Maryland planter family, accompanied by an enslaved servant; a *casta* painting by José de Ibarra represents a mixed race family, part of a set of pictures produced in Mexico likely intended to be shipped to Spain.

There is a pause in the conversation as the students look and think. Then ideas, analysis, and questions begin. Students compare the figural groupings, noting similarities in the spatial organization of foreground and background as well as the poses and gestures of the two central male figures. They comment on the rich costuming of the figures, recalling that fine clothing signaled prosperity and social hierarchy in both northern and southern colonies. They observe the Catholic context of each image and the way in which Calvert’s hand hovers above a distant steeple. The inscription on Ibarra’s painting catches someone’s eye—“De Español e India, Mestizo”—and the students draw upon their knowledge of colonial history and postcolonial theory to contrast the reproduction of racial ideologies in both pictures, arguing that Hesselius reflects on the binarization of race in a slave society while Ibarra visualizes ideologies of creolization. A question about audience leads to further speculation about the pictures’ functions within their imperial settings: one painting was probably meant for display within the seat of a Chesapeake plantation, visible to white and black members of the Calvert household; the other piece was meant to legitimate, for officials in the seat of the Spanish empire, a fabricated social and racial taxonomy that classified colonial subjects in the distant viceroyalty into a variety of castes: *mestizos, mulattos, castizos, coyotes*, etc.
Such was the gratifying scene we experienced halfway through our co-taught seminar, “Colonial Art across North America,” which explored the movement and circulation of material things from New Spain to New France and everywhere in between. What made the lively conversation on this particular day possible? The same thing that motivated and energized the course throughout: collaboration. Conceived and organized as a co-taught seminar, the course enabled us to pool our knowledge of distinct yet complementary fields of North American art history in a way we could not have achieved by teaching two separate classes. Collaboration defined our interaction at every level of the course, from the construction of the syllabus to our classroom teaching and end-of-semester grading. Collaboration also characterized the students’ experience of the seminar. Through class discussions, collective brainstorming sessions, and team-based research projects, students learned to integrate different bodies of knowledge and accommodate different disciplinary approaches.

The result was a happily, if not always seamlessly, “entangled” classroom in which experiment, debate, and diverse perspectives were eagerly welcomed. Entanglement, a critical concept within the humanities today, offers a useful metaphor for the


**Figure 12.2** José de Ibarra, *From Spaniard and Indian, Mestizo*, ca. 1725, oil on canvas, 166 × 94 cm. Museo de América, Madrid. *Source*: Museo de América, Madrid.
experience of co-teaching the art of the Americas. As defined by historian Eliga H. Gould, entanglement describes and illuminates points of encounter and interaction between the colonial powers of Spain and Britain in the Atlantic world. “Entangled histories ... examine interconnected societies,” Gould explains. And because “such interconnections often (though not always) occur in contiguous societies, one way to think of entangled history is as a more capacious form of borderland history.” Historians have contended that entanglement improves upon the familiar model of comparative studies, arguing that the latter methodology treats colonies as unrelated agents of imperialism. But for art historians, whose scholarship often demands the skilled analysis of form and meaning across a body of material evidence, these two approaches together offer a complementary way to understand the characteristics of diverse colonial cultures. As in the example we used to introduce this essay, comparison trains students to perceive the relative similarities and differences between the cultural production of different colonies, such as English Maryland and Spanish Mexico. Entanglement builds upon this process by enabling us to discern the entwining, whether actual or imagined, of people, events, spaces, discourses, and objects within and between diverse colonial settlements.

In the case of our seminar, this meant devising a course that sought to illuminate the cultural intersections already present in the historical record and to discern those less evident. We considered the hybrid creations that emerged out of encounters between settlers, Native Americans, and enslaved populations, as in the devotional featherwork mosaics made by indigenous converts in Franciscan monasteries, or the diviners’ bundles created by free and enslaved African Americans and buried beneath their living quarters in colonial Maryland. We also attended to the circulation, acquisition, theft, and movement of material things through and between urban entrepôts, frontiers, and borderlands, like the copper kettles that Native Americans in the “middle ground” of the Great Lakes acquired from French and British traders and transformed into jewelry, weapons, and tools.

As we discovered in our effort to entangle the art histories of colonial North America, co-teaching is itself a productively entangled practice. Co-teaching aspires to integrate knowledge, methodologies, and perspectives; it requires a willingness to cross and combine disciplines, to expose the limits of one’s expertise, and to exercise flexibility. It is especially suitable to the teaching of North American art because it simultaneously works within, interrogates, and partially redresses the disciplinary gap between the arts of Latin America and the United States: fields of study that are usually regarded as distinct and separate despite their many commonalities of geography, history, and aesthetics. Further, co-teaching implicitly encourages interdisciplinary connections, thereby fulfilling an imperative of twenty-first-century higher education. By modeling and fostering collaboration in the classroom, it also cultivates ways of learning increasingly valued within academe: namely, problem-based and student-driven learning. We describe efforts to promote such approaches—our own and those of other scholars—at a later point in this chapter.

In what follows, we expand on the why and the how of co-teaching. We explain our motives and explore the pedagogy of co-teaching, and we discuss the benefits and challenges of a collaborative classroom for the field of American art. We offer lessons learned from our experiences—what worked and what did not—and reflect on ways that co-teaching the art of the Americas promotes innovation among a new generation of scholars.
Why Co-Teach?

Today it is broadly accepted that the exchanges that occurred between Europe and the Americas following 1492 were marked by asymmetrical encounters, contestations of power, and intense rivalries—not only among indigenous and foreign settlers but also between diverse European imperial powers. As shown by Herman Moll’s map published in London in 1720 (Figure 12.3), early North America was a constantly shifting battleground, where Spain, France, and Britain vied to control vast territories and their indigenous inhabitants. Yet, for many years, the art history of colonial North America was studied in discrete segments of Latin American, Canadian, and United States art. Within these categories, art historians devoted their efforts to analyzing the distinct representational strategies that European nations devised for asserting their dominion over lands across the Atlantic. These past approaches tended to follow traditional core/periphery historical models in which the artistic and architectural monuments created in the European colonies of the Americas were analyzed in relation to the examples produced in their respective European metropoles. In this approach, moreover, the political and social dynamics that characterized each colonization process were only of limited interest in understanding works of art, often referenced to address the local examples that deviated from European norms.5

In the last few decades, however, scholarly approaches such as postcolonial theory, Atlantic studies, Pacific studies, and global history, among others, have resonated in this art-historical field, prompting new ways to address the visual and material cultures of the early Americas. For example, in a collaborative effort, Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn, specialists in the arts of colonial Peru and Mexico, respectively, have evaluated the central position that the recognition of “hybridity” has occupied in the study of Spanish colonial images and objects. While recognizing the usefulness of the term’s postcolonial dimension within the Spanish colonial context, Dean and Leibsohn also consider the limitations of reducing considerations of hybridity to “visible” products to the detriment of “invisible” processes of cultural interaction that often occurred within the colonial world. Kariann Yokota, writing about the early United States, has underscored the postcolonial nature of post-revolutionary America and explored the continuing Britishness of its material culture.6 Revisionist studies have yielded fuller understanding of the interactions and policies that emerged through the process of European colonization, particularly in relation to indigenous and enslaved communities. Not only has it become clear that the processes of domination, assimilation, and resistance were much more complex than the picture presented by early, epic accounts of military encounters and economic expansion; several studies have also demonstrated that, while assimilating European patterns of domination, subjugated communities preserved and created new visual and material expressions of great political, social, and cultural significance.7

In addition, regions that were especially problematic to examine under nationalist models—in particular, areas that today form part of the United States but were in earlier times under Spanish or French domination—have also emerged from the sphere of local history to join the larger narratives of early North American art. Textbooks such as Framing America: A Social History of American Art and American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity have broadened and decentered the scope of American art to include a globalized and culturally diverse account.8 Such studies have enabled professors and students to acknowledge the
Figure 12.3  Herman Moll, *A new map of the north parts of America claimed by France under ye names of Louisiana, Mississippi [i.e., Mississippi], Canada, and New France with ye adjoining territories of England and Spain*, 1720, hand-colored engraving on paper. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3300.ct000677.
historical dynamics that took shape across and between colonial territories. Major exhibitions and museum installations have also sought to raise understanding about the cultural heritage of the Americas broadly construed. Representative examples of this trend are exhibitions mounted at the National Museum of the American Indian and the traveling exhibition, *The Art of the Missions of Northern New Spain*, which toured in both Mexico and the United States. These exhibitions move cultural education beyond the academic classroom to teach broader, diverse publics about the material histories of the Americas.9

Despite these efforts, art historians have been somewhat reluctant to embrace the sort of comparative approaches more common in the fields of British and Spanish colonial history. Atlantic world historians such as John H. Elliot, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, and James Sidbury have argued for a model of inquiry that compares the experiences of diverse imperial formations.10 While art historians are skilled in the practice of visual comparison, comparative studies of colonial cultures have been scarce in the field. In the case of the colonial Americas, comparative methods have usually been applied to assess how closely colonial products follow European canons. When considered beyond issues of form and style, however, or even transatlantic trajectories, the relevance of comparison proves to be even greater.

For example, new installations of American art, such as the “American Identities” permanent installation at the Brooklyn Museum of Art or the Art of the Americas wing at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, have integrated artworks created in both North and South America before and after European colonization. In particular, the side-by-side placement of pieces from the Spanish and British colonies in these installations invites audiences to draw stylistic and iconographic connections between specific objects. This is a fruitful trend since comparative analysis of works produced in different imperial contexts can reveal the particular ideological and cultural constructs that informed them, as demonstrated by the example of the class exercise that opened this chapter.

What is more, by comparing the artistic strategies deployed in different geographic and cultural areas, art historians can identify the alternative means of communication and interaction that existed within the mosaic of colonies that formed the early modern Atlantic, and above all the points of intersection or entanglement that existed among them. Despite the trade monopolies that European imperial powers sought to impose, political and economic asymmetries characterized the circulation of objects in the New World. As revealed by some of the textiles and costumes that highlighted the wealth and social position of the individuals portrayed in both British colonial portraits and Mexican *casta* paintings, colonial commodities circulated throughout the Americas following complex, and even crisscrossing, trajectories that often reached the Pacific Ocean. Within these circuits, Spain regularly had the upper hand thanks to its Manila Galleon trade circuit, which secured a continuous stream of luxury items from the Philippines to Mexico. Smuggling and looting, nonetheless, were also established channels to allow the flow of such goods to British and French territories.

While such commercial entanglements were crucial to the flow of art and other material goods in the New World, existing disciplinary divisions—which persist in training specialists in the art of the United States or the art of Latin America—make the research and understanding of such histories cumbersome. Collaborative teaching and learning, on the other hand, can address the circum-Atlantic, circum-Pacific, and cross-imperial interactions that took place in the colonial Americas. In so doing, it can
also raise awareness of the historiographical and methodological frames that have shaped the scholarly discourses in each field, such as the nationalistic narratives of American exceptionalism that characterized North American art history during the Cold War era, or the teleological interpretations of pieces commissioned by Spanish American creoles as inspired by an emerging sense of patriotism, readings that until not long ago were the norm in Spanish colonial art history.

In addition to its specific advantages for teaching early North American art, collaboration in general carries numerous pedagogical benefits. For both practical and educational reasons, co-teaching permits instructors to combine their knowledge to achieve integration of content and method and thereby offer the kind of course that would be difficult to teach alone. Naturally, a willingness to learn about another field—to tread beyond the comfort zone of one’s own specialization, even to confront and reveal the limits of one’s own knowledge both within and outside the classroom—is a prerequisite for collaborative teaching. But the rewards make the risk of self-exposure worthwhile. Studies in pedagogy emphasize the intellectual growth, professional development, and curricular strengths that emerge, often unintentionally, in the process of co-teaching. We learn even more about our own fields in the process, for “the collaborative arrangement spurs each partner to locate, share and experiment with fresh ideas for structuring class sessions, creating more effective writing assignments, and improving our skills at critiquing student papers.” This was certainly true in our case. Constructing our syllabus for “Colonial Art across North America” led each of us to read far afield of familiar scholarship, and we found that two professors were better than one in producing an active classroom.

This is not to suggest that collaborative teaching is without its challenges. Good collaboration takes time, planning, patience, and communication. Faculty interested in teaching together must first consider what model of collaboration best suits their needs, goals, and temperament: a team-based model in which instructors coordinate the design of paired, linked, but separately taught courses with minimal faculty interaction; a team-based model in which two or more faculty alternate teaching classes; or a co-taught course involving close interaction throughout the semester, from course inception to filing grades. While one of us had prior experience with team-based teaching across two departments, we chose to pursue the final model of close interaction because it allowed for the greatest integration. As faculty colleagues, we had a strong professional relationship on which to build, and we were fortunate to teach in a supportive department that did not harbor the critical bias sometimes targeted at collaborative teaching: that it requires less work than teaching a course by oneself. To the contrary, as one experienced co-teacher observes (and as our many planning meetings confirmed), “to do it right, to do it well, means many more hours of preparation beforehand.” More problematic than this bias is the popular stereotype of the “sage on the stage”: the ideal of the lone professor brilliantly lecturing to a rapt classroom of listeners. Colleges and universities have historically valued and rewarded individual intellectual achievement; collaboration, in contrast, “rubs against powerful precedents, challenging assumptions and modes of being with long tenacious roots.”

In our experience, these potential obstacles seldom materialized, and in any case, they were worth risking as part of the effort of developing a course that aimed to integrate closely our different fields. Integrated knowledge and thinking has emerged as a priority within research universities and institutions—the goal being, in part, to cultivate new generations of scholars with the nimble learning ability and creativity
necessary to wrestle with the sorts of broad, vexing questions that link fields of inquiry from the humanities to the social and natural sciences (for example, “What is a person?”). Collaborative teaching is one way to achieve such goals (it also helps assuage the concerns about academic “siloing” present in higher education today). As one educator puts it,

In an academic world where interdisciplinarity is offered up as constitutive of the intellectual air we all breathe, co-teaching should be considered a worthwhile way of training students to think across conventional disciplinary (and even methodologically) dividing lines.

For our purposes, we aimed to cultivate in our students a reasonable degree of fluency across the artistic and material cultures of early North America. We did not expect students of Latin American art to become experts in early Canadian art; nor did we expect those specializing in colonial British art to understand every nook and nuance of New Spanish art. But we wanted students to emerge from the course with enough information and understanding about different cultures to make intellectual connections between seemingly unconnected artifacts and traditions. For example, by looking at divergent traditions such as the bark boxes created by French Canadian nuns in Quebec, or the Asian-inspired *biombos* (screens) commissioned by the creole elites of colonial Mexico, students came to understand how colonial subjects acted as agents of appropriation, combining artistic traditions from within and from beyond the Americas in their particular interpretations of local identities. In this sense, teaching across the borders of North American art meant crossing disciplinary as well as geopolitical borders.

Co-teaching has other positive impacts on student learning and development, for it models cooperation as a way of learning and working. Teachers inevitably bring different perspectives and backgrounds into the classroom. Such diversity can be positive, for it puts different approaches and even differences of opinion on display for students. Students not only observe their teachers learning from each other (better comprehending, in the process, the fluid character of knowledge itself); they may even learn and implement important skills of civil disagreement. Further, by displacing the familiar figure of the authoritative professor at the head of the classroom, co-teaching levels the playing field for everyone involved, fostering “a less hierarchical structure of authority in the classroom.” Witnessing the give-and-take of their instructors empowers students to take an active role in their own learning. Researchers identify additional benefits of the student-driven classroom, including “higher achievement, greater retention, improved interpersonal skills, and an increase in regard for positive interdependence.” We observed many of these outcomes firsthand. We were impressed by the consistently high quality of discussions among our students, by the way they learned to drive conversation, and by the mutual respect they expressed.

We were likewise gratified to see how enthusiastically many of them embraced opportunities to work collaboratively on research projects. Effective faculty collaboration provides an important model for students to follow in such endeavors. But collaboration, for teachers and students, does not always come naturally in an academic environment that prizes individual scholarship. Such was the challenge we tackled in building collaborative assignments into our course. “Teaching students how to collaborate is hard[;] we were never taught how to do it,” explains one history professor:
Our unstated but default assumption is that the students who complete individual research well—not, for example, a group of students who researched, wrote and mounted a play or exhibit about a historical episode—are best suited for graduate training in history. This goes double for graduate school.25

The Entangled Classroom

We first offered our seminar “Colonial Art across North America” during fall 2007 in connection with a symposium we were organizing for the following spring at the University of Delaware.26 The content of the symposium, and a follow-up publication we co-edited, significantly reshaped our own understandings of early North American cultures. Consequently we revised our seminar considerably when we re-taught it in fall 2011.

Our motives and objectives were similar each time we taught the seminar. In part, we sought to capitalize on unique situations: we specialized in different areas of colonial North American art history but shared interests in postcolonial studies; our graduate program was undergoing revisions that redefined our breadth requirement in “American art” to the more inclusive parameter of the “art of the Americas”; and preparations for our symposium presented an opportunity to offer a complementary course. At the same time, we wanted to engage our students in new directions in American studies; namely, growing attention to issues of borderlands, transnationalism, globalization, and world art history.

Integrating our fields of study made sense as a way to achieve these goals. We intended, as we explained in our 2007 syllabus, “to reanimate the plurality of early North American material culture through a multidisciplinary investigation of the uses and meanings of colonial objects” and “to challenge familiar disciplinary paradigms by introducing students to an approach at once more geographically expansive and culturally inclusive than existing models of American art historical study.” We wanted to help our students develop the knowledge and methodologies that would prepare them, as emerging scholars, to work confidently across the colonial art histories of Latin America and the United States.

Each time we taught the seminar, we focused the course on North America—specifically, the major colonial settlements of Britain, France, and Spain, including the Caribbean—for matters of organizational expediency as well as historical circumstance. Although language, race, and ethnicity marked differences between and within North American societies, groups were also linked through systems and events including trade, migration, war, slavery, marriage, foodways, technology, and religion. This was true of the populous capitals of empire—such as New Orleans, Mexico City, and Montreal—as well as the fluid contact zones of the frontier, such as the mission settlements of New Spain or the forts of the Great Lakes region. There was also the matter of the ideological motives that united European powers in their conquest of the northern New World, including the spread of Christianity and the acquisition of wealth—not to mention the important strategies of resistance, alliance, and acculturation that characterized the actions of colonized and enslaved groups. In response to this almost bewildering spectrum of North American people, places, and histories, we hoped to explore some deceptively straightforward questions. How did artistic creativity, trade, and consumption connect disparate groups of colonizers and colonized? How did art and material things shape the formation of early American cultures?
In practical terms, this meant ensuring that our students were on the same page in terms of their historical and geographical knowledge. To this end, we assigned readings and led introductory discussion sessions meant to sketch the contours of major European settlements in North America, such as New Spain, New France, and the British colonies. Likewise, to help students understand how New World objects could embody and enact colonial ideologies, it was necessary to introduce some important theoretical concepts. We devoted classes to postcolonial theory, exploring transculturation, mimicry, alterity, entanglement, and ambivalence. Through readings that positioned the early United States and post-conquest Mexico and Peru as postcolonial regimes, we likewise introduced students to critical terms in North American studies, including ethnogenesis, settler, creole, borderland, contact zone, and middle ground. We also interrogated the word “colonial”—a slippery term that shifted meaning depending on the geographies and historical periods being studied. Such discussions proved immensely helpful to our understanding of North American art.

A major component of our 2007 course was three weeks of classes organized around artistic practices and concepts common to the three major colonial groups under consideration. The first class examined religion, cult objects, and ritual. The second addressed portraiture and, more generally, how colonial and creole subjects used objects to fashion images of themselves and others. The third class explored objects in motion: the movement of artifacts, like moosehair embroideries, wampum, and ritual images, via tourism, treaty alliances, and missionary work. Through these classes, we came to understand how the mobility and dislocation of things helped materialize contact zones and frontiers, giving form to processes of diaspora, settlement, and creolization.

Although we kept the religion class when we re-taught the seminar in 2011, we omitted the class about portraiture and self-representation (we found ways to explore these issues in our other meetings), and the class on motion expanded in scope to become the organizing theme of the course. There were several reasons for making these changes. For one, we wanted to expand beyond a comparative mode of teaching to examine material encounters between cultures. Gould has argued,

[H]istorical comparison tends to take as a given the very national boundaries that Atlantic history has long sought to complicate, and it often presupposes comparability where comparability did not exist … there is a need for Atlantic historians to think equally hard about what it means to write entangled history of the sort exemplified by the English-speaking and Spanish Atlantic worlds.

In other words, whereas historical scholarship often takes its lead from contemporary geopolitics, we may instead productively acknowledge the contestation among colonial powers and attend to the places where competing interests collided. Adapting Gould’s suggestion for the purposes of art history, we wanted to know how art objects might signal Anglo-Iberian entanglements. Studying the movement of objects between and within cultures was one way to do this. Our experience of co-organizing the symposium “Objects in Motion” and co-editing a follow-up volume of essays had sharpened our awareness of the many ways in which early American objects changed hands and locations. Historians have tended to emphasize commerce and trade as the main channels of material exchange in the Atlantic world. But while trade was an important conduit for the movement of paintings, prints, and other artifacts, it did not account for other ways...
in which things circulated. The speakers and authors in our “Objects in Motion” project pinpointed looting, theft, collecting, gift-giving, performance, ritual, display, and concealment as modalities that also animated objects or explained their histories. For example, JoAnne Mancini discussed objects stolen and appropriated by British officers in the context of the bitter imperial rivalry between Britain and Spain, while Sophie White analyzed a case of theft in eighteenth-century French Louisiana to understand the complex circulation patterns that textiles and clothing items followed in colonial North America. Ruth Phillips, on the other hand, analyzed several collections of Native American objects gathered by British military officers posted to North America against textual evidence from contemporary novels and travel writing in order to assess the epistemological foundations of these particular gatherings. These and other mechanisms of circulation became organizing themes in the 2011 version of our syllabus.

In both iterations of our course, we guided students to work collaboratively on projects that required sharing research and cooperating as part of learning communities. We saw this as a natural extension of our approach to the course: by modeling collaboration, we also sought to encourage it. But we recognized that many of the students had little practice with teamwork within humanities courses and might feel uncomfortable at the prospect of working with partners. We were therefore frank with our students about the benefits of collaboration: although humanities scholarship is often a solitary endeavor, there are plenty of opportunities that invite or even demand cooperation, from the professional duties of participating in meetings to the joint effort required to curate exhibitions, organize conferences, and edit colleagues’ writing. We acknowledged the experimental character of collaboration but expressed optimism about its potential to alter and energize humanities scholarship. “Until we teach, reward, and recognize collaborative scholarship,” advises one teacher, “younger generations of scholars will continue to be as myopic as their elders about the possibilities for intellectual work.”

We put these ideas into practice in 2007 by devising a major assignment that required students to work in four teams on a mock-exhibition exploring cultural interconnectedness in the northern New World. More specifically, their task was to identify places where diverse populations came together in the creation, exchange, and consumption of material things. Objects that demonstrated the hybrid character of these places would make up the content of the exhibition. The students identified a rich diversity of locations—New Orleans, California missions, the West Indies, and Salem, Massachusetts—and selected objects ranging from a Massachusetts tea service made of Mexican silver to decorative headstones from a Jewish cemetery in Curaçao. They divided up their research on objects and wrote catalogue entries individually, but they collaborated on the writing of a general overview for their section of the exhibition and made collective presentations on their findings to the class. The assignment thus required them to work both alone and cooperatively (much as real-world curatorial work demands), and we evaluated their performance both individually and as a group. Throughout, the assignment produced varying levels of student engagement. Some resisted collaboration, voicing a preference for the familiar seminar assignment of a monographic paper and/or not fully contributing to their team. But others welcomed the opportunity to work together and embraced the challenges to conventional ways of learning that it demanded.

We were sufficiently persuaded of the value and promise of student collaboration that we made teamwork an even more vital part of the seminar when we re-taught it
four years later. We frequently incorporated group work as part of our classroom activity, such as brainstorming sessions or working in pairs to analyze objects. Most important, while retaining aspects of the mock-exhibition assignment from 2007, we wanted to get students thinking conceptually about the ways in which the study of North American art could shape and innovate North American studies in general. Many of the theoretical paradigms we had previously used to explore New World cultures were derived from fields outside art history, such as postcolonial and literary studies, which did not always privilege material culture as evidence. While this interdisciplinarity was productive for our purposes, we were curious about what art history could add to the mix. How might putting objects front and center allow us to complicate the uses of familiar terms, like creolization, or fathom new ideas with potential application beyond our field?

Our model in this effort was the sort of “keywords” project introduced by Raymond Williams in 1976 and adapted for the purposes of American studies by literary scholars Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler in 2007.33 Using Burgett and Hendler’s co-edited volume of sixty-four short essays, Keywords for American Cultural Studies, we identified ten keywords with particular relevance to North American art-historical study (such as “civilization,” “diaspora,” and “empire”). The students’ first assignment was to consider how these terms might signify differently if written from the perspective of early American art and material culture studies. Imagining a wiki-style collaboration with the original writers of the essays, each student revised one entry: they added paragraphs and deleted sentences, expanded on existing sections, and refined the chronological focus to the early modern period.34 Most important, each student integrated two objects into the discussion to suggest how material things could reshape understandings of important keywords. In this regard, their resulting essays differed in method and content from Burgett and Hendler’s Keywords entries, which tended to emphasize literary criticism instead of art and material culture.

Building on this experience, we next tasked the students with identifying keywords useful to the study of North American art and material culture that were not already present in the Burgett and Hendler volume. We encouraged the class to think about concepts that had already emerged in their readings and discussions (we were halfway through the semester at this point), and we devoted part of one class to brainstorming ideas in groups. Out of the dozens of possible keywords suggested by each group, we selected five promising terms, collectively agreeing to those most common to each group as well as a few outliers with intriguing potential: periphery, exchange, amnesia, creole, and hybridity.

Finally, we paired the students to research and compose essays about these keywords. Much as we had done in 2007, we invited the students to imagine the end product of their work as an exhibition: this time, one organized around concepts instead of places. Each pair worked collaboratively to develop short essays exploring the meaning and relevance of their keyword for North American art history. They also identified four objects that exemplified their keyword and wrote individual essays about them in the manner of catalogue entries. Finally, each pair shared its research with the class in the form of an oral presentation.

Although we were not entirely sure what to expect when we devised this assignment, we were deeply impressed by the results. As in 2007, students took to teamwork with varying degrees of commitment, but in general they were eager to learn from each other and from other disciplines (combining backgrounds in art history, English, history, and
material culture studies). And they demonstrated an energy for processing and sharing ideas that was downright inspirational. To give a few examples: the “creole” pair advanced a viable definition of a “creole object”—something that “combines New World materials and craftsmanship with forms and styles from an imperial center”—and suggested a vivid example: “A fine wooden bench, made by a New Spanish craftsman in the English Queen Anne style for use in a Mexico City parlor, is a creole object that is transimperial as well as transatlantic in the language it employs to shape its owner’s identity” (see Figure 12.4). The “exchange” team pinpointed an important nuance between sites of exchange (such as a South Carolina customs house) and artifacts that enabled exchange (such as a beaded Mexican change purse). And using prints, maps, and textiles, the “periphery” pair contested the powerful discursive paradigm of European metropole/colonial margin with evidence of multiple, and often shifting, centers and peripheries in the New World. The semester concluded with another brainstorming session in which students proposed various plans and installations for a mock-exhibition. Our only regret was that the constraints of a single-semester course didn’t allow time to implement their ingenious suggestions.

Looking Ahead

When we started our collaborative efforts six years ago, we could sense that exciting opportunities for teaching and research were opening before us. We never imagined, though, that we would enjoy the fruits of our rather risky endeavor so soon. Over the last few years, we have each broadened our individual teaching and research agendas,
developed our knowledge of fields and disciplines other than our own, and, perhaps most gratifyingly, witnessed the academic progress of our students.

For example, several of our students are now thinking outside of the geographical confines of their originally chosen fields (Latin American art or art of the United States) and embracing more encompassing and complex approaches. One student, for example, found the course of her master’s thesis research—which examined the trans-continental commerce in northeastern-made silver within post-Civil War New Orleans—altered by the ideas of cross-cultural consumption that she learned about during the seminar. Another student developed a master’s paper that explored the American national identities that formed around Chinese goods transported through the oceanic spaces of the Pacific during the late eighteenth century.36

Our own research has also changed, as we are thinking in more hemispheric and entangled ways. Wendy Bellion’s research on iconoclasm in the late colonial and early United States also engages the destruction of objects in Montreal and Mexico City. And Mónica Domínguez Torres has expanded her interests in cross-cultural exchanges in the Spanish colonial world to the exploitation and transformation of sea treasures into valuable commodities that were equally desired and acquired by Spanish, Italian, French, and British patrons.

As teachers, the positive experiences in the two iterations of our joint seminar have not only furthered our interest in repeating the class in the future but also in expanding it. We may add more opportunities for field-based learning through class travel to collections and sites outside of the Delaware Valley—and even abroad. New teaching technologies, in particular webcasting, permit new forms of international collaboration by enabling guest lectures from faculty specializing in other areas of the North American colonial experience (such as Dutch, German, and Swedish settlements).37 Exploitation of online resources could lead to a website featuring the innovative studies that our students have produced and the entangled objects they have identified, thereby disseminating publicly the knowledge they have collaboratively produced.

Teaching across the borders of North American art history has proved to be a challenging but worthwhile experience. For all the additional preparation, discipline, and patience that team teaching requires, its positive outcomes greatly reward the efforts. The art history of the colonial Americas cannot fully be understood without a broad understanding of the complex political and cultural dynamics at play in the Atlantic and Pacific worlds. Our experience has persuaded us that the future of the field depends on growing communication and collaboration among specialists in different geographical areas of American art as well as a more comprehensive training in the art of all of the Americas for the newest generation of scholars.

Notes

1 Gould, 2007a, pp. 766–767. In a related essay, Gould argues that colonial peripheries are as important—and in the case of British America, more so—than metropolitan centers as sites of entanglement, for it is within the “entangled borderland” that one often finds evidence of colonial contestation, “permeability and instability.” Gould, 2007b.

2 Cañizares-Esguerra, 2006; Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra, 2011.
A major exhibition and catalogue focusing on the creation and circulation of Mexican feather mosaics discussed in detail the multilayered meanings and functions that emerged from the incorporation of European iconography into an ancient Mesoamerican tradition; see Wolf, Russo, and Fane, 2014. On diviners’ bundles, see Leone and Fry, 1999.

Examples of this trend include surveys in the fields of British and Spanish colonial art such as Kubler and Soria, 1959; Wilmerding, 1976.


See, for instance, Thompson, 1984; Phillips, 1998; Katzew, 2011.

Pohl, 2012; Miller et al., 2008.

Reflections on the historiographic and methodological antecedents of such ventures can be found in Lonetree and Cobb, 2008; Bargellini and Komanecky, 2009.

Elliott, 2006; Cañizares-Esguerra, 2006; Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra, 2011.

Among the many studies that emphasize this point, see Bakken, Clark, and Thompson, 1998; Dennis, Smith, and Smith, 2004.


On this point, see Robinson and Schaible, pp. 57–59; Bryant and Land, 1998; Bakken, Clark, and Thompson, 1998.


During fall 2010, Wendy Bellion co-taught a pair of cross-disciplinary graduate seminars with Professor Edward Larkin of the University of Delaware’s English Department: “The Art and Literature of the American Revolution in Global Context.” Bellion and Larkin co-designed one master syllabus for the two seminars, and while each seminar was taught individually by one instructor, they often participated in each other’s classes. Student evaluations expressed desire for more cross-disciplinary courses, and the experience inadvertently produced a student cohort that pursued opportunities for interdisciplinary learning; four of the students later took “Colonial Art across North America.”

“Look for a co-teacher with a healthy psyche,” advise two experts in collaborative teaching, “work hard to develop the skill of ‘reading’ each other in class,” and “be willing to consider compromising with your colleague.” Robinson and Schaible, 1995, pp. 57–58.

Jackson, 2010.


Jackson, 2010.

Anderson and Speck, 1998, p. 673. For an example of this issue in practice, see Seesholtz and Polk, 2009.

Colwill and Boyd, 2008, p. 219. These authors, together with other researchers, have observed positive political implications in collaborative teaching, arguing in favor of its “feminist, anti-colonial, and transformative” potential (p. 219).

Robinson and Schaible, 1995, p. 58.
“Objects in Motion: Art and Material Culture across Colonial North America,” held at the University of Delaware, April 25–26, 2008. Nine papers from the symposium were expanded for publication in a special issue of Winterthur Portfolio co-edited by the authors. See Bellion and Domínguez Torres, 2011.
During the summer preceding the fall 2011 course, students completed two reading assignments in North American history: Elliott, 2006; Greer, 1997.
Readings included essays by Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Michel de Certeau, plus selections from Ashcroft, 1998.
On this point, see Yokota, 2007; Dean and Leibsohn, 2003.
Williams, 1976; Burgett and Hendler, 2007. See also García and Faherty, 2011. Akin to our project of challenging and redefining critical concepts in the field by locating material objects at the center of analysis, García and Faherty sought to inquire “how keywords function differently when framed not just by the spatial lens of ‘America’ but also the temporal prefix ‘early’” (p. 601).
Here we followed the lead of Burgett and Hendler, who have devised an online wiki space—a “Keywords Collaboratory”—that welcomes students and classes to “collaborate on keywords assignments that take their method, focus, or inspiration from the essays published” in their book. See the website Keywords for American Cultural Studies.
Casey and Zuba, 2011.
Dickinson, 2012; Casey, 2011.
On this point, see Labi, 2011.

References

Keywords for American Cultural Studies, keywords.fordhamitac.org/ (accessed August 19, 2014).


Since the early years of the republic, the study of American architecture has had a nationalistic cast. Is there such a thing as an American architecture? The question is an open-ended one that no one has devised a rigorous means of answering. This is most evident in broad-scale histories, but it also arises in narrower works that examine single figures, periods, or building types.

Consider this analysis taken from a perceptive study of Henry Hobson Richardson (1838–86), one of the most widely admired of American architects:

The [National] Academy [of Design, New York, Peter B. Wight, 1861–65] and [Boston] City Hall [Bryant and Gilman, 1861–65] were significant, influential examples of the derivative state of American architecture that had existed since before the Revolution and that entered a new phase with these works. American architects were on the receiving end of ideas generated in Europe, especially in England and France, and to a lesser extent in Germany.1

The author, James O’Gorman, contrasted these prominent buildings, erected in the 1860s when Richardson was in France learning to be an architect, to Sever Hall at Harvard (Figure 13.1), designed by Richardson and his employee Stanford White and built in 1878. Here, too, the casual observer could spot visual ideas derived from abroad, specifically from the English Queen Anne architects. The pediments with their floral decorations; the idiosyncratic suspended central pavilions; the window-filled semicircular bays; the dense brickwork of the walls and their relatively, but not completely, regular fenestration: all have counterparts in contemporary British architecture.

The language used to characterize the three buildings is telling. The National Academy and Boston City Hall were “significant” and “influential.” This sounds...
promising—but then we learn that they were also “derivative” of English and French architectural ideas, respectively. Since architecture is a cultural product, it is by definition shaped by ideas learned from our contemporaries and predecessors. In this sense, all buildings are derivative. Why not say that the two buildings were “influenced by,” “learned from,” “owed allegiance to,” or “paid homage to” European sources? Or one might even say that they shared a common body of architectural ideas with their European colleagues, and that these buildings were or were not up to an international common standard. But in this narrative, the first articulation of visual ideas and the direction of flow are important and mark the two 1860s buildings as derivative.

O’Gorman might also have found Richardson’s building derivative on the basis of its borrowed visual forms, but instead he judged that Richardson’s treatment of the mass of the building marked a break from the dominant picturesque aesthetic and constituted something “fresh and new.” In some undefined way, it responded to the nature of American life, and so it was “a work of architecture to which might be applied Larzer Ziff’s characterization of Emerson as an ‘escape from history … a true American beginning.’”\textsuperscript{2}
My point is that anxieties first articulated two centuries ago maintain a tenacious hold on contemporary narratives of architecture in the United States. That Richardson was in some meaningful way an American architect is critical to this passage. That he was trained in France, that the buildings offered for comparison were built before he began to practice on his own—these seem less relevant than the nation where he was born and where he worked. But why did the accident of birth trump systematic professional training? Might not Richardson have been treated as a European-style architect working in the United States? And if birth was so important, why not consider that Richardson was a Southerner practicing in the North immediately after the Civil War? Why is the standard of comparison the Academy and the City Hall rather than, say, the work of other architects trained in the same atelier, or that of the English architect William Burges, many of whose buildings resemble Richardson’s? Why is it more important that Richardson was “fresh and new” in the United States than that he was [fill in whatever adjectives you like] in a European American or even a global context? Or that he was simply a very good architect, needing no comparative context at all? Why is the adjective American so central to thinking about buildings made in the United States?

Since the late eighteenth century, the literature of architecture has been part of a quest for a distinctive, overarching national identity that has engaged artists, writers, politicians, and travelers. The very phrase American architecture implies a nationalist agenda. To use it as a label, a description, or a goal is to suggest that there ought to be something distinctive and, often, exemplary about buildings constructed within the political boundaries of the United States. In most venues of American cultural life other than right-wing politics, the concept of American exceptionalism no longer seems as compelling as it once did. But in the study of American architecture it has not yet been dismissed, in part because the nationalist discourse in architecture has played out historically in ways that have made it difficult for architectural thinkers to abandon it.

**Americanness?**

Americanness is a compelling idea that few commentators have been able to define in other than abstract terms. More important, few have tried rigorously to establish a connection between the quality of Americanness and the architectural artifact. How, specifically, does Americanness create the architecture we find in the street? Most of the answers, like O’Gorman’s about Sever Hall, have been impressionistic or connoisseurish rather than being grounded in a clearly articulated sense of historical or cultural process.

American architectural writers have been anxious to distinguish European and American building in part because they feared that there was no difference. An American architecture that was simply an extension of the European was inherently inferior. The nation should develop its own architectural language if it were to create an authentic culture. Louisa Caroline Tuthill, the first American to attempt to write a survey history of architecture, argued, in common with most of her contemporaries, that “We can no more adopt the style of architecture than the dress of a foreign people. … Our architecture must … be partly indigenous.” The argument was grounded in eighteenth-century theories of history and culture, which, as the art
critic James Jackson Jarves put it in 1864, held that “each civilized race, ancient or modern, has incarnated its own aesthetic life and character in definite forms of architecture, which show with great clearness their indigenous ideas and general conditions.” But they also feared that a really American architecture, one that had freed itself from history and European tutelage, would be even more inferior than a derivative one. The critic Montgomery Schuyler, quoting the émigré architect Leopold Eidlitz, ruefully noted that “American architecture was the art of covering one thing with another thing to imitate a third thing, which, if genuine, would not be desirable.” As the decades passed, though, some became more confident that “our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands,” as Emerson put it, was drawing to a close. Still, as late as 1924 the critic Lewis Mumford could argue that “our finest efforts in building remain chaotic and undisciplined and dispersed—the reflection of our accumulated civilization.”

O’Gorman’s analysis of Richardson’s work belongs to a long history of efforts to identify the precise point when American architecture finally became American. For him, it was with the “fresh and new” design of Sever Hall. Newly commissioned in 1836 to design the United States Treasury Building, Robert Mills wrote to his supervisor of his belief that “We have entered on a new era in the history of the world; it is our destiny to lead, not to be led.” Sculptor Horatio Greenough agreed that “these United States are destined to form a new style of architecture.” Prairie School architect and historian Thomas Tallmadge confidently asserted in 1927 that “the high sea on which we are now afloat” had “borne us to the leadership of the world in architecture [that] marks the culmination of a voyage of three hundred years.” Architectural writers began to look about anxiously to see who had noticed, as Henry-Russell Hitchcock did in an essay “American Influence Abroad,” published to accompany an exhibition on “The Rise of an American Architecture” that was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1970.

Americanness in architecture might arise from the peculiar qualities of American life, leading to the “adaptation of forms and magnitude of structures to the climate they are exposed to, and the offices for which they are intended.” In like spirit, critic Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer found “country homes” to be the “more original, more ‘American’ than elsewhere,” because “we have been forced to meet ... new and diverse requirements.”

Technological ingenuity was another promising path to American exceptionalism. To construct a new nation in an “empty” continent, Americans had to marshal “political and military genius,” and then to confront the “immediate wants of the community,” which included “bridges, aqueducts, canals, railroads, viaducts, steamboats, [and] telegraphs,” according to Tuthill. In the 1920s Talbot Hamlin agreed that in the nineteenth century the American genius for design emerged most clearly in the clipper ship. Hitchcock found it in architectural ideas that were similarly “organizational and technical, truly functional in their relation to modern civilization.” Historian John A. Kouwenhoven agreed that the tradition of seeing American culture as “an extension of European culture” had caused historians to overlook America’s distinctive contribution to design, which lay in “technological civilization,” not in the traditional arts, which “have been inadequately representative of our national character.”

A second, more diffuse, but ultimately more seductive line of thinking located architectural Americanness in American institutions and “values.” Democratic
republicanism had freed Americans spiritually as well as economically and politically, and it was only natural that architecture should manifest this. Democracy’s most salient feature was its emphasis on individuality. As early as the 1830s and 1840s, architectural pundits urged American builders to create houses that expressed their individual (male) personalities. Jarves located the aesthetic promise of American architecture in “the variety of taste and freedom of inventive experiment shown by private enterprise.”

Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, the two most renowned, and most influential, advocates of a democratic American architecture transfigured the progress wrought by such hard-headed self-seeking into something higher. While Jarves could see the free entrepreneur as a source of progress—“give man liberty, and the good in him is ever striving to assert itself”—the two Chicago architects denounced money even as they served it. Sullivan was dismayed by “the prevalent disregard” of Americans for any values “that do not immediately concern the immediate Dollar.”

“Democracy is primarily of the individual!” Sullivan declared, but national character was formed of “the preponderance of individual characteristics.” Democracy (he always capitalized it to indicate an as yet unrealized ideal) was an enterprise of cooperating, rather than competing, individualities. Their collective power, freed from antiquated hierarchies, would raise humanity to the level it had been seeking all along. The term “democratic republic,” Wright told European readers, “should mean that our country places a life-premium upon Individuality as the highest possible development of the Individual consistent with a harmonious life of the whole. ... Individuality then is a great, strong national Ideal.”

Individuality was not the same as individualism, but constituted a conscious participation in a larger entity. The highest fruits of democracy were not the indulgence of personal desires but the fulfillment of human destiny. Sullivan fused early nineteenth-century assumptions about the relationship of national character and cultural forms, Christian notions of providential American destiny, Transcendentalist ideas about the soul, and Romantic conceptions of the artist into a kind of pop Hegelianism. Democracy was not a mere political system but a “spiritual law, a perennial subjective reality in the realm of man’s spirit.” Since the creation of the world it had been struggling toward fulfillment, “ever seeking expression.” The human consciousness of “One Infinite Spirit” led to the “discovery of man by man as spirit.” The United States was a “land of destiny.” Like many other writers on American architecture, Sullivan viewed the “slumbering continent, a virgin wilderness” as a stage always intended as “the home of free men.” But where others wrote more mundanely about coming to terms with the nation’s vast spaces or of the opportunity for repeatedly beginning anew, Sullivan saw the American land as the stage meant for “the divine altitude of man’s humanity.”

An American architecture would inevitably emerge, since “a certain function, aspirant democracy, is seeking a certain form of expression, democratic architecture, and will certainly find it.” Wright’s version was organic architecture, “the only form of art-expression to be considered for the human faith that is Democracy.” As architects steeped in Romantic ideas of the artist as a “man speaking to men,” but one “endowed with more lively sensibility ... and a more comprehensive soul,” to borrow William Wordsworth’s formulation, Sullivan and Wright imagined the architect as a “poet who uses not words but building materials as a medium of expression,” a supremely perceptive individual who could help other individuals express their “real
needs.”  

Sullivan’s vision of a democratic American architecture has often been described as Whitmanian, and indeed the critic Lewis Mumford called Sullivan “the Whitman of American architecture … the first mind in American architecture that had come to know itself with any fullness in relation to its soil, its period, its civilization, and had been able to absorb fully all the many lessons of the century.”  

However, Whitman’s portrait of America was based on the meticulous observation and encyclopedic enumeration of the country’s population and its landscape in all their particularity. Rarely do Sullivan or Wright, or many of the legion of commentators on the Americanness of American architecture who followed them, bother with the specifics of American life. They speak in broad terms of space, democracy, liberty, capitalism, individualism, and ingenuity without asking about the content of these words. “Many American values are unique,” the architect Craig Whitaker tells us. These include individuality, “freedom, equality, and the opportunity for renewal” offered by physical mobility within a spacious national territory.  

The renowned historian Vincent Scully cited intellectual pluralism, cultural democracy, “Emersonian nature,” and alleviation of “the continent’s aggressive climate” as “fundamental items of American belief” that were manifested most evidently in the Shingle Style houses of the late nineteenth century. In an essay described by its volume editor, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., as “flaming, almost Blakean,” Scully characterized the suburban houses and the downtown skyscrapers as products of a “leap toward freedom. … The nineteenth-century skyscraper leaped for height. … The house, conversely, stretched out to cover the ground, bursting through partitions inside, extending porches outside.”  

He related both to individualism and possessiveness in a territorial sense.

American?

The highly colored prose of a Sullivan or a Scully demonstrates once again the elusiveness of the concept of Americanness as a criterion for assessing architecture. Alan Gowans, one of the most perceptive of modern architectural historians, wrote that while he believed there was an “American spirit” in architecture, “it has been undeniably vague, elusive, almost indefinable.” Historians and critics have tended to offer examples rather than analyses, as Scully did, by seizing on certain episodes or building types as characteristically American, or as waymarkers on the road to Americanness. Rather than examine the existing human landscape to discover what qualities might link the varied kinds of architecture found within the borders of the United States, these historians have typically inspected architecture for its conformity to an intuitive Americanness. What doesn’t fit is not central to the story of American architecture. The commitment to Americanness precedes architecture itself.

As American architectural writing matured along with the architectural profession itself in the early twentieth century, Chicago at the end of the nineteenth century came to appear as the Camelot of Americanness. Here were created, as the standard story has it, the skyscraper and the classic formulation of the single-family suburban house. Here American architecture “leaped” for freedom in two directions. Here, too, began the classicism of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, which threatened to derail the progress of the American project.
The skyscraper was of course a subject of intense interest among contemporary American architectural writers, but they rarely framed it in terms of freedom. Instead they were concerned with structural innovation, real-estate values, decorous appearance, and the urban impact. While the skyscraper seemed most American to outsiders, twentieth-century American writers amplified the nineteenth-century fascination with the bourgeois single-family house as the quintessential American building type. It seemed to exemplify the individuality at the heart of the democratic impulse. In the Cold War, the skyscraper and the single-family house were touted by propagandists as evidence of the dynamism of American capitalism and of its benefits to ordinary (middle-class) Americans. In contrast, Scully dismissed the prodigious, expensive, architecturally ambitious Gilded Age palaces of the New York–Newport elite, built at the same time and by some of the same people who owned the skyscrapers, as barren exercises that were “too unique to produce the freedom en masse which … was the century’s true dream.” The ultimate power to determine architectural value no longer lay with Medicis or Rockefellers but with “millions of persons.” These buildings still have not found a place in the narrative of American architecture.

Scully’s dismissal of the Newport mansions, about which he had written early in his career, is one example of the power of an intuitive Americanness to filter entire categories of buildings from the history of American architecture. The airiness of the concept of Americanness has been stabilized by a (usually) tacit agreement that it is to be found in buildings designed according to the canons of European formal architecture, suitably adapted, and among buildings within which Euro-American social rituals were enacted: private houses, churches, civic structures, and a few particularly elaborate business buildings. These fit comfortably into the categories of the “art of architecture,” in which “vital ideas become transmuted into vivid and memorable form,” as the conservative architectural historian David Handlin put it.

Handlin’s matter-of-fact statement is worth examining. It restricts “memorable form” to the tradition of art-architecture—not even to all architecture produced by trained architects. Yet trained architects also produced stores, warehouses, factories, hospitals, prisons, apartment buildings, schools, military facilities, and any number of other structures that aren’t comfortably adapted to Handlin’s criteria. Moreover, buildings such as the ancient pueblos of the Southwest or the grain elevators and industrial plants that fascinated European modernist architects and American modernist painters would surely count as “memorable form[s].” For Handlin, however, the “true beginning of American architecture” occurred when Americans thought to ask whether they could design “buildings that were worthy of the designation ‘architecture’—which in effect could match the timeless qualities that characterized the great works of other civilizations.”

Despite a tradition of demanding a uniquely American architecture, something fresh and new, writers about American architecture rarely shared their literary colleagues’ belief in the American Adam—the reborn innocent in the virgin continent. Instead, historians of American architecture have preferred a model that the nineteenth-century American historian John Fiske labeled “the transit of civilization,” and that Alan Gowans describes as the “line of progress.” And that line began in western Europe. Whatever their nationalist commitments, American architects from Thomas Jefferson to the present grounded their work in familiar, albeit sometimes transformed, Euro-American design vocabularies. Even skyscrapers, which seemed so uniquely American, escaped the limbo into which other commercial and industrial
buildings were cast only because the question of the aesthetics of their exteriors fascinated contemporaries and historians alike. While those in the first era of skyscraper-building struggled to fit them within the traditional aesthetic vocabulary, the generations of historians sought to portray them as forerunners of European modernism.

Americanness was grounded in western Europe for more reasons than simply to stabilize the canon, as the long reign in American architecture of the Colonial Revival—of buildings based on the relatively few surviving structures constructed before and just after the American Revolution—made clear. Buildings emulating the colonial were constructed as early as the 1850s, and they continue to be built by a new generation of conservative architects. The period when the Colonial Revival reigned strongest—the period from roughly 1890 to 1925—was also an era of rising nativism and hardening white supremacy. To say, as Fiske Kimball, a prominent early twentieth-century architectural historian, architect, restorationist, and museum director, did, that the “heritage of classical monuments from the formative period of the nation” laid the groundwork for “America’s leadership in the new classical revival of the present” was to imply that no later comers had anything to contribute to the American project. British-derived architecture, it was said, embodied key American values that were absent from other parts of the world, including central and southern Europe, from which “a proletariat descended upon us,” in Thomas Tallmadge’s words.

The more generous among the advocates of the Colonial Revival hoped that the experience of colonial design would have a salutary Americanizing effect on some immigrants. To the curators of the period rooms in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s American Wing, organized in 1915, “Many of our people are not cognizant of our traditions and the principles for which our fathers struggled and died. The tremendous changes in the character of our nation, and the influx of foreign ideas utterly at variance with those held by the men who gave us the Republic, threaten and, unless checked, may shake its foundations.” Not coincidentally, they also thought that the American Wing’s colonial rooms “made possible a convincing demonstration to our own people, and particularly to the world in general, that our American arts unconsciously developed a style of their own.”

This criteria for inclusion—“memorable form” implicitly based on western European norms—which Handlin called a “principle of selection,” has historically been a principle of exclusion as well. For Tallmadge, California’s early missions, while charming, were not American not only because they did not embody the values of Americanness, but because they were created by “ignorant [Roman Catholic] monks” and the “fumbling hands of the Indian artisans.” Tallmadge was willing to allow that in the interiors of the missions “the monks of California surpassed the Americans in architectural charm and religious atmosphere.” Since at the time Tallmadge wrote the standing missions were believed to antedate the American Revolution, the implication was that the eastern colonists had already become Americans while the westerners and their “copper-colored and childlike neophytes” could never be.

The subtexts of what is appropriate subject matter for architectural history and who are its rightful actors that are implied by this western-European-based concept of Americanness will be obvious to contemporary readers. This is old news, except that these unspoken boundaries and the simple social models upon which the concept is based continue to affect our ability to account for important aspects of architecture
itself. For example, nineteenth-century bourgeois houses were conceived by authors of normative domestic and architectural advice manuals through the lens of the ideology of domesticity, which saw the home as a secluded domain of leisure and uplift overseen by a female head of household, a domain that was the complement and the antithesis of the public, profane world of economic labor in which the male head participated. Late twentieth-century historians continued to interpret nineteenth-century houses in that light, ignoring their inescapably mixed quality. Yet the historian Elizabeth Blackmar demonstrated that bourgeois houses were also sites of unpaid labor by family members and of servants’ wage labor. They were buildings with extensive networks of service spaces essential to the intended operation of their formal ritual spaces. And they were places where families acted out bourgeois privacy in front of a selected public of regularly visiting peers. It is important to understand the ideology, but it is also important to understand the ways it worked out, or didn’t, within the life of houses.

If the insistence on Euro-American roots as the foundation of Americanness masks one set of problems, the evocation of democracy and freedom masks another. American democracy is imperfect, and freedom has been unequally distributed. What does it mean for a contemporary historian to say that a skyscraper or a house “leaped toward freedom”? How, for example, does one deal with the South, whose architecture is easily recognized as belonging to the same architectural traditions as those elsewhere in the United States, but which is also a region with a long, continuing, blatantly un- and even anti-democratic history? This contradiction of the idea of Americanness means that the South is largely excluded from conventional histories.

The social and political ferment of the 1960s confronted architectural thinkers with many of these limitations. Learning from Las Vegas, written by three Philadelphia architects, became a kind of populist classic, read widely in American studies and art history as well as by architectural designers as a celebration of the commercial roadside landscape (it was not). At the same time, folklorists and geographers sought in ordinary, “vernacular,” or “folk” architecture and landscape the values that earlier writers identified in the work of the Richardsons, Sullivans, and Wrights, but the newer scholars believed that these values were unmediated and hence more authentically expressed than in what they called “high-style” architecture. If these ordinary buildings shared—perhaps even possessed more of—the quality of Americanness, how could one justify labeling an account restricted to the customary canon a history of “American” architecture? How could one attach the broader adjective to a narrow story?

Architectural historians grew nervous. Scully began his widely read American Architecture and Urbanism with this apologia:

This book is concerned with the meaning of American architecture and with an assessment of the kind of human environment it has created in that geographical area which is now occupied by the United States. The splendid pre-Columbian, colonial, and modern achievements of South and Meso-America are not treated. In one sense, that restriction, though long if rather foolishly sanctioned by historical custom, seems especially artificial here, since all the architectures of this hemisphere can be shown to exhibit common hemispherical traits. … A vast landscape, a more or less scarifying contact with the Indian population, certain racial crimes, colonialism, a sense of distance from the centers of high civilization, a feeling at once of
liberation and of loss: all these attitudes and phenomena have been shared in varying degree by every post-Columbian culture of America. … Together they build toward a kind of uneasiness, a distrust of the place, a restlessness shared to some extent even by the Indian civilizations which preceded them.

But then Scully deftly pulled his own feet out of the fire:

The cataclysmic modern shift from the small, pre-industrial world to a new world of mass population and industrialism did not begin in America, but … it developed faster and more completely in the United States than anywhere else in the world. This must have taken place partly because there was less of the old in America to hold off the new and partly because of the character of the American himself. The rush of immigration which began in the 1840’s exacerbated an archetypal colonial sense of uprootedness and partial alienation, and it eventually swept away that anchor in classical learning and in the cult of intellectual attainment … So the American became the first mass man, the first modern man, trampling over the earth and all old things. …

In all this rests whatever justification there may be for restricting this discussion to the architecture of the United States and to some of its predecessors in this continental area.43

One could quarrel with Scully’s justification on empirical grounds: the United States was not the only nation in the Americas with “less of the old … to hold off the new”; it wasn’t the only nation to experience mass immigration, which was a global phenomenon in the nineteenth century. So the justification seems more like a rationalization.

The bigger problem is this: Scully and many of his contemporaries after the 1960s sensed the poor fit between the totality of architecture in the United States and the idea of Americanness. They understood that there was more to the American landscape than the familiar individual works that appeared in the texts. But they didn’t know what to do about it because they had inherited a narrative that was essentially critical and impressionistic rather than historical and empirical. Collectively, they had no model of historical explanation or cultural process that could link the terms Americanness and American in a rigorous manner that might escape the underlying restriction to Euro-American aesthetic discourse. So they fell back on what Scully rightly called a habit “long if rather foolishly sanctioned by historical custom.”

Architect, scholar, and preservationist James Marston Fitch made a Herculean effort to overcome the limitations of the conventional narrative in American Building: The Forces That Shape It (1948), which expanded two decades later into two volumes, one on “historical forces” and the other on “environmental forces.”44 The latter was revised and expanded again just before the author’s death in 1999.45 Fitch stretched the story in several directions. He paid serious attention to building technologies. Standard architectural surveys mention the balloon-framed house, the steel-framed tall office building, and sometimes the use of concrete and glass in modernist architecture, but they tend otherwise to ignore the interaction of visual and technological systems that shapes all buildings.

Fitch also recognized as early as the 1940s that “ecological, microclimatic and psychosomatic considerations” permeated architectural design and that they had to be accounted for in writing the histories of buildings.46 To put it another way, he
understood that bodies and buildings were part of a single system that regulated both survival and social interaction.

Nevertheless, as an architect who shared the professional and intellectual commitments of many of his peers, Fitch was unable, or unwilling, to reject the conventional narrative entirely. When his account split into two volumes, the historical volume stuck relatively close to the standard canon, albeit with some noteworthy additions. The environmental volume tended to focus on an entirely different set of buildings, few derived from the familiar canon. Thus history and environment became separate stories that never quite meshed.

Like so many of his predecessors as well, Fitch thought that American architecture was, to varying degrees, democratic, and he devoted an entire volume to demonstrating what was distinctly American about the nation’s architecture. Yet while he could easily show the effects of acoustics, environment, and structural forces on buildings, he had no concomitantly rigorous way to relate cultural ideas to built forms, largely because they looked primarily to visual qualities as expressions of a unitary American culture rather than examining multiple cultural practices and architecture in three dimensions. He accepted the popular notion that antebellum society was democratic and that “taste … [was] still subject to some measure of democratic control” while also acknowledging the failures of American society, particularly the racial and class divisions that undermined democracy. As a left-leaning Southerner, Fitch was not afraid to confront slavery and to dismiss the then dominant white-supremacist view of the Old South. “Twentieth century apologies for plantation life may appear to be supported by such skillful restorations as those at Williamsburg, Monticello or Mount Vernon. But as they stand today, detached from the ugly and cumbersome system which made them possible, those graceful old houses are mere relicts.” Fitch believed Southern architecture to be inferior to that in the North because it relied on uneducated black labor. “Production and efficiency on the job” required literacy, but “the slave who could read the carpenter’s handbooks of the North could also read an Abolitionist tract.”

Alan Gowans, too, attempted to rework the conventional narrative. It is noteworthy that the two most ambitious such projects came from an old-style populist leftist (Fitch) and a right-wing libertarian (Gowans). Already in *Images of American Living* Gowans had begun to stretch the outlines of the standard survey by including furnishings, implying that neither design ideas nor the meaning and use of the built environment can be understood by confining one’s attention to a single genre of artifact. Gowans quickly recognized the relative narrowness of the conventional story and began to explore what he called the “popular/commercial arts.” From that point on, he became a kind of architectural completist, amassing an enormous archive of slides that he called National Images of North American Living, for which he attempted unsuccessfully to find an institutional home. This collection became the pictorial source material for *Styles and Types of North American Architecture* (1992), an attempt to recast *Images of American Living* completely. It included Canada as well as the United States, thus eliminating the American political system as an explanation of Americanness. The concept of “styles” acknowledged traditional architectural-historical concerns with decoration and visual imagery although it used few familiar examples of the canonical styles. “Types” embraced the ways buildings of all sorts conventionalized patterns of social behavior. Gowans’s political views did not incline
him toward thinking in terms of class differences; instead he tended to see the totality of the built environment as a way that organic societies reinforce fundamental values. Styles and types together formed a matrix for the creation of “visual metaphors of value and thence of the validity of institutions they underlie.”

As architectural thought moved beyond acknowledging the simple exclusion of particular kinds of people or buildings, another limitation of the discourse of Americanness became evident. The conventional reliance upon a sense of buildings as visually defined unities, rather than as a complex systems of spaces, continues to engender a distorted understanding of buildings. If we say, for example, that Monticello was “Thomas Jefferson’s house,” we ignore its role as a living and working place for dozens of relatives, hired white and black employees, and enslaved blacks, many of whom spent far more time there than Jefferson, not to mention the constant stream of visitors through the house. We might expect each of them to experience these spaces differently. So who can say what Monticello “means,” much less call it “American”? In fact, Monticello was carefully organized to ensure that everyone who lived or visited there had a different experience of it, according to his or her status.

Feminist, racial, and queer theorists and historians have made this differential experience of architecture as clear as it ought to have been all along. Spaces enforce hierarchies, and they cue certain kinds of normative behavior—a quality that I call “annotated space”—in ways that can’t be understood by understanding buildings as simple, resolved objects. Conversely, behavior often defines otherwise generic spaces, distinguishing them from others that might be visually similar.

The claim that buildings could represent some common national feeling or democratic consensus was undermined not only by a growing understanding of the differential experience of buildings, but by a similar conception of the differential privilege of designing them. The exclusion of non-whites and non-males from the architectural profession or from commissions from powerful institutions and clients means exclusion from the privilege of attempting to make “buildings that were worthy of the designation ‘architecture,’” as Handlin called them, or even of participating in the discussion. This closed circle of professional architecture—of the makers of the buildings that historians have looked to for expressions of the American—cannot be overemphasized. Access to clients, to contacts, to training, and to important members of the field was necessary before one could produce significant architecture in the Euro-American tradition. There were no Emily Dickinsons in architecture and very few Phyllis Wheatleys. Instead, as Roxane Kuter Williamson showed, “most of the famous architects in history connect to each other through an experience like apprenticeship. … Family advantage, schools, and social connections” also counted in significant ways in the quest for architectural fame. The Furness bone connected to the Sullivan bone, the Sullivan bone connected to the Wright bone …

Can We Still Write About an American Architecture?

How, then, can we resolve the weaknesses of the tenacious concept of Americanness in the light of the vast numbers of very different buildings, builders, and users whose presence in the United States we now feel compelled to acknowledge, even if we set aside the fact that architectural ideas have not been contained by national boundaries north or south? There is as yet no grand resolution to be found. Tentative responses
range widely. At one extreme authors layer a few non-canonical ethnic traditions and building types as the mood strikes them. At another, I wrote a non-survey (1998) that was organized around five concepts that I thought American builders of all sorts addressed, without presuming to identify those I thought were more or less authentically American. Neither solution really works.

At the moment, however, the primary strategy is to ignore the issue, sometimes using a kind of majority-rule thesis that excludes buildings not used by “the vast majority of American citizens” which makes them “not absolutely fundamental to understanding the shared architectural culture of the entire nation.”

Many professionals treat architecture as an independent, theory-driven discipline with its own rules and concerns, one whose increasingly international constituency negates nationalistic concerns. Architectural theory is “a practice of mediation” that creates “relationships between formal analyses of a work of architecture and its social ground or context,” in the words of K. Michael Hays. Critics of this claim find that it results in a generic, universalized understanding of architecture devoid of any specific social context. Architectural historian Mary McLeod pointed out that while the theorists of the 1990s wrote and spoke often of an “other” architecture, of subversion and transgression, they preferred ungrounded, abstract otherness to the spaces of real life that feminists and social historians have studied.

Architectural historians have ducked down a different alley. Why bother, some ask, with a “grand narrative” at all? This was a question raised in other fields, notably American history, in the 1960s. It was amplified by the suspicion of systematic knowledge aroused by Foucauldian social theory, which turned “grand narrative” into the “master narrative,” a tool of control of the objects of knowledge. And indeed the history of Americanness in architecture traced here gives some support to that argument. One simple way to summarize the conventional story of American architecture is that Americanness is lodged firmly in works produced by professional elites for socio-cultural elites, embodying those groups’ values and senses of self, with other kinds of architecture treated as un-American or marginally important.

Among those who make this argument are many of the scholars who have alerted us to racial, gender, and class differences in architectural production and use. They frame studies of ethnic, racial, or gendered fragments of American architecture narrowly enough to make the connection between buildings and their makers’ identity seem obvious. Architectural writers have yet to question identity and its connection to work in the way that, for example, Kirsten Pai Buick has with the work of the sculptor Edmonia Lewis.

In acknowledging the force of the argument against the grand narrative, it must also be said that it does not address the most important issue. Older and newer histories of architecture share equally flimsy means of connecting society, culture, and buildings. Even the most theoretically sophisticated treatments of American architecture rely on social and cultural theories that do not address that intersection. Architecture is a variety of material culture, an anthropological term referring to those portions of the physical world transformed by culturally transmitted ideas. The defining, probably irresolvable, problem of material culture lies in specifying the relationship between the words. Culture is invisible, mutable, intangible; it is not material. The material world is not culture, but it is shaped by culture. Builders, critics, and scholars have asserted that the cultural—“Americanness”—permeates the material—the built environment, but they never say how.
Notes

2. O'Gorman, 1987, p. 44.
3. Tuthill, 1848, 149.
5. Schuyler, 1891, p. 57.
8. Liscombe, 1994, p. 188.
10. Tallmadge, 1936, p. 5.
13. Tuthill, 1848, pp. 135, 149.
33. Handlin, 1985, p. 38. I use the term “conservative” only with respect to Handlin’s and others’ intellectual positions regarding architectural history; I mean to imply nothing about the authors’ political views, unless explicitly noted.
41. Venturi et al., 1972.
References


In 1899, the American Stereoscopic Company, a New York firm owned by Brown University graduate and former Rhode Island public school teacher Roddo Y. Young, published a photographic image fresh from the Philippine–American War, which had begun in the outskirts of Manila in February of that year (Figure 14.1). Upon a card that identifies the American Stereoscopic Company as the object’s “Manufacturers and Publishers,” the location of the company as “New York, U.S.A., 725–727 Broadway,” and Young as the copyright holder, are mounted two nearly identical pictures, fixed side by side, and meant to be viewed through a stereoscope (which Young’s company also manufactured) in an illusionistic three dimensions. Within each of the two individual images are presented two figures in a landscape, bounded by a high horizon line formed by a double stone balustrade. One of the figures, an American soldier, is seated. Lips pursed, eyes narrowed, and finger on the trigger, he sits and stares warily into the distance. In this position of vigilance, the American pins to the ground the second figure: a toppled sculpture of a Catholic saint that has been knocked from its pedestal and which lies, humiliated, beneath the flexed form of the living soldier.

Insofar as it is framed by the intentions of a publisher who selected it, gave it a catchy title, and placed his brand upon it, The Church Saint sat on by a Washington “Johnnie,” Manila, Philippine I’ds is, on one level, immediately legible to anyone who has ventured into the thicket of scholarship that considers the relationships between images and the militarized US pursuit of empire in the 1890s. Focused mainly on the 1898 Spanish–American War as it transpired in Cuba, this literature has provided a compelling formulation—“images sold war, and war sold images”—that would seem to apply as well to Young’s stereograph as to Thomas Edison’s moving pictures, the countless cartoons made to sell newspapers, or any of the other commercial images of 1898.1

---

But does this seductive formulation really help us to interpret *The Church Saint*, made not in Cuba or the United States in 1898, but in the transpacific in 1899? Of course it was a commercial image. But what was it selling? Not “Spanish atrocities”—by December of 1898, Spain was gone from all of the territories where the United States had challenged its sovereignty.2 Not war to defend the revolutionaries, on whose behalf the United States claimed, at least in Cuba, to have intervened—by early February of 1899, the United States was at war in the Philippines against the very people who had fought to end Spanish rule. And it was not even selling war to crush the nascent Philippine state—unlike certain other images such as Young’s *Expecting a Filipino Attack behind the Cemetery Wall; Pasig, Phil. Is’ds* (1899; LC Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 12606 (S)) neither *The Church Saint* nor its paratext directly referenced Filipinos, “the enemy,” or “insurgents.”

The problem here is not necessarily that the image is difficult to read. It is obviously selling regime change: specifically the toppling of the Catholic Church in the Philippines by the United States. This it does by employing two practices that are frequently found at the interface of art and war. The first is memorialization, or the creation, in the words of archaeologist Adam T. Smith, of works that “encompass features whose aesthetics are explicitly directed toward cueing memories of specific events that define a polity’s role within the macropolitical order.” The second is the “specific event” enacted by Young’s subjects: the spoliation of a work of art pertaining to an old regime—and, in a broader sense, the spoliation of what Smith calls “the political landscape”: the buildings, monuments, architectural decoration, and other works of art that embody a polity, in this case the Catholic Church.3

Nor does the problem lie in framing *The Church Saint* within the general context of American political iconoclasm and its memorialization. As Brendan McConville argues, during the War of Independence, American revolutionaries expressed their rage against the monarchy not only through regular military proceedings, but also

---

**Figure 14.1**  R.Y. Young, *The Church Saint sat on by a Washington “Johnnie,”* Manila, Philippine I’ds., 1899, stereograph. Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 12606 (S).
through the practice of iconoclasm—the pulling down, inverting, beheading, or defacing of images of George III—and attacks on the buildings and objects of the Church of England, toward whose establishment in the colonies imperial policy had tended throughout the prior century. Additionally, pictorial works across the nineteenth century memorialized this revolutionary clearing of the “political landscape.” As late as 1876, New Yorker John C. McRae engraved *Pulling down the statue of George III by the “Sons of Freedom,” at the Bowling Green, City of New York, July 1776*—along with two other images, “Raising the Liberty Pole,” 1776, and the Fourth of July-themed *The Day We Celebrate*, that together presented revolutionary spoliation, the substitution of new, American icons for older ones, and the ritualized celebration of the Americanized political landscape as a pictorial parable of independence.4

The problem, rather, is in framing *The Church Saint* in its specific context: the Pacific world, or more particularly, Manila as a turbulent locus for geopolitical reconfiguration within the Pacific world in 1899. To put it another way, being able to read *The Church Saint* as a regime change image that memorializes the spoliation of Catholic architectural art does not explain why American photographers and American soldiers would, at that time and place, have engaged in this constellation of practices. This problem is twofold: first, the Pacific world is, for scholars of American art and architecture, largely a blind spot—since only a very few such scholars have ventured into it, their explorations have been necessarily limited. Second, the field of American history, which might be expected to have provided a usable context which art historians might apply, ready-made, to *The Church Saint*, has not done so. Indeed, it can be said that American history has suffered recently from a kind of paradox in which a slightly increased interest in the transpacific in the 1890s has been joined to a creeping attraction to monocausality, such that historians are actually forgetting things they used to know—including the significance of religion within the politics of American empire, which recent historians generally downplay, omit, or treat only as a postwar concern. Additionally, while some historians have noted acts such as the destruction of the church in Paco and the church and Augustinian convent in Guadalupe, they have tended to cast such acts as incidental events occurring in the heat of battle and motivated solely by “military necessity” arising from the war against nationalists. That is to say, in contrast to architectural historian Andrew Herscher, whose groundbreaking analysis of the Kosovo conflict folds damage and destruction into the spectrum of architectural practice—“violence *taking place*,” in his adept phrase—historians of the Philippine–American War have interpreted such acts as devoid of meaning in themselves.5

Thus, while the problem of contextualizing *The Church Saint* is, on one level, an interpretive problem arising from a specific geographical lacuna within American art history, it is also exemplary of a deeper but related methodological issue deserving consideration by all historically minded analysts in the field. To what extent should scholars of American art and architecture simply accept and apply the contexts that (American) historians have provided? Or should we also be developing our own contexts? And, if we do decide to write the contexts for American art and architecture, how do we go about doing that, even while still aiming to analyze images, objects, buildings, and landscapes—and, for that matter, artistic practices, practitioners, and institutions?

One possibility is to look beyond the methodological boundaries of American history, even as we redefine the geographical and political borders of “American art.”
Some of the characteristics of the specific historical context in Manila in 1899 that make it difficult for Americanists—the presence and interaction of multiple political and cultural actors in a single, contested location (and, as a corollary, the movement of people, culture, institutions, and practices across boundaries); the conjoined development of geopolitical processes in intersection with artistic practices (including not only the creation of images, objects, buildings, and landscapes, but also processes of exchange, alteration, reiteration, and destruction)—are, in a sense, the very characteristics that another branch of the discipline of history, world history, seeks out. Indeed, one of the animating goals of world history is to search, in virtually any historical moment, for greater complexity through the consideration of additional actors, wider geographical contexts, or other variables; and to manage this complexity by emphasizing interaction and rejecting monocausal explanations. Thus, for example, Martha Chaiklin is not content to view the US “opening” of Japan purely through the lens of US–Japanese relations, but rather by triangulation through the complex historical relationship between Japan and the Netherlands—including the multifaceted history of gift exchange.\(^\text{6}\)

World historians are also much more likely than their Americanist counterparts to take art seriously as the material, symbolic, and processual heart of such interactions. This tendency may be seen in Roxann Prazniak’s contribution to the same recent issue of the *Journal of World History*, which investigates both Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s *The Effects of Good Government* and *Martyrdom of the Franciscans* and also extensively develops their context. By combining both modes of research and analysis, Prazniak seeks to obtain an understanding both of these works and of the complex relationships embedded within them between Siena, the Mongol Empire, the Catholic Church, and subversive religious entities such as the Franciscan Spirituals.\(^\text{7}\)

The question of how to “write the context” for American art history cannot be resolved here in a general way, but that is not my aim. By applying the combined methodology routinely employed by world historians to a particular case study, my first goal is, rather, to reframe the relationship between “art” and “context” in that one case. What I will propose is that in Manila in 1899—a setting in which the United States was literally making empire by the minute through armed conquest and in which the personnel who were enacting that conquest were also heavily engaged in the making and breaking of art—American art did not merely “sell” war. Rather, art—understood as all of the constituent practices that contributed to the reformation of the “political landscape,” in Smith’s sense—*was* war.

But recognizing the confluence of American art practices and “contextual,” “non-art” practices (in this instance, the waging of war) in this specific case may also be of use in helping us to think about and question that relationship more generally. Is art epiphenomenal to historical processes, or is it a medium through which historical processes are enacted? Is the answer different if the historical processes under consideration are “war” or “empire”? To answer these questions, it will be necessary to engage in a much more intensive analysis of places, such as the Pacific world, where Americans waged war or made empire—but where practices of American art have been little analyzed. A specific example is the Philippines after the period discussed here, when the establishment of photographic and other art studios by Americans (including former military personnel such as Roy Squires, a Washington “Johnnie” and amateur photographer who turned professional as a result of his success, during the war, in selling photographs to his fellow troops), the introduction of new kinds of
architecture and urbanism, and the institutionalization of art education intertwined with imperial rule in ways that historians of American art have barely investigated.8

* 

Let us return to our case study and attempt to locate The Church Saint more precisely. This task presents something of a challenge, in that Young’s caption only describes the location as “Manila,” which could stand for either the city or the extensive province beyond; taken together, the city and outlying province had over twenty separate parishes. Moreover, the photographic landscape is sufficiently large and disorganized to compound the difficulty: for example, images from the period of the Spanish–American and Philippine–American wars in the Library of Congress are not generally sorted by geographical location—or even necessarily as war images.

However, just as certain places attracted more military action than others, so too did some zones attract a greater intensity of artistic activity. One such place was the corridor east from Manila to the Laguna de Bay along the Pasig River, containing a chain of settlements founded by the Catholic religious orders in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries including Santa Ana, San Pedro Macati, Guadalupe, and Pasig. This was an area of significant interest to the Americans who, during the period between the Spanish capitulation in August 1898 and the outbreak of the Philippine–American War six months later, had begun to think of themselves, in a term favored by the first American-published newspaper in Manila, The American, as “pioneers.” In September 1898, it had been traveled by “Brigadier General Charles A. Whittier, now collector of customs,” with an eye toward how, through American rule, “productive power and wealth would be imparted to the island.” His report, extracted on Christmas Eve 1898 in The American, glowingly portrayed the territory along “the Pasig river to the Laguna” for its “extraordinary fertility of soil,” and relished the “possibility for the acquirement of large estates if we control the country and if good titles can be assured.”9

However, these two “ifs” regarding control and title—the two component parts of sovereignty—were, in fact, very significant. For one thing, the United States had not gained military dominance over the province surrounding the city of Manila during the Spanish–American War, but only over the city itself. Rather, “virtually all of Luzon” had from the end of June 1898 been in the control of the revolutionary army under Emilio Aguinaldo and other returned exiles such as Miguel Malvar, who had also taken steps to establish a Philippine state. However, the United States faced another challenger to undivided American sovereignty beyond the nascent Philippine state: the Catholic religious orders, whose 300-year historical foothold has been noted. The orders were not just spiritual entities, but had exercised various forms of temporal authority (for example, education, taxation, intelligence-gathering) up to the time of the American incursion. Further, they remained the owners of substantial holdings of land and buildings with well-established title that, for example, had withstood earlier legal challenges brought by Spanish civil officials. This threatened not only the US acquisition “of large estates” but also a larger imperial goal: reinscribing the entire Philippines with a new system of land title.10

The Treaty of Paris, ending the Spanish–American War, had not resolved this issue. Although US officials apparently believed they could gain full sovereignty solely by negotiating with Spain, this was not the case. Notably, the sovereign authority to
liquidate territories belonging to the religious orders rested not with Spain but with the Vatican—as did the power to expel those orders. But, since the Holy See had not been an official party to the 1898 negotiations, it had done neither of these things. Indeed, perhaps understanding the situation better than the US delegation, the unofficial Vatican observer at the negotiations, the French-born former Archbishop of Santa Fe and of New Orleans, Placide-Louis Chapelle, had even convinced the United States to include a treaty provision, Article VIII, guaranteeing that the 1898 “relinquishment or cession … cannot in any respect impair the property or rights which by law belong to the peaceful possession of property of all kinds, of … ecclesiastical or civic bodies.”

This situation was further complicated by the thorny relationship of the Philippine state to the Catholic Church and to the religious orders. On the one hand, the Philippines was home to intense popular piety that might serve as a vector for revolutionary mobilization—hence American military attempts to break up the Colorum, a religious confraternity, and wartime efforts by US civilian officials to prevent clergy from “arousing disloyalty to the United States” by restricting their access to schools. On the other hand, Americans also knew that a strong current of anticlericalism, and particularly of antipathy toward the religious orders, ran through certain strands of Filipino nationalism: Filipino forces imprisoned hundreds of religious during the revolution against Spain, and Article 5 of the Philippine state’s first constitution, the 1899 Malolos Constitution, recognized the separation of church and state. However, despite the fact that US officials and the press cast US intervention as liberating the Philippines from the oppression of the religious orders, this shared antipathy hardly implied that the United States shared a common cause with nationalists—not least because the Malolos Constitution also contained an “Additional Article” declaring that “All the estates, edifices, and other property possessed by religious corporations in these islands shall be deemed restored to the Philippine State as of the 24th of May last [1898].” Given that the United States did not recognize the existence of that state—and was waging a war precisely to prove US sovereignty over all territories claimed by it—the United States would hardly have recognized such a claim. Thus, the fact that the United States and the Philippine state each desired “control” and “title” over the Catholic political landscape pushed it directly into the conflict zone.

US soldiers interacted with virtually all of the ecclesiastical structures and landscapes along the Pasig, as may be inferred from the catalogue of claims for damages prepared by the Archdiocese of Manila, published in Spanish in 1903 in a bid to obtain indemnities from the US government. According to the Catalogue, US forces occupied and damaged the church and parish house at Santa Ana and destroyed three neighborhood chapels; damaged and occupied the cemeteries, parish house, and church of San Pedro Macati; caused “great and many” damages to the church and parish house of Pasig and destroyed all but two of its sixteen chapels; and (as I have noted) destroyed the Augustinian convent and church at Guadalupe. In this case, the Catalogue states that American forces had occupied the buildings with sufficient time “to inventory the furniture, treasures, and the other effects that they encountered in them.” Thus, the account continued, it was with “great surprise that we saw from Manila that the entire Convento like the Church was completely consumed” (“pasto de las llamas”), including the archive and library, a deluxe edition of the “Flora de Filipinas,” a valuable image of the Virgin Mary, and $10,000-worth of “treasures, altars, and ornaments.” In addition, although the record of US-authored documents
J.M. Mancini

is sparse on this, some sources corroborating the *Catalogue* do exist—for example the American Methodist George Amos Miller’s *Interesting Manila*, which expresses regret over the burning of Guadalupe and blames it on California Volunteers.13

In 1899 Americans also photographed all of these sites and the interaction of American forces with them. Indeed, in some cases, several photographers made images of this interaction—as was the case for Pasig, established as a mission parish by Augustinians in 1573 (and defended at arms by members of that order during the ill-fated British invasion of 1762). Here, in addition to the photographer whose image Young published (and the photographer working for Underwood & Underwood, possibly the same person), other US photographers who depicted the interaction of American troops with this church and its landscape included Perley Fremont Rockett, a sometime San Franciscan and the “Official Photographer of the Twentieth Kansas Regiment, United States Volunteers,” and Dean Conant Worcester (with his photographic partner, Penoyer Levi Sherman), a former University of Michigan zoologist appointed to the First Philippine Commission in January 1899.

A consideration of photographs taken in Pasig, and a correlation of the specific architectural and landscape elements visible in those images to elements visible in *The Church Saint*, allows us to firmly locate Young’s image there and to clarify its spatial relationship to the wider scene. Underwood & Underwood’s *Gallant Defenders of the Flag Dewey raised over the Philippines—1st Battalion, Washington Vols. at Pasig* (1899; LC Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 11522-2), for example, shows a stone balustrade to the left and a distinctive house with a hipped roof in the center of the horizon that are the same as those in *The Church Saint*, indicating that *Gallant Defenders* was made from a vantage point slightly to the right and somewhat higher than *The Church Saint*. In turn, images taken from a position facing the Pasig church such as Rockett’s *Soldiers Entering Pasig Church after Capture* (Figure 14.2) show that the thin line in the grass behind “Johnnie” accentuating the horizontality of his rifle is part of a distinctive circle-and-cross pavement design in a grassy churchyard. This same path is also visible beneath the standing and kneeling figures of prisoners in Underwood & Underwood’s *Filipino Prisoners of War at Pasig, Philippine Islands* (1899; LC Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 11522-4) and *Pasig from the Church Tower—after its capture by the Americans* (Figure 14.3). This latter view, taken from above, shows that the double balustrade in *The Church Saint* is actually two separate walls, one delimiting a path and plaza beyond the churchyard and one bounding the churchyard itself.

By establishing the location as Pasig, it is also possible to comment on the dates when the photographs were made. Correspondence by General Elwell S. Otis received in Washington on March 15th indicates that, following an engagement with “three thousand insurgents” in Pasig and Pateros, American troops under Brigadier General Lloyd Wheaton “occupie[d] those towns with sufficient force to hold them” and took 400 prisoners. This is corroborated by the *Catalogue*, which states, “[T]he troops occupied the Church and Parish House from the 15th of March until the 2nd of the same month of the year 1900.” This date also coincides with the date of March 17th, on Worcester’s images *Pasig Church* and *Battalion 22nd Inf’ry … Pasig* (1899; both LC Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 10157 (G)), which indicates that he was present with his camera immediately after the taking of the town. However, the same cannot easily be said of the Washington Volunteers. Although they were attached to Wheaton, according to the regimental history and casualty records in the *Correspondence* they were in Guadalupe on the 14th, and not engaged in Pasig until the 26th. This,
Figure 14.2  Perley Fremont Rockett, *Soldiers Entering Pasig Church after Capture*, 1899, photograph. Photo: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 5046.

Figure 14.3  Strohmeyer & Wyman / Underwood & Underwood, *Pasig from the Church Tower—after its capture by the Americans—Philippine Islands*, 1899, stereograph. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 11522-4.
and their absence from Worcester’s photographs, suggests that both the Volunteers’ manipulation of Pasig’s political landscape and the making of stereographs that memorialized the manipulation took place on or after this later date—that is to say, after the heat of battle had subsided.14

With this in mind, it becomes possible to characterize the work done by the Volunteers in manipulating the political landscape and creating commercial photographs to memorialize that manipulation. As I have observed, some images did create narratives about the “brave” “Johnnies” engaging “insurgents” in battle. But many other images specifically took as their subject the performance of rituals establishing American control and possession of the Catholic political landscape. These images included those, such as Rockett’s, depicting the entry of US forces into the church (see Figure 14.2); Gallant Defenders of the Flag, which shows the lining up of the Volunteers directly in front of the church in a formation perpendicular to it; Co. K., Fighting Washington Volunteers (1899; LC Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 11522-1), which depicts them on the other side of the churchyard and looking directly at the church; and Filipino Prisoners of War at Pasig, Philippine Islands (1899; LC Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 11522-4), which presents captured revolutionaries in the churchyard. Indeed, this stereograph displays US control over both competitors to its sovereignty: in the background of the photograph, behind the prisoners, is a solid line of American soldiers, arrayed in interposition between the prisoners and the occupied church.

Other photographs represent the performance of rituals that more directly involved the manipulation of Catholic objects, structures, and landscapes. Pasig from the Church Tower (see Figure 14.3) depicts a curious moment within the performance of one such ritual in the form of a detail in the center-right foreground. Here we find a Washington Volunteer together with a second figure, whose elbow the Volunteer holds as if he were about to help it to cross the street. This second figure, with its left foot extending forward in front of the center of and perpendicular to its right foot; the tilt of its head slightly to the left; and its flexed, upwardly-oriented left arm, appears to be the upright form of the toppled statue in The Church Saint. If that is the case, then this image captures one of two possible moments: the staging of the humiliation depicted in The Church Saint, or the dismantling of the set afterwards.

In addition to images representing the performance of rituals of control, others display the physical alteration of church structures as in The Church at Pasig, showing barricaded Tower Windows and Stone Wall Defenses, Philippines (1899; LC Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 11522-3), which shows the rendering of the church to the service of military operations—in this case “defense,” but also possibly surveillance. Like the performance of rituals, making physical alterations enacted taking control of a Catholic structure by US forces and the possession of that structure over time (possession being a precondition to sovereignty in both US and international law). It also entailed both material and symbolic defacement. Moreover, the exercise of architectural defacement in the service of military practice facilitated further, related, aesthetic practices. For, as has already been suggested by Pasig from the Church Tower, the ascent of soldiers to the top of Pasig’s fortified church tower was undertaken in conjunction with the ascent of photographers—who, in some cases, were one and the same—who from that vantage point created images that themselves crystallized and furthered the transformation of the landscape.

*
Although Pasig was more elaborately photographed than many church landscapes, it was not unique. Photographs from a number of other locations in the province of Manila, both along the Pasig and beyond, also visualized the American performance of control over church buildings and landscapes. As in Pasig, many of these images from the wider landscape were made for commercial distribution, suggesting that they, too, were both selling regime change and enacting it. Rockett, for example, photographed the US possession of San Pedro Macati—the scene, apparently, of a dramatic showdown between the chaplain of the First California Volunteers, William McKinnon, and his own “officers and men” who tried to loot it. An example is Rockett’s *California and Idaho Troops in Churchyard at San Pedro Macati* (1899; LC Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 5046), depicting a smoke-filled and disorderly scene in which soldiers mill and cook amidst lean-tos and where refuse that litters the churchyard, alongside a donkey standing stupidly before the church. Nonetheless, this is a carefully composed image: curved balustrades in the foreground draw the viewer’s eye upwards and into the center of the image, to a large boundary cross.15

Such images also represent attendant processes of damage, alteration, and defacement. One example is the church in Taguig, near San Pedro Macati, presented in Underwood & Underwood’s *Washington Troops at the Taquig [sic] Church, just before they charged the Filipinos—Sentinels watching the enemy—P.I. (1899; LC Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 11152-1). Here, architectural defacement has a deeper symbolic import, as the creation of a sentry post upon the apex of the church’s roof entailed the removal of the cross arms which presumably had transversed the horizontal pole on the apex. This is more obvious in another Underwood & Underwood stereograph taken from the vantage point of the church tower, *Lookouts on the Church Top—watching the Filipinos—Taquig [sic], Philippine Islands* (Figure 14.4), which depicts two sentries seated adjacent to the deformed cross, one with an outstretched arm pointing behind the church, and a second who follows the first lookout’s gaze through binoculars—highlighting a triangular, mutually constitutive interplay between architectural defacement, military possession, and photographic reproduction.

In other cases, photographers memorialized not the physical alteration of churches or their landscapes, but the apparent interference with Filipino religious practice occasioned by the US occupation of such sites. Consider, for example, stereographs from Santa Cruz, north of the Pasig, site of both a large church and one of the city’s largest cemeteries. Here, the *Catalogue* charges, American troops caused “great destruction in the Cemetery … at the outbreak of hostilities in February of the year ’99.” But they also engaged in the staging of tableaux of disruption, as in *Praying for the souls of departed friends—Santa Cruz Cemetery, Manila, Philippines* (Figure 14.5). In this image, American soldiers are arrayed once again in interposition between Filipinos and Catholic structures, including an American who actually elbows the wall of niche graves while the praying Filipinos maintain a distance from it. In some cases, these photographs verge on blasphemy. For example, *The bones of Tenants whose burial rental was not renewed* (Figure 14.6) depicts an American handling the disturbed remains of the Filipino dead—posed in a way which mockingly appropriates an iconography normally employed to evoke themes of human frailty and vanity, as in Caravaggio’s *Saint Francis in Meditation* (1606; Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome)—while a uniformed soldier grins on the proceedings.16

It is not sufficient, however, merely to describe such images in terms of sacrilege or the interruption of Catholic religious practice, without also understanding the direct relationship between desecration and the projection of power within the US enactment of regime
change. Catholic cemeteries, and the practices associated with them, attracted some of the bitterest condemnation (and the most lurid fascination) from American Protestants in Manila. Americans objected to the renting of individual niche graves on a temporary basis, and the subsequent removal of remains to communal ossuaries, which interfered with Americans’ attachment to private, perpetually held graves as a kind of property to which individuals had an “inalienable right.” Further, they objected that control over these “rentals” resided with Catholic clergy, which prevented the US from establishing civic control over cemeteries. Thus, US officials quickly passed legislation banning
traditional Catholic burials; and American soldiers disrupted Paco Cemetery by digging individual graves in the ground. When faced with resistance to the new legal framework, US officials enforced American-style burials at gunpoint—and took pictures of the proceedings. As the caption to a photograph titled *A Filipino Funeral Under American Auspices* explains: “the prejudices of the people were so firmly fixed that in some instances it was necessary to send an armed guard to enforce the rules of the authorities.”

A look beyond Pasig will also facilitate analysis of a final issue: the outright destruction of church structures and the representation thereof. Some commercial images were published depicting destroyed churches, such as two Underwood & Underwood stereographs, *Ruins of Old Church at Guadalupe—burned during Filipino Retreat—Philippines* and *The Church at Guadalupe—destroyed by fire—The scene of hard fighting, Philippine Islands* (1899; both LC Prints and Photographs Division, LOT
Yet, what is striking about these images is the extent to which they minimized such destruction: for example, *The Church at Guadalupe’s* placement of two youths lolling in the foreground and deployment of a vantage point that emphasizes the intact brickwork rather than the gutted roof, door, and interior.

This is in contrast to Worcester and Sherman’s private album photograph, *Guadalupe Church* (1899–1900; LC Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 10157-48), which shows it without obscuring or distracting foreground features, such that charring is visible on the buttresses to the left, and scorched marks rise above windows that are hidden by the foreground tree in the commercial image. Similarly, Worcester and Sherman’s private album contained a stark depiction of the ruined Paco Church (Figure 14.7), but commercial photographers appear to have shunned publishing images of it—even though the Chicago photographer John D. Cress did register *Paco Church, Manila, after it was burned* for copyright. This suggests that there were limits to what portion of regime change commercial photographers could or would “sell”—limits seemingly also applied to the representation of looting, and to interior views of occupied churches not obviously in use as hospitals.

This reticence appears to have intensified over the course of 1899. The establishment of US control in the province of Manila, and the demobilization within a few months of the soldiers who had taken part in it, created new imperatives beyond those of conquest. On the home front, this included the McKinley Administration’s need to maintain the support of US Catholics, in light of the transpacific return of reports of looting,
spoliation, and the occupation of churches—and of liturgical objects in the possession of soldiers. Thus that autumn McKinnon (the Catholic chaplain who had fended off looters from San Pedro Macati) toured the United States, presenting illustrated lectures in which he denied all US mistreatment of Catholic churches and blamed looting on “Chinamen”—and enjoyed a visit to the White House. He was soon accompanied in this endeavor by Worcester, who returned to the United States in October “to assist … people in unlearning … misinformation about things that have gone on in the Island of Luzon”—namely “accounts of the desecration of churches … the heroism of the Filipinos [and the] looting of villages and towns by American soldiers.” This he did through the presentation of illustrated lectures based on his own images—but omitting Paco Church, Guadalupe Church, and other photos he had made of burnt, defaced, or occupied churches.18

This trend toward the circulation of an alternative iconography continued for the remainder of the conflict. After 1899, many photographers chose not to follow the war’s progression beyond Manila, but remained there to make pleasing images that displayed the orderliness of US rule. In this vein, some Americans made stereographs of intact architectural features from destroyed or despoiled sites, such as C.H. Graves’s *The artistic entrance gate to Santa Cruz Cemetery* (1902; LC Prints and Photographs Division, Stereograph Files—Foreign Geographical—Philippines—Manila). Others more brazenly published impossible images of preservation that depicted destroyed structures before their demise. A notable example is the *Church at Paco, Luzon* published in Jose de Olivares and William Bryan’s *Our Islands and their People*, after a photograph Cress deposited for copyright (Figure 14.8). However, the model for the Bryan

Figure 14.8 Church at Paco, Luzon. Published in Jose de Olivares and William S. Bryan, *Our Islands and their People as Seen with Camera and Pencil*, 1899, vol. II, p. 598, fig. 102. Source: This item is reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.
photograph—not attributed in the caption—was not *Paco Church, Manila, after it was burned*, but rather *Paco Church, Manila, before it was burned*.19

*

I have argued here that the methodologies of world history can help historians of American art to imagine their field differently. First, world history encourages us to look beyond the United States to complex, contested zones such as the Pacific world, which heretofore have attracted little attention from historians of American art. Second, world history’s pursuit of the mutual interrogation of artifacts and their contexts invites us to reimagine our role as the authors of the contexts for American art—rather than as the consumers of prefabricated historical contexts made by Americanist historians. In the case study presented in this chapter, I have applied these observations in order to argue that, during the US conquest of Manila in 1899, the practices of art and the practices of war merged as Americans occupied, performed rituals of control upon, spoliated, and staged tableaux disrupting the Catholic political landscape—and did so in conjunction with photographers who memorialized these actions. Undoubtedly, such photographs served the discursive and propagandistic purposes identified by previous scholars. But, in the context of a contest for territorial sovereignty between the United States and the Catholic Church (a context that recent American historians have all but overlooked), the US transformation of the Catholic political landscape and its reproduction through photography ought also to be understood as continuous with that contest.

This may be an unusual case. But if we emulate world history’s abiding interest in complex processes that take place outside of narrowly “national” boundaries, and its capacity to redefine the relationship between “art” and “context,” we may be surprised by the “American art” we find in forgotten places like the Pacific world. This will depend, however, not only on where we look, but how.

Notes

1 For images as an accelerant to American “jingoism” see, for example, Campbell, 2000; for a discussion of literature analyzing the Spanish–American War as an accelerant to commercial image-making (particularly motion pictures) see, for example, Castonguay, 1999.

2 “Spanish atrocities”: Library of Congress, n.d., “‘Remember the Maine’.”


6 Chaiklin, 2010.

7 Prazniak, 2010.

8 The direct intersection of photography and transpacific soldiering in Squires’ career also characterized the experience of other enlistees, but this intersection has been little explored within existing scholarship: the best-known account of Philippine–American War photographs (Wexler, 2000) focuses on images made in Europe by a photographer who never went to the Philippines: see Egan, 1910.
9 [Editorial], The American 1 (61) (December 25, 1898), [p. 2]; “The Philippines,” The American 1 (60) (December 24, 1898), [p. 6].
10 “Virtually”: May, 1980, p. xxv; see also May, 1984. Land/title: Cunningham, 1916; Iyer and Maurer, 2008; Pilapil, 1961. Note that this discussion pertains mostly to four orders which had been present continuously since the sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries—the Augustinians, Augustinian Recollects, Dominicans, and Franciscans—rather than to nineteenth-century arrivals or the expelled and reinstated Jesuits.
13 Arzobispado de Manila, 1903, pp. 11–13, 171. Miller, 1906, pp. 147–148. Note: Miller’s text identifies the date as February 14, 1900, but the narrative indicates that he is discussing 1899.
15 “Shocking Vandalism. Further Proofs of Church Looting. Californians are Also Accused of Robbery,” San Francisco Monitor, November 25, 1899.
16 Arzobispado de Manila, 1903, p. 5.

References

Arzobispado de Manila y los Obispados Sufraganeos. (1903). Catálogo de las reclama-
cciones que por daños y perjuicios inferidos a la Iglesia Católica de Filipinas presenta al gobi-
erno de los Estados Unidos de América. Manila, Imp. de “El Mercantil.”


“Home” and “Homeless” in Art between the Wars

Angela Miller

Since Wanda Corn’s seminal study of 1999—The Great American Thing—native and cosmopolitan have become the standard binary for organizing American modernism. On one side, the “transatlantics”: Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Stella, and Gerald Murphy; on the other side, the “rooted”: Charles Demuth, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Charles Sheeler. Corn treats “Americanisme”—the French, and broadly European, fascination with the modernity of the new nation—as the field on which Americans and Europeans tested the possibilities inherent in the technological and social forms of the modern city. Corn’s rooted artists, by contrast, deflected away from urban modernity and toward native traditions rooted in the nineteenth-century heritage. The present chapter picks up where Corn’s important book leaves off, by moving beyond a focus on the thematic and geographical to consider underlying differences in affect and attitude between two distinctive groups of American modernists. Was the self the source of meaning, or rather a shifting reflex of the modern environment? Was meaning to be located below the surface of life, in a web of metaphor connecting self and nature, body and world? Or was creative ferment the product of a play of social selves glancing off the random occurrences of the everyday? If older symbolic responses to self and nature found anchorage in correspondences that mapped the world in personally meaningful ways, those more attuned to the destabilizing rhythms of modern technology and the unpredictable character of twentieth-century cities were more engaged by the play of surface ironies, and by the accidental and fleeting production of meaning itself.

“Transatlantic” and “rooted” in this context align with distinctly different aesthetic and social dispositions, marking opposed habits of being and ways of relating to the world. In my usage, these terms do not simply signify two distinct versions of “America” as the focus of a new culturally specific modern art, but point as well to fundamentally different forms of identity itself. The possibilities of the new century...
provoked contrasting attitudes toward the construction of the self, along with distinct discourses of gender and sexuality. In the decades between the wars, these distinct positions pointed toward a politics not only of culture but of meaning itself: how meaning is visually constituted, its fixity, and its operations in the world. Such underlying differences imply other kinds of mobility than those associated with geographical axes. Kenneth Burke—a man who rarely left his perch in the New Jersey woods, and was by no stretch a “transatlantic”—embodies these other forms of mobility. Called by one scholar the “Charlie Chaplin of dialectics,” Burke—writer, critic, and philosopher—brought humor and word play to the task of deconstructing philosophical certainties, placing high-minded political ideals and conventional pieties into close quarters with the irreverent claims of the body. Skating lightly over some of the most pressing intellectual concerns facing interwar modernists, Burke approached questions of identity and essence as deeply situated within the roiling contradictions of human motivation. Coming of age in the prewar and wartime literary avant-garde of Dada, Burke skewered the rhetoric of purity and spiritual insularity central to native modernism as being out of step with a tumultuously modernizing culture. Burke demonstrated a subversive energy through analytic brilliance rather than through efforts to integrate the impossibly fractured elements of modern experience. Out of such splinters issued new forms of inventiveness. Burke’s work is a sustained repudiation of the expressive paradigm—in which the world was bent to the artist’s own self. In its place, he offered the generative possibilities of happenstance and random events, the improbable resemblances among things otherwise unrelated. This semantic and semiotic mobility brings him into kinship with the transatlantic avant-garde, as its genial uncle and unheralded theorist.

Though they imply different tolerances for indeterminacy, transatlantic and rooted meet at their extremes, each taking on—dialectically—the qualities of the other. We will see how the impulse for stability and rootedness issues from a sense of homelessness, while the tolerance for ambiguity and multiple meanings was enabled by a feeling of being “at home in the world,” an ability to occupy two positions at once. Native and cosmopolitan also share a common condition of loss, endemic to modernity itself.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, modernity—and its associated dynamic of modernization—was commonly linked to the homeless condition of culture in the United States. But the “roots” of homelessness, so to speak, were in the nineteenth century. As Nathaniel Hawthorne proclaimed in the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, “I am a citizen of somewhere else.” Inspired by the dream of a fully native expression grounded in the landscape, the culture, and the history of the new nation-state, many of its artists and writers were haunted by a persistent sense of displacement and absence. The essence of a modern condition first recognized by Europeans such as Georg Lukács, this homelessness found a literary echo in the vast Pacific spaces traversed by Melville’s whalers—and by those revolutionary sailors in an alien world where they were—in the words of Roman Jakobson—“everywhere equally chez soi.” Homelessness had in addition a distinctively native and modern pedigree in the frail seaborne boats of Ryder, the agoraphobic prairies of Alfred Jacob Miller and James Fenimore Cooper, and the whiteness of Poe’s polar reaches in *Arthur Gordon Pym*, threatening self-annihilation. This is the territory of American Symbolist and Romantic imaginings, producing the first of many ironies: that the search for a native literature and art found one recurrent form in the existentially weightless and rootless condition
of the displaced American. Within these Symbolist literary currents, New World
nature—relative to Europe—defied the domesticating urges of writers still bound by
European social and historical frames. In defiance of the polite conventions of
European belles-lettres, this tradition fed upon the disorienting scale of American
nature, its inhuman and alien character, its uncanny qualities of a primeval world lost
to cultural memory but recoverable through the power of imagination.

This Symbolist legacy of sublimity found no immediate issue in the visual arts
however. Confronting urban technological modernity, many American modernists
retreated to the regions and into a refined organic imagery of sublimated natural ener-
gies.7 Not until the post-World War II confrontation with a different uncharted uni-
verse of the atom would modernist abstraction give rise to parallel landscapes of
metaphysical homelessness. Instead, in the early twentieth century this nineteenth-
century Symbolist tradition of existential displacement had generated—in dialectical
fashion—its obverse: an impulse to ground cultural expression in a nature at once
richly sustaining and intertwined with the nation-state, its histories and traditions, its
cultural discourses, its expressive practices. As historian George Mosse has emphasized,
“the task of twentieth-century nationalism was to provide shelter and continuity, roots
for an ever more rootless world.”8 This regrounding of nation in a recovered sense of
home suggests one important impulse driving native modernism.

To find a way beyond the Symbolist traditions of homelessness, the first generation
of American modernists focused on nature’s blending of biological growth with the
psychic rhythms of human creativity. Such forms of expression reaffirmed belief in the
exceptionalism of national culture—thinly rooted in history but rich in nature and
democratic values. Gesturing back toward the nineteenth century, this organicism
offered a critical alternative to the commercial and materialist strivings of the new
culture. By the late teens, nurtured by Alfred Stieglitz as galleriste, impresario, and
tireless missionary for a native modernism, Arthur Dove, Georgia O’Keeffe, John
Marin, Paul Strand, and Marsden Hartley had established a form of abstraction both
original and culturally recognizable.9 Stieglitz intimates such as Paul Rosenfeld linked
these creative energies to essential attributes of gender: feminine receptivity and mas-
culine penetration determined the character of one’s art and informed one’s imagina-
tion of nature.

Art-making acquired a cult-like sacral character in Stieglitz’s missionizing,10 earning
the Stieglitz artists occasionally caustic assessments as a cliquish clergy, bound by eso-
teric beliefs.11 In lieu of the commodified art world Stieglitz so relentlessly railed
against, he insisted upon the singular experience of his own gallery spaces, cordoned
off from market pressures. Stieglitz characterized The Intimate Gallery (1925–29) to
his friend the writer Sherwood Anderson as a space “throbbing and pulsating,” a liv-
ing organism alive with the same organic energies that found visual expression in the
work of his favored artists.12 Elizabeth McCausland wrote of how Dove’s work was
“an extension of his body, as it were, a breathing of flesh and blood into the further
but still animate process—in this case, painting.”13 This rhetoric of embodiment in
turn forged links between the content of native modernism, its practitioners, and the
site of its formation.

Stieglitz’s heated rhetoric of soil, depth, and penetration similarly revealed a meta-
physical quest to get below the surface to some underlying reality, an impulse revealed
in a letter to Marius De Zayas about the collector Leo Stein: “he does not feel below
the surface. He has just a little of the Berenson quality in his makeup.”14 Like their
contemporary William Carlos Williams, who called for expressive culture to draw from the soil itself, to “sink,” in his words, the art of the native modernists was an effort to penetrate the surface of the culture in order to enter its very entrails. Entrenched in a Symbolist rhetoric of matter and spirit, surface and depth, Stieglitz was unable to grasp the innovations of the European avant-garde, relying instead on his colleagues, especially De Zayas, who may have meant to tweak Stieglitz’s prejudices when he wrote about the poet Apollinaire: “[He] is really the deepest observer of superficiality. We have become good friends.”

For a generation emerging out of the physical and psychic repressions of the later nineteenth century—a compartmentalization of experience that kept mind and body, spirit and nature too often tightly separated from one another—cultural and aesthetic renewal began through a process of reintegration. Commerce and industry had given rise—in the memorable image of Van Wyck Brooks—to a vast “Sargasso sea” of culture—unformed, shapeless, and disordered—mechanization threatening to submerge the human element. Imagination—the organic principle of creation—focused the aspirations of the intellectuals around the little journal Seven Arts and other literary and cultural voices: a force of redemption, acting through the creative energies of the artist, that would knit together the dualisms that had stalled the emergence of a vital expressive culture. The native modernism of organic abstraction in particular collapsed body, nature, and self into a neo-Romantic matrix of correspondences recalling the nineteenth-century heritage. Within this metaphoric universe, the non-organic, technological forces of modernization were alien elements bent into expressive service by the power of imagination. Dove’s trains and oil tanks, or O’Keeffe’s skyscraper series—wherein the “negative” space of nature and sky in the city acquires a powerful presence in contrast to the inert mass of the buildings themselves—both achieve this oxymoronic coupling of nature and technology.

The home-centered modernism of the Stieglitz artists aspired to a selfhood continuous with nature; their aesthetic innovations were directed at making nature present within the self, while rendering the representational means transparent. This resonance between nature and psyche took a range of forms that sought to translate the subtle emanations of the natural world into internal imaginative rhythms, colors, and forms that communicated at once a sense of nature and of the sentient awakened will of the artist responding to nature through the filters of subjective experience. The photographer himself consistently sought self-recognition in the world he photographed. Stieglitz even managed to make the turn toward a modernist “straight” photographic aesthetic serve these Symbolist propensities. His Equivalents series (1923–1931/34) charted the delicately shifting tonalities, and densities of clouds in infinite variation, the entire series a composite portrait of inner moods and transitory light effects mirroring interior affect. Stieglitz’s persistent concern with expressing in photography “a feeling I had about the world” or as he put it, “something already taking form within me” was noted as well by Paul Strand, who remarked on his efforts “to use the expressivity of the objective world for the end of fashioning therewith subjective form.”

Marin, Dove, and O’Keeffe were likewise motivated by their efforts to infuse an internal landscape of feeling and emotion with the animating energies of nature. For Marin, this organicism expanded to include buildings; his series of skyscrapers registers the giddiness of a young artist just discovering the power of his own imagination to imbue a stolidly immobile urban infrastructure with the energies of life forms. In his characteristically rhapsodic manner, Marin wrote that “the whole city is alive;
buildings, people, all are alive; and the more they move me the more I feel them to be alive.” Marin’s buildings sway and pulse their way skyward in defiance of the very qualities that Henry Adams, Cassandra-like, saw in them in these same years: skyscrapers as symbols of a new determinism, a frightening expression of the accelerating world of impersonal modern forces.

Following World War I, the native modernists embarked on a series of internal exiles, severing their lingering ties to New York and gravitating to regions far from the metropolitan modernity from which they increasingly recoiled: rural Long Island and Ohio for Dove, Maine for both Marin and Hartley, New Mexico for O’Keeffe. Only Stieglitz remained anchored to New York, the urban platform he required for his evangelical mission of aesthetic redemption. But his family compound at Lake George served a similar function as a symbolically charged locus where the intertwining of nature and culture, self and others, helped shape both his practice and his rhetoric as the leading arbiter of a renewed native expression.

Native modernism—understood in the dramaturgical terms introduced by Burke of scene and agent, act, agency, and purpose—pitted the individual ego of the artist-agent, expressed through his creative work, against the modern city as the “scene” of cultural expression. Stieglitz’s finest photographs of New York circa 1910 embody this struggle of the individual creative will of the artist—and its resultant sense of ethical and aesthetic purpose—with the steel-clad certitudes of the new America. It was an exhausting clash of the titans. Locked in combat with these leaden forces, his efforts to “inseminate” a native cultural expression committed Stieglitz to living in a place to which he felt only a tenuous attachment. Over time this combative posture between agent and scene stymied any deep engagement with the forces of the new century. In place of an exchange between cultural agent and the scene of creative action—an exchange potentially generating new cultural forms—Stieglitz assumed an oppositional stance whose agency of creative transformation was curtailed by its withdrawal from the scene of modernization. The homecoming heralded by Rosenfeld’s 1924 Port of New York was enacted through aesthetic means in the absence of a transformative engagement with lived experience. As late as 1956, Rudi Blesh observed that Stieglitz “could have grasped a new role, but he did not recognize it when it came.”

The efforts to realize this fully integrated cultural self were born of a deeply inorganic condition, an attenuated sense of place and history with which these artists—and Stieglitz himself—struggled in one way or another. Despite his tireless campaigning on behalf of his artists, Stieglitz suffered from a sense of estrangement. “You can’t escape … you would find America all over the world,” he wrote in a letter of 1926. The novelist Jean Toomer wrote of “The impression [Stieglitz] gave me … that he was a traveler in these parts, an exile from another world, without home here. He was so unconcealed in his homelessness that he symbolized the state and acted as a magnet for many others, exiles like himself, but less sure of their status.”

This sense of homelessness that drove the native modernist nostalgia for belonging and deep connection was strikingly enunciated by Elizabeth McCausland—an interwar essayist, critic, and partner of the transatlantic photographer Berenice Abbott—in a 1937 essay on Arthur Dove, whose luminously expansive abstractions are among the most satisfying works produced by the Stieglitz artists. Dove, McCausland wrote, “has never had a land of his own in which to take root and grow. American indeed this homeless, dispossessed, rootless spirit, as is the romantic, nostalgic love of earth which compensates for the lack of home by creating a miracle in paint.” For McCausland,
what was most American about American art was its condition of spiritual dis-
possess-ion. McCausland’s insight is that in Dove’s work the paint itself—its handling, its
texture, its tactility, as well as its earthy palette and its intimations of both physical and
spiritual tumescence—compensates for an underlying sense of lack, an absence at the
core of native modernism. Her insight connected the longing for home with a cor-
responding search for embodied expression that invested the medium itself with a
spiritual yearning that remained felt if not expressed. Dove, read through the critical
discourse of Paul Rosenfeld and others in the Stieglitz circle of the 1920s, has ever
since been associated with a “loamy” nationalism, or what Wanda Corn memorably
dubbed “soil/spirit.” And yet McCausland intuitively grasped that Dove’s form of
embodied formalism was driven not by a realized sense of home but by a feeling of
estrangement from it. His search for an embodied geography took shape in the very
absence of a fully stable identity grounded in place and history.

Of what, then, did Dove’s compensatory “miracle in paint” consist? What absences
did it stand in place of? Dove turned to pure abstraction at the same moment as Wassily
Kandinsky on the other side of the Atlantic. Like O’Keeffe’s initial efforts, Dove’s early
work reveals elements of art nouveau, an international language drawing upon a natu-
ral world endowed with lyrically convoluted organic energies. By the early teens, he—
along with O’Keeffe—had developed one of the primary elements of organic
abstraction: the synaesthetic exploration of color to conjure musical sonorities, and of
textural properties to activate the sense of touch. The synaesthetic engagement of
touch and sound in both artists suggests a longing to push beyond the singularity
of vision into other forms of apprehension. In a pastel on linen dated 1912–13
(Figure 15.1), Dove evoked the velvety folds and creases of a cow, suggesting on an
intimate scale the swelling bovine shapes that nuzzle the viewer, commanding the field

![Figure 15.1](image-url)
of vision. Dove gave the painting to Stieglitz, who thanked the artist: “You don’t know what the ‘Cow’ meant to O’K & me.—It outlived virtually everything else we had about us.—We often talk of it.”

The effort to activate the senses—and through them the psyche—involves as well a retreat from language. For Stieglitz and his followers, the unconscious was a realm free of language, not—as more commonly would be the case for the psychically charged linguistic play of the Surrealists, Kenneth Burke, and others—a realm itself shaped by language. O’Keeffe struggled against language: “I have been just trying to express myself—Words and I are not good friends at all … I have to say it someway … I’ve [sic] been slaving on the violin—trying to make that talk—I wish I could tell you some of the things I’ve wanted to say as I felt them.” The affinities between musical and visual expression in O’Keeffe’s art—and her own assertions that she “thought in colored form rather than words”—drew once again upon synaesthesia as a primary path into abstraction. For O’Keeffe, music allowed for a direct translation into visual effects, in a manner that awakened an “inner force,” giving rise to new forms of plastic expression. O’Keeffe’s favorite composer was Bach; her early abstractions showed the impact of Bach’s fugues.

Synaesthesia was motivated by a desire to bridge the division between image and thing, words and what they signified, part of a broader native modernist drive toward representational transparency. The “absence” at the heart of native modernism was a lost fullness of experience. Dove and his fellow artists sought to revivify meaning and identity by clothing the medium—the signifying dimension—in flesh, thus re-embodying aesthetic perception. The literary scholar Walter Benn Michaels links this re-embodiment of language with a form of “nativist modernism” that assumed its fullest form in the 1920s, collapsing the semiological gap between the world and its representations. It did this through the “ontology of the sign.” With this deliberate paradox, Benn Michaels captured the manner in which a certain representational strand in modernism worked against representation, in effect striving to achieve a non-mediated, direct experience of the world by embedding vision in the body. Grounding representation in nature and in the culturally innocent body, such aesthetic forms reinforced the “identitarian claims” so central to native modernism.

By the 1920s, the aesthetics of native modernism—synaesthesia, embodied formalism, and the ontology of the sign—would increasingly come to serve a circumscribed, gendered, and nationally branded identity. Such practices sought to banish the semiotic instability and play of meanings that proliferated amidst the visually and historically disjunctive landscapes of the modern American city. Resisting the tendency of signs to refer to other signs rather than to things, native modernism emphasized the world-disclosing power of aesthetic form over world-making semiotic play. Metaphor braced the subject against the slippages of both language and visual form: slippages that revealed how form and meaning both could be arbitrarily generated through incidental similarities of sounds, or through the shape-shifting power of forms themselves rather than through internal expressive sources. Neo-Romantic expression, grounded in concepts of authenticity as defined apart from the market and from the forces of modernization, would increasingly come under interrogation by artists and writers who shaped their practice around irony, urbane humor, and self-reflexive linguistic and visual play.
If Stieglitz was a kind of self-styled metaphysical seeker, driven by a desire to “strike through the pasteboard mask,” the transatlantic avant-garde was drawn instead to the mask itself, the richly compelling play of surface elements. Driven by radically different sensibilities, this group resisted any impulse toward defining essence, rejecting notions of aesthetic will in favor of chance, environmental contingency, and semiotic contiguity of elements over semantic continuity. Freed from the search for a defining inner experience, these artists gesture toward art as a language of what Burke would call “unbindings,” the divorce of form from meaning, and, more broadly, from identitarian claims that positioned the modernist artist safely above the dissipating energies of commerce and consumerism. Form for them was substance; not a mere container but the only way in which it was possible to know something.

For Stieglitz’s acolyte Paul Rosenfeld, the nation’s cultural “coming-of-age” would be heralded by the triumphant docking of the wandering, errant, and homeless cultural ship in the “Port of New York.” Yet by the 1920s, the transatlantic ocean liner had come to serve as the symbol of a very different new cross-pollinated cultural expression, reversing the direction of the central metaphor of native modernism as a “docking” and homecoming of culture. With its sleekly utilitarian forms and its streamlined volumes, the ocean liner was the essence of sophisticated modernist design; featured in travel posters, it also signaled the new mobility of a transnational class of elite tourists shuttling freely between continents. For Charles Demuth and Gerald Murphy, the funnel-shaped stacks of these ocean liners, abstracted from their broader context, became synecdoches for the experience of expatriation itself, carrying associations with the thrill of temporarily displaced identities. Both artists used the flat, uninflected planes of color and the reductive geometries that characterized one element of the transnational aesthetic. For both artists, the ocean liner heralded a new freedom from the straitened aesthetic and social environment of the United States, marked by its business-first values. The trip to Europe also offered the possibility of self-reinvention in a new climate of experimentation. For Murphy, as much as for his contemporary Man Ray, Europe was a place of aesthetic self-discovery as well as a stage for non-productive play, and a welcoming refuge from the lives and identities into which they had been born.

Murphy’s now lost Boat Deck (Figure 15.2) was shown at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris; the archival photograph of the work establishes its outrageous scale and presence in the context of the diminutive easel paintings around it. Murphy used scale to satirize the great American boast—Americans strutting their power—as it was perceived by the French. “Unknown Banker Buys Atlantic,” scream the headlines on an oversized newspaper acting as the backdrop to a series of popular American types, in the collaborative musical Within the Quota, scored by Cole Porter with sets by Murphy. Murphy remained aloof from any fixed national location, performing his Americanness for his transnational circle in France by enacting their own hyperbolic vision of the New World. Positioning himself both inside and outside of the national self-image, Murphy kept all fixed positions at bay.

Murphy’s fluctuating stance was typical of cosmopolitan modernism, which resisted nation-centered geographies of culture. Place gave way to space, rootedness to geographic mobility. But physical movement between cultures and continents was only one dimension of a broader mobility. This different current of modernist practice freed meaning from its anchoring in natural affinities and into a more open play of signifiers. In place of the vertical axis of depth, searching for foundational metaphors...
of soil, roots, and organic growth, they looked to mechanical and technological processes, and embraced the unregulated and absurdist conjunctions driven by chance encounters between things and events. The generative practices of cosmopolitan modernism emerged out of a pronounced distrust toward meanings associated with the doxologies of a national art. Linguistic play—punning and the use of homonyms, alliteration, and anagrams (e.g., *Anemic Cinema*)—link the work of Murphy with that of Marcel Duchamp, Charles Demuth, and Man Ray. Homonyms—in which words that sound alike contain contiguous meanings—oscillate between identity and difference, enacting a form of uprooting that is the linguistic counterpart of geographical expatriation. Punning and the use of homonyms have also been linked to visual “shape-shifting,” the manner in which objects become points of transit for distinct meanings in a process associated with Surrealism.

Such linguistic play found a counterpart in a more generalized resistance to fixed allegiances or identities. These artists uniformly resisted “flying under one flag” (Burke’s phrase), distancing themselves from all reflexive or sentimental ties to nation or to singular subject positions. The only flag Murphy flew was the Soviet hammer and sickle, which he did in an act of provocation directed at the members of the Anglophilic country club next door to the Murphy residence in East Hampton.

This delight in the indeterminacies of meaning associated with word play and with verbal punning found a counterpart as well in a visual wit that generated new meanings through the suggestively ambiguous play of forms resembling one another. The flat, uninflected planes of color that link Murphy, Demuth, and Patrick Henry Bruce

---

are also more than the reflex of planar abstraction; they express the divorce of form and its iterations from any link to substance or mimetic illusion, invoking their difference from the biomorphic world of natural shapes that swell with animate energies.

Selfhood within this new formation was a platform for role-playing, disguise, and multiplied identities. Duchamp’s alter ego Rrose Sélavy combines in one moniker a range of gambits: word play (“Eros c’est la vie”); cross-gender identifications; and suggestive links to Jewish ethnicity (la vie and Levy) with its attendant associations with mobile or nationally non-specific forms of identity. Androgynous figures also appear as leitmotifs in the work of Man Ray, coupled with forms of role-playing and a recombinative sensibility involving cross-gender play, multiple referents, and doubled images. Gerald Murphy did everything but cross-dress, engaging in related forms of cross-class identification, dressing both down and up, self-costuming in an assortment of historical guises, while Demuth paid tribute to female impersonator Bert Savoy in his poster portrait Calla Lilies. Cross-dressing made entertainment out of the promiscuous slippages of identity in the modern metropolis. Such devices undermined the stable location of the referent; with respect to the conservative retrenchment of gendered identities that characterized the native modernists, such decoupling of sex and gender was as subversive as racial passing and other versions of crossed identities. To expose the arbitrary nature of gender alignments was to also to unlink biology from culture and identity from physical attributes.

Same-sex preferences and androgynous behavior also surfaced among the native modernists. Georgia O’Keeffe cultivated a provocatively androgynous sexuality, cross-dressing in bowler hat and becoming involved with other women. Hartley was openly homosexual. Yet Hartley’s homosexuality produced an odd reaction formation in which he entrenched himself within rigidly categorical thinking, his homosexuality forming a strange mix with eugenic beliefs that coupled culture to racially and ethnically pure (non-hybrid) identities, and that drew boundaries ever more tightly.

Murphy struggled with his attraction to men while remaining happily married all his life, daily negotiating the challenges of living in two locations simultaneously. These doublings of desire and emotional attachment left their trace in the multiple doublings within his art. They are mirrored in the billboard painting he made to signpost the home he created with his wife Sara on the French Riviera. Villa America (Figure 15.3) is steeped in word play, double entendre, and visual puns. Stars and stripes signal national location (flying under one flag), only to ironize and confound such symbols of nationalism by placing them alongside other symbols of exile and mobility. Villa America seams together multiple signs of conflicting affiliation. On the painting’s left side is a bifurcated Star of David painted in gold leaf, evoking the context of self-exile from the country of origin. The Star of David itself refers both to exile and homeland, to the biblical exile of the Jews and to the Zionist movement to create a Jewish nation whose roots were only a generation removed from Murphy’s.

At the heart of Villa America is the central ambiguity emerging out of these doubled meanings: between nation as site of spiritual belonging and nation as site of material dreams and ambitions: between âme (French for soul) and rica, or the rich one, a familiar moniker for wealthy Americans in the years between the wars. The gold leaf alludes at once to bullion (lucre) and to the spirit, as in medieval art, to both material and immaterial realms.

Villa America announces Murphy’s “contrapuntal” awareness, his sense of an identity dislocated from any national grounding. With its brash commercial
aesthetic, its flatly patterned surface forms, and its unambiguously incised boundaries, Murphy’s billboard seems a camp re-enactment of the very features of US culture that he turned away from in his flight to a more whimsical and creatively unstructured way of life. Like Burke, in his commentary on Dada, and like Matthew Josephson—editor of Broom, a leading avant-garde journal of the 1920s—who found poetic alliteration and metrical inventiveness in advertising jingles, Murphy felt most challenged by the play of surface qualities, those aggressive communications from another world that assaulted one’s interiority, and whose glib exterior made a mockery of any pretense of depth.

The Symbolist tradition to which I have linked the Stieglitz artists set subjectivity and imagination into high relief against the social field, as figure to ground in an oppositional stance. Murphy’s subject slid instead along the slick surface of commercial life, neither a product of it nor in opposition to it. Instead these features of the modern visual landscape demanded a new attitude, one of irony, irreverent wit, and a new graphic imagination that strikingly anticipated Pop in style, if not in content.45

A final feature of Murphy’s art is the manner in which it absents the personal voice and subjecthood of the artist, as far removed as possible from the lush embodied Expressionism of Dove and O’Keeffe, or the libidinally charged prose of Paul Rosenfeld. Reductively flat, affectless, impersonal, filled with clever indirections of meaning, Murphy’s art transforms the very commercialism of US culture from which he had fled into the materials of a new art. Murphy redeemed his source materials—consumer goods like razors, fountain pens, and safety matches—from their banality, transforming them from scenic background into actors in a quotidian drama dominated by overscaled and strangely animate objects. Changing scene (the consumer landscape) into primary actor also offered a commentary on the increasing dominance of things within the psychic economy of consumerism. Animated consumer objects now became actors; in the humorously inverted world of the future, things became
lifelike, and human beings became mannequins. But Murphy rehumanized this world by sharing it with his intimates—a small circle of family, friends, and fellow artists that constituted his new borderless homeland.

O’Keeffe—the occasionally resistant standard bearer of native modernism—and Man Ray—whose career arc spanned from New York Dada to European Surrealism between the wars and beyond—both generated new meanings out of the play of forms. But they did so in fundamentally different ways. O’Keeffe’s flowers resemble the female anatomy; her natural forms resemble bodies (Figure 15.4). If O’Keeffe herself protested the tendency to reduce natural forms in her work to sometimes graphic (Clement Greenberg would call these scatological) equivalents, such resemblances seem undeniable. Man Ray also exploited resemblances between bodies and objects but did so in a manner that broke with the naturalizing logic and associations that characterized organic abstraction. Man Ray’s forms play on accidental similarities, often jolting familiar apprehension out of its customary track to send it in a different direction. A muscular female torso, for instance, becomes a bull’s head, detaching the female body from its gendered markers, and hybridizing it by
combining associations with both masculine and feminine (Figure 15.5). Native modernist metaphor also had the potential to awaken new perception through defamiliarization. But it did so inside of a universe of meanings stabilized within a setting of shared assumptions, values, and associations. These associations—despite O’Keeffe’s protests—exercised a powerful canalizing effect, drawing the reception of her images along certain already established pathways of meaning. O’Keeffe’s abstractions, while containing the same possibility of imaginative metamorphosis and accidental resemblance as Man Ray’s, remain locked into established chains of association embedded within the social, aesthetic, and discursive worlds of the native modernists: associations leading from feminine body to nature, from internal affect to biological cycles of expansion and contraction, or what Oscar Bluemner—in reference to O’Keeffe—referred to as “biological emotion.”

If O’Keeffe’s nature-based imagery exploits the metaphoric dimension of meaning, Man Ray’s images trace meanings along a metonymic axis in which similarities of form carry no organic association but act to generate new meanings purely through morphological similarities. Such similarities are produced by tracing and stenciling, indexical processes far removed from Symbolist-infused notions of expressive form. They also employed aleatory, or chance, processes. If metaphor defines a relationship along the axis of depth, metonymy defines contiguity—or adjacency—along a horizontal or surface axis. Metonymy is most frequently associated with realism as a literary mode, because it draws upon connections that are environmental and social in nature; an individual, for instance, is identified by means

of external objects drawn from his or her social environment: bench for judge, or White House for president. My use of metonymy in this context focuses not on content but on form: adjacency of things within a common environment gives way to related shapes and sounds; sounds resemble other sounds, and shapes conjure related shapes. Metonymy in this sense is distinct from metaphor but comes to approximate metamorph: the ways in which shapes shift—under the pressure of desire, projection, anxiety, displacement, or other psychic processes—and assume other shapes.47

Native modernism contained the metonymic properties of the image—its tendency toward slippages of meaning that result from the adjacency of forms or chance resemblance—within established metaphoric sequences, themselves now “rooted” in an ever more developed and recognized discourse that anchored the self to a set of signifiers: self as nature; nature as authentic ground of experience; culture as a deeply internalized expression of these conjunctions; and nation as their prophetic unfolding, the fullest and most realized collective embodiment of authentic selfhood. If the logic of metaphor—in the context of native modernism—points toward naturalization of meanings, the logic of metonymy opens into an unstructured and playfully non-productive form of signification. Rather than reproducing existing associations grounded in established aesthetic and social practices, the metonymic mode operates through what current discourses of the transnational identify as deterritorialization48

The energies of the unconscious, destabilizing the circuits of reason and convention, function more openly in metonymy. In the metaphoric constructions of the native modernists, unconscious energies are tapped as well, but for different purposes: to authenticate and update older Symbolist ideas through the liberatory discourse of the body. Stieglitz, Paul Rosenfeld, and others emphasized sex as a force of liberation, breaking free from the stifling physical and cultural repression of the fathers. Yet the native modernist reaction against the fathers ended up reinstating that generation’s high-minded retreat from urban modernity. Despite their rhetoric of a protean self responsive to the myriad promptings of a sensitized psyche, the Stieglitz circle resublimated the unconscious through its programmatic insistence on specific kinds of meaning and on a version of sexuality that served their broader concerns with aesthetic and cultural renewal.

Many of the main actors among both groups—the native modernists and their avant-garde colleagues—lived outside the ethnic, social, and sexual norms of the day. Stieglitz and Paul Rosenfeld were of German Jewish ancestry; Man Ray was a first-generation immigrant of Russian Jewish background; O’Keeffe was a woman in a male art world; Murphy was bisexual and of Irish descent, managing the double life forced upon him by his errant desires as well as by his own Irish background in ways quite different from others who also constructed selves out of their conflicted personal and social origins. Hartley and Demuth were homosexual. This sense of difference, it can be argued, drove the investments of both the native modernists and the cosmopolitans in experimentation and innovation. What remains to be more fully explored is why some among this group directed their sense of social difference toward a more radical questioning through aesthetic means of all fixed locations—social, sexual, or national—while others sought an anchor for their mobile modern selves in gendered, regional, and place-specific identities.
Notes

1 See also Balken, 2003.
2 For a recent example of scholarship connecting aesthetic practice to broader institutional, representational, and philosophical positions, see Marshall, 2012.
3 Rueckert, 1982, p. 4.
5 On the paradox of the homeless person’s search for home, see Boym, 2001.
6 Jakobson, 1921; James, 1953.
7 This offers an interesting contrast with European modernisms, which Blair links to “the aesthetic and social possibilities opened up by mass production, the heterogeneity of the city, and the possibilities of breaking with the constraints of premodern identities.” Blair, 1999, p. 166.
8 Mosse, 1993, p. 32.
9 The most recent consideration of Stieglitz’s nationalist mission appears in Connor, 2001, p. 73, where she refers to Stieglitz’s later gallery, An American Place, as a “metonym for America.” This “metonymic” linkage between environment and character was long-standing and can be traced back to the nineteenth century. See Rosenbaum, 2006, p. 144.
10 On Stieglitz’s presumption to a godlike authority, see William Carlos Williams, “What of Alfred Stieglitz?” (1946), cited in Corn, 1999, p. 32. On the religious rhetoric used in reference to Stieglitz’s secular mission, see De Zayas and Naumann, 1996, p. 161. See also Rosenfeld, 1924, p. 258, who refers to 291 as “a church” and “a house of God.”
11 On this point, see Greenberg, 1946, p. 343. Even the generally sympathetic Corn identifies them as “shameless campaigners for their brand-name product.” Corn, 1999, p. 39.
13 McCausland, 1937, p. 5.
14 De Zayas and Naumann, 1996, p. 179.
15 De Zayas and Naumann, 1996, p. 181; see also p. 184.
16 Seligmann constructed Stieglitz’s battle with the philistines as part of a longer tradition of oppositional culture, reaching back to “Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau,” indeed linking him to Lincoln himself among those who struggled to realize the “dream of human emancipation.” Stieglitz and Seligmann, 1966, p. viii.
17 Quoted in Tashjian, 1975, pp. 18–19.
20 Stieglitz and Seligmann, 1966, p. 43 (February 1926).
21 Quoted in Weaver, 1996, p. 302.
22 McCausland, 1937, p. 5.
23 Synaesthesia, like other elements of native modernism, is traceable back to the Symbolist movement and, before that, to Romanticism.
27 On these points see Pyne, 2007, pp. 204 and 251. O’Keeffe’s early synaesthetic
translations of Bach would be repeated in Walt Disney’s 1940 animated film
Fantasia.
29 On the relentless gendering of creative activity in the Stieglitz circle, see Brennan, 2001; Pyne, 2007.
30 On the prevalence of metaphor among the native modernists, see Corn, 1999, p. 31. Corn associates the tendency toward metaphor, and its restless circling around meaning, with anxieties about death. Yet such instabilities of meaning are endemic to all forms of figurative thinking; characteristic of Symbolist thought is a retreat from literalness or facticity: the thing itself. An insistence on the object is indeed an aspect of a very different current of American modernism, in which objects become the points of transit and exchange among meanings.
31 One form taken by this desire to control the boundaries of both identity and meaning is the prevalent motif of incest—the family drama now as a national drama in which fantasies of incest offer compensatory reassurance against deep anxieties about ethnic mixing, and about the dilution of the racial and national patrimony. See Michaels, 1995.
32 The phrase is from Melville, Moby-Dick, ch. 36, “The Quarter Deck.”
34 Dove, Hartley, and Marin had all spent significant periods in Europe; only O’Keeffe did not take her first trip to Europe until the 1950s. Stieglitz arguably was deeply shaped by his early education in Berlin and his exposure to German culture (1882 to 1890).
36 There are numerous examples in Duchamp’s work; see Demos, 2007, p. 100. On Man Ray’s taste for homonymic word play, see Klein et al., 2009, p. 10.
37 See Baker, 2007, p. 7 and passim.
38 Donnelly, with Billings, 1982, p. 129.
40 A suggestion made by Klein et al., 2009, pp. 47, 180.
41 Cross-dressing was part of a popular vogue that extended from vaudeville performers such as Julian Eltinge to college pranks, from Duchamp to Chaplin. See Miller et al., 2008, pp. 428–429.
42 See Frank, 1995, pp. 54–62, on the work.
44 The term is Edward Said’s, a descriptor of the exilic condition itself.
45 For a similar emphasis on surface—“the closure of the conception of the art object as an interior or ‘expressive’ space,” see L.S. Dickens, in Klein et al., 2009, pp. 154, 157.
47 On Man Ray’s “metamorphic” tendencies, see Klein et al., 2009, p. 41; on Picabia and transformation, see Baker, 2007, p. 3. This peculiar power of visual images to shape-shift was exploited concurrently by silent animation in what Donald Crafton has called polymorphous plasticity, and what Sergei Eisenstein celebrated as the rejection of “metaphysical immobility.” Crafton, 1993; Eisenstein, 1986.
References


The year 1932: contemporary American Indian paintings traveled coast to coast in the *Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts*, the largest touring exhibition of Native American art in US history until 1976. The American Pavilion of the Venice Biennale featured Pueblo painters without formal arts training alongside George Bellows, John Sloan, Arthur B. Davies, and other well-known American artists. The Whitney Museum of American Art purchased a painting by Pueblo artist Tonita Peña for a record sum of $225. In France, publisher C. Szwedzicki released a lavish portfolio of prints titled *Pueblo Indian Painting*. On the eve of the New Deal, when the country’s economy and morale were at an all-time low, a *New York Times* critic assessed contemporary Native art as “American art, and of the most important kind.” As we write in 2014, most surveys of American art do not even mention that in the 1920s and 1930s a small but influential Pueblo and Kiowa painting movement sparked imaginations on both sides of the Atlantic. The envelope enclosing narratives of American art history expands and contracts with the cultural politics of a given present. Today, as scholars across disciplines are recovering a broad range of “global modernisms,” we return with a critical eye to a moment when Native art impacted understandings of American art in an international framework. Rather than push at the seams of an inherited envelope, we demonstrate that incorporating the first Native painting movement of the twentieth century back into American art history entails fundamentally altering its shape.

It was also in 1932 that the Studio School opened at the Santa Fe Indian School, providing federally funded training for Native artists from across the country. White educator Dorothy Dunn encouraged the students to paint exclusively from tribal sources, reflecting the official reversal of federal assimilation policies that aimed to abolish Native cultures in the preceding five decades. Dunn’s pedagogical vision and widespread promotional activities have colored the subsequent reception of Native
painting as kitsch, romantic, and apolitical. While there is room for a reassessment of Studio School histories, we have chosen to focus on an earlier generation of Pueblo painters who laid the groundwork for the Studio School. Beginning in the 1910s, artists without a formal arts education, such as Awa Tsireh, Tonita Peña, and Velino Herrera, navigated a cultural landscape transformed by colonial politics, tourism, ethnography, and modernist experimentation. Their works traveled from Santa Fe to New York, Venice, and beyond, inspiring local, national, and international commentary on the relationship between Native art and American artistic identity. We focus on five interrelated facets of Pueblo painting in 1932: the transcultural address of Awa Tsireh’s painting; the nationalistic arts rhetoric surrounding the *Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts*; an incisive critique by an Italian critic who saw Pueblo paintings at the Venice Biennale; the conjoined development of painters’ friendships and styles; and the surprising affinity of hand-painted images with transatlantic technologies of reproduction.

To craft an American art history complex enough for the twenty-first century, previously unrecognized artists and varying, even contradictory perspectives must be folded into the histories we write. We do not have in mind the flat folds of a letter: neat, parallel creases measured to fit a standard-sized envelope. Rather we envision the complex, multi-planar surface of origami. The perspective is different, depending on which of a multitude of planes one inspects, though all are thoroughly interconnected. Here we borrow from Gilles Deleuze’s malleable theories of the “fold,” which propose an alternative to models of subjectivity and nationhood that depend on stable divisions between interiors and exteriors. Deleuze uses analogies of crumpled paper, creased cloth, and other “bendable” materials, revealing apparently discrete subjects, places, and times to be proximate and overlapping.

Rather than sites where preformed identities meet, folds mark relationships in a process of becoming: “points of emergence or creativity, unexpected conjunctions or improbable continuums.” The five contiguous facets of this essay likewise draw together subjects characterized by divisions of race, class, gender, culture, and geography: Pueblo artists and communities, white American patrons, and European audiences. Their interrelations are visible in the paintings we analyze throughout. Considering the multifaceted characteristics of Pueblo painting in 1932 helps us envision a different shape for American art: “a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds” that fits no envelope.

**Awa Tsireh’s Transcultural Line**

On December 1, 1931, *The Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts* opened at the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York City. The organizers proudly announced that it was “the first exhibition of American Indian art selected entirely with consideration of esthetic value.” Gracing the cover of volume 1 of the two-volume catalogue is a painting by Awa Tsireh (Figure 16.1). *Koshareson Rainbow* depicts the distinctive Pueblo striped clowns who climb poles, police cultural mores, and engage in buffoonery. Their unorthodox behavior breaks the symmetry of the ordered universe depicted. They straddle a rainbow that emerges from stepped-fret pyramids—traditional Pueblo cloud forms—to link realms of earth and sky. Two horned serpents undulate along the ground line; out of their tails grows a complex abstract design
derived from Pueblo pottery-painting imagery. The arch of the rainbow suggests the outer edge of a bowl, painted in the black, white, and rust-red palette of local pottery and ancient murals.

Any of Awa Tsireh’s relatives or clan brothers from his New Mexican community of San Ildefonso (population 696 in 1930) would recognize this iconography. Black and white-striped clowns appear in ancient Mimbres pottery of the Southwest as early as 1100 CE. The horned serpents can be traced back even further, probably to an origin in ancient Mesoamerica. In addition to working for a brief period with his maternal uncle, Crescensio Martinez, the first San Ildefonso artist to make watercolors of ritual dancers, Awa Tsireh was the son of an accomplished potter. Furthermore, in his village the already world-famous Maria and Julian Martinez and others were making great strides in the manufacture and sale of painted pots.10

In the 1910s and 1920s Awa Tsireh developed an aesthetic vocabulary that answered to the divergent expectations of indigenous and international audiences. Tourists, ethnographers, writers, and artists created a market for Pueblo arts, believing that they represented a culture distant from the ills of industrial modernity that

---

**Figure 16.1** Awa Tsireh, *Koshare on Rainbow*, cover of John Sloan and Oliver La Farge, *Introduction to American Indian Art*, catalogue, 1931. Cover design by Oliver La Farge.
culminated in the Great Depression. In turn, the arts helped garner political support for Pueblo communities who actively resisted federal assimilation measures such as bans on ritual dancing. Painters were challenged to maintain Pueblo protocols limiting the circulation and abuse of sacred knowledge, while communicating Pueblo values in a language understood by non-Natives. The linear precision of Koshares on Rainbow resonates with Art Deco styles of the period, as well as Persian and Indian miniature paintings and Japanese woodblock prints that circulated through European artistic circles. The boldness of the composition was achieved using black India ink, which Awa Tsireh frequently favored over the softer hues of watercolor. While Pueblo audiences may have decoded layers of cosmological significance in his motifs, non-Native collectors were seduced by their visual power in modernist terms.

While Awa Tsireh’s paintings are the best surviving record of his artistic process, an account by poet Alice Corbin Henderson in the New York Times in 1925 illuminates the transcultural milieu in which he worked. She recalled first seeing work by Awa Tsireh in the summer of 1917, while showing the renowned Hindu art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy the pueblos of New Mexico. Both Henderson and Coomaraswamy immediately wanted to buy the paintings, he because of their visual correspondence to Indian miniatures. Later, Henderson and her artist husband befriended the young artist and entertained him in their Santa Fe home. Henderson described Awa Tsireh as reticent, unwilling to talk about his work. But when she shared with him in 1925 a book of Japanese prints, “he turned the pages thoughtfully, and finally, brushing his hand lovingly over a page, said simply, ‘Made good’.” Henderson’s portrayal of the artist’s simple “Indian” vocabulary disguises the fact that he conversed in Tewa, Spanish, and English. But she also notes approvingly that “[t]he technique that has produced pottery designs as perfect as those of an Etruscan vase has gone into his training” and pronounces the results “as precise and sophisticated as a Persian miniature.” When Henderson, Coomaraswamy, and others familiar with world art traditions admired Awa Tsireh’s aesthetic fluency, they undermined stereotypes of their own making.

There was another feature of his paintings that navigated cultural boundaries: humor. In addition to climbing ephemeral rainbows, his koshares were known to chase turkeys, play leapfrog, and gorge on watermelon. Pueblo clowns are cultural critics whose ribald and gluttonous behaviors satirize the secular, the sacred, and the foreign. Dorothy Dunn noted that these deviant figures often contrast with the ordered elements of Awa Tsireh’s paintings, producing “a playful, sometimes impish view of ordinary or imagined events such as a black and white ... [koshare] assisting Santa Claus with his pack.” Satirical clowning was a sanctioned way for the artist to confront the paradox of his situation: white Americans asked him to play the role of an “authentic Indian,” standing outside a colonial modernity in which he, and they, were thoroughly entangled. Awa Tsireh folded koshare and Santa together in his painting, evoking Christopher Bracken’s assessment of the fold as “a mode of irony: it makes contradictory terms interact.”

The Associated Press reported in December 1931 that Awa Tsireh had a “sense of humor that put waggish reporters off their guard.” Journalists demanded to know what he and other painters thought of New York when they stepped off the train on their way to visit the Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts. Awa Tsireh allegedly retorted, “Have you ever been to Santa Fe?” His reply calls to mind the crowds of New York
tourists who visited New Mexico, gawking at a Pueblo dance while striped clowns slyly stole their cameras. The artist navigated a transcultural milieu with sharp humor and bold ink lines.  

“An Art That Is Really American”

Awa Tsireh’s koshare paintings joined more than forty watercolor paintings and 600 other historical and contemporary objects at the opening of The Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts at Grand Central Galleries in New York. Painter John Sloan and anthropologist and novelist Oliver La Farge were listed as its curators, and versions of this show toured at least fifteen other American cities from 1932 to 1933. In the catalogue, they described their goal: to convince the American public that Indian art was “at once classic and modern,” representing “thousands of years of development” on American, rather than European, soil.

The Exposition marked the culmination of more than a decade of efforts to show the New York art world that Native painting was “an art that is really American.” In 1920 Sloan, president of the Society of Independent Artists, had included Pueblo paintings in the Society’s Fourth Annual Exhibition at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. Within the next three years, New York-based artist and writer Marsden Hartley published three articles on Pueblo art. In the first, he argued, “As Americans we should accept the one American genius we possess, with genuine alacrity. We have upon our own soil something to show the world.” White American painters, curators, and critics claimed Pueblo watercolors as national patrimony unfettered by the weight of “old world” traditions. Pueblo cultures seemed seductively distant from Europe, where the United States had so recently been thrust into the horrors of World War I.

In the Magazine of American Art in 1932, one reviewer inadvertently captures a paradox at the core of the circulating definitions: “a group of American Indian artists … adopted this foreign medium of expression and yet do not show the slightest trace of foreign or white influence in any subject, technic, or treatment.” Like many commentators of the period, he struggled to uphold the purity of Native cultural forms, by neatly severing foreign medium—watercolor—from indigenous content—Pueblo ritual. Yet the distinction collapses when he discusses with admiration Awa Tsireh’s great “versatility”: “[He] has three distinct styles: realistic, realism modified by symbolism, and purely creative imagination.” The author cannily employs a vocabulary central to period debates about modern American painting, which encompassed an established school of realist oil painters as well as artists experimenting with linear forms of abstraction and the fluidity of watercolor. In attributing a full spectrum of styles to Awa Tsireh, he implies that talent and savvy, as much as indigenous tradition, drove this “modern” art.

The Exposition was enormously successful, drawing a crowd of more than 3,000 on opening day. The event inspired Christian Brinton, president of the College Art Association, to announce triumphantly, “The battle for American aesthetic expression has now been won. But it has not been won by our typical foreign-trained man with his ill-digested Parisian artist table-d’hote.” His declaration that the United States had an artistic treasury not only older but fresher and purer than anything Europe has to offer borrows from the paradoxical new definition of Native arts as ancient and rooted in American soil, and yet wholly modern—and ready to travel.
Nationalism Undone in Venice

After the success of the *Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts*, Grand Central Galleries director Walter L. Clark coordinated with John and Dolly Sloan to send Native works to the Venice Biennale. In 1932 a mostly European audience encountered more than two dozen Pueblo watercolors in the American Pavilion (see Figure 16.2). The display of paintings on the walls was punctuated by cases of turquoise and silver jewelry, Pueblo pottery, and baskets from the Northwest Coast. Navajo blankets were hung high on the walls, but the paintings’ position in two rows at eye level suggests their privileged place in the room, linking them visually with the works of American painters John Sloan, George Bellows, Arthur B. Davies, and others that filled the adjoining galleries.

Pueblo paintings were not new to European audiences. They were on view at the International Exposition of Seville in 1928 and at the International Congress of Folk Arts in Prague the following year. Limited edition print portfolios of Native paintings were published in Nice in 1929 and 1932 (see below). *Art News* raved, “Not only was this feature an outstanding success in our own national representation, but the Indian room was acclaimed as the most popular exhibition among all the rich and varied displays there assembled.” Yet organizers’ private letters indicate that they deemed the export of artistic nationalism in 1932 a failure. Clark wrote to the Italian organizers on June 2, “We have seen some accounts of your exhibition in the foreign press, but unfortunately, it did not come out in the New York papers, which was a disappointment to us.” Clark’s chagrin indicates that the success of Native American
art abroad depended heavily upon domestic headlines that were all too infrequent. Failing to represent the nation to the nation, Native arts have not been seen in the American Pavilion since 1932.40

Meanwhile, in a lengthy article published in Rome, esteemed Italian critic Emilio Cecchi expressed skepticism about the Americans’ romantic appropriation of Native art. His own travels to the Southwest inform his account. Instead of “tradition,” Cecchi saw in some of the works “half-baked notions and coquetry, suggestive of the covers of a magazine.” He writes, “At Tesuque, Taos, etc., the walls of indigenous houses are papered with tri-color covers, with portraits of movie stars, and advertisements for toothpaste and cigarettes. Modern art works on the Indian taste through these models.”41 Cecchi suggests that commercial advertising influenced the paintings, foregrounding a contemporaneity that American patrons could only obliquely acknowledge.

Cecchi’s account also ran against the grain of the single shining moment of affirmation for the Venice organizers. The Whitney Museum of American Art (which had just opened the previous year) purchased Tonita Peña’s Basket Dance from the exhibit for the astounding sum of $225—the highest price ever paid for a Native American painting.42 In December 1931, when the Sloans arranged for Native painters to visit New York art galleries during the Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts, Whitney curator Hermon More responded, “We are naturally most interested and sympathetic towards this phase of American art of which these men and women are the living exponents, and shall do everything in our power to make them feel welcome in the event of their visit to the Museum.” For a moment, the first museum of American art valued not only Native paintings, but also the artists who made them (although Peña was not among the visitors).43 Tellingly, the Whitney no longer owns Basket Dance and has lost all records pertaining to it. In its place, we include another of Peña’s many paintings of the basket dance, purchased by the Saint Louis Art Museum the same year (see Figure 16.3).

Figure 16.3 Tonita Peña, Basket Dance, 1932, watercolor on illustration board, 14⅝×22½ in. St. Louis Art Museum 92.1932.
Cecchi weighs in on Peña’s work in cutting terms:

Tonita Peña, of Cochiti Pueblo, works tirelessly to provide for the stores. Her watercolors are in every shop window, next to the crude silver encrusted with turquoise and painted pottery, but unfortunately belong to the lowest genus. … Even among the Indians is the usual music everywhere. The bad artist sells to three thousand, the good to thirty.44

As we shall see, Cecchi’s portrayal of the powerful economic pressures confronting Pueblo artists is accurate. His view would have repulsed Sloan, whose triumphant narrative obscured the widespread commercialization of Native arts. Cecchi’s conclusion that Pueblo watercolors are “a crude and mixed art” challenges homogenizing, romantic views circulated by American patrons, even as it imposes a dominant system of aesthetic valuation on the work.45 We might say that his account folds Pueblo painting into a transcultural milieu, only to push it to the edge. Importantly, Cecchi’s cynical view of the market foreshadows late twentieth-century critics who dismissed Native painting as kitsch. Both prohibit nuanced consideration of the multiple roles paintings played in the lives of makers and patrons.

Pueblo Mentors and Friends

Where was Tonita Peña while her works were traveling in New York and Venice? A busy mother of seven who kept a farm in Cochiti, southwest of Santa Fe, Peña managed to slip into town during the spring and summer of 1932 to join her male peers at the Santa Fe Indian School, where they painted murals for the dining room. In one of her first activities as an art teacher there, Dorothy Dunn invited the older, established generation to provide inspirational examples for students beginning the new Studio program that fall.46 Indeed, Peña acted as a mentor and friend to Pablita Velarde (1918–2006), a 14-year-old student from Santa Clara Pueblo who would later become the most famous female artist among the Studio School painters. Velarde watched closely as Peña worked, and subsequently the two went together to sell their paintings under the portal of the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe. Velarde recalled that Peña teased her, pretending to steal the younger woman’s ideas. In turn she credited Peña with giving her the courage to begin an artistic career: “She was the only Indian woman artist I knew or heard of when I was young, and she helped me learn to paint.”47

It is not surprising that Velarde gravitated toward the one older woman in the group. Pueblo communities tended to consider the new art of watercolor painting a male pursuit, perhaps because men had long produced murals within the sacred precincts of the kivas. So women’s participation was not encouraged. Letters Peña wrote to her patrons in Santa Fe in the 1920s indicate that dire poverty initially drove her to paint for sale.48 Yet she continued working after her economic situation stabilized, seeking the support of her powerful third husband, who was an important church official in 1932 (and later four-time governor of Cochiti), to appease the concerns of tribal elders. Velarde recalled admiringly, “I could never understand how Tonita could have all those children, run a home, help her husband with crops, and still have time to do so many paintings.”49

As Marilee Jantzer-White has argued, both the subject and style of Peña’s paintings reflect the responsibility of Pueblo women to establish harmony by maintaining the
continuity of cultural practices in their communities. Unlike some of her more experimental male peers, Peña tended to depict dances she observed in Cochiti in a consistent figural style. One of her favorite subjects was the basket dance, which focused on the central role of women in transmitting life. The Basket Dance illustrated here is characteristic in that Peña disregards conventions of foreshortening, giving equal space to the profiles of men and women in separate lines. Still, in contrast to Awa Tsireh’s preference for regular, symmetrical shapes, close attention to Peña’s figures reveals subtle dissimilarities in posture, facial expression, the tilt of a feather or the sweep and length of women’s hair, corresponding to the specificities of actual human bodies in motion. They are at once individuals and equal, interlocking parts of the dance. She gave special attention to the baskets held in the four women’s hands, each depicting a distinct geometric pattern, highlighting the beauty and importance of female creativity.

Surely Peña was a compelling model for younger women artists like Velarde, in striking a balance between maintaining communal Pueblo values and succeeding in a market beyond Cochiti.

Friendships among Pueblo painters, in addition to shared indigenous roots and political contexts, were a powerful (if underexplored) factor in the stylistic affinities of their work. A relationship between Awa Tsireh, Herrera, and Hopi artist Fred Kabotie likely dates to 1919, when Awa Tsireh admired the work of the others at an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe. Their friendship is captured with particular liveliness in a story, recounted by Kabotie, of their “bicycle odyssey” together in 1922. The archaeologist Edgar Lee Hewett employed the three young men to work on a dig that summer. When they were left to travel 12 miles to the site on ill-functioning bicycles, a comedy of errors ensued: a busted lunch sack, a broken pedal, a leaky tire patched with syrup, and a strong gust of wind that blew away their paper money. When Herrera caught a ride to the town of Bernalillo, his thirsty and exhausted friends staggered behind, finding upon their arrival that he had been jailed for carrying a pistol. Humor and camaraderie got them through. Awa Tsireh shared his only loaf of bread, Kabotie offered a turn on his superior bike, and both aimed to bail out Herrera, only to land in jail alongside him.

Their solidarity formed the backdrop to their paintings. It is likely that Awa Tsireh painted the first of his Hopi Snake Dances inspired by Kabotie’s example. Similarly, Herrera’s Antelopes Running Under Rainy Skies (Figure 16.4) recalls Koshares on Rainbow (Figure 16.1) in the artist’s use of a strong decorative ground line and arching sky containing not three tumbling sacred clowns but three leaping prong-horn antelopes. As in Awa Tsireh’s rainbow, the sinuous symmetry of Herrera’s clouds and central sun motif envelops the antelopes in a Pueblo cosmology. Below the ground line is a curious assemblage suggestive of an evacuated self-portrait. Two empty deerskin boots face toe to toe. Above them we find a painted shield, arrow quiver, and lance—equipment of the male hunter, who wears these items in ceremonial dance, too. Although Herrera had been part of Zia ceremonial life in his youth, he was censured by the authorities there for violating protocols against painting certain religious images. In the 1930s, he lived in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, where sociability with patrons, students, and fellow painters replaced his close ties to village life.

The play of repetition with variation evident in Pueblo painting folds individual artworks and oeuvres into one another, adding another dimension to our thesis that the movement emerged from an intersubjective, transcultural process. A shared aesthetic, in turn, conditioned the international circulation of paintings as prints.
Reproductions and Multiples

In 1932, three of Herrera’s paintings sat in an artist’s atelier in France, where they were translated into prints for the lavish portfolio *Pueblo Indian Painting*. Four years earlier, a small French art press had begun to produce elegant publications on Native art that made these paintings available as multiples, principally through the museums and libraries that could afford such expensive works. *Pueblo Indian Painting* was the second of six such portfolios published by l’Édition d’Art C. Szwedzicki in Nice. In an edition of 500 portfolios, with fifty prints in each, *Pueblo Indian Painting* cost $50—a staggering sum during the Depression. Seven artists were represented (including Awa Tśireh). Despite Tonita Peña’s fame, only male artists were included in the portfolio. Herrera’s *Antelopes Running Under Rainy Skies* is among the most elaborate of the works in *Pueblo Indian Art*. Yet the complex design was ideally suited to reproduction. Black lines and controlled areas of color in gouache articulate a single, flat, crisply divided plane amenable to printing. By comparison, contemporaneous non-Native American watercolorists such as John Marin played with layered washes and mottled, bleeding colors that defied print technologies of the day. Indeed, though lauded by American critics for their hand-made singularity, paintings such as *Antelopes Running Under Rainy Skies* had as much in common with French-led trends in transatlantic poster art as with painting—a fact that was certainly not lost on l’Édition d’Art C. Szwedzicki. A reproductive logic is even at work inside of Herrera’s compositions, as cloud motifs and antelope bodies are repeated with striking precision and subtle

![Figure 16.4 Velino Herrera, *Antelopes Running Under Rainy Skies*, plate 50 of *Pueblo Indian Painting*, 1932, 14⅜ × 20 in. Source: Courtesy of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library.](image)
variation. When produced in an edition of 500, Herrera’s three antelopes became 1,500 exuberant creatures whose sprints took them far from the American Southwest.

As a high-end, collectable commodity, the beautiful prints in *Pueblo Indian Art* hardly succumbed to the logic of the assembly line. Today they are especially rare, aged, and expensive, regaining a measure of lost “aura.” Nonetheless, the portfolios attest to the painters’ firm grasp of a culture of reproduction that aided the transatlantic circulation of their paintings. The sheer number of their early paintings is amazing—they exist in the thousands. By 1932, Awa Tsireh, Peña, and Herrera had generated numerous variants of the themes for which they were most renowned. These might be sold to a tourist in the Pueblo for $3 if the artist needed quick cash, for a bit more to the Spanish and Indian Trading Company in Santa Fe (from which many collectors and museums, including the Saint Louis Art Museum, bought paintings), or by Elizabeth Amelia White in her tony New York Gallery for $25 to $300. There is no central database of the scores of paintings in private collections in the United States and in Europe, and in American museums, large and small. They continue to appear on eBay and online auctions, and in galleries, bearing generic titles and often lacking definitive provenance or dates. Though to discerning viewers the figures are infinitely varied, the quantity of these paintings inevitably leads to confusion: how is a scholar to determine which of the many images of the *Corn Dance* made by Awa Tsireh and Tonita Peña match those listed in the Venice Biennale catalogue?

The qualities of interchangeability and reproducibility that helped send Pueblo paintings around the world in 1932 hurt their reputation in subsequent decades. As we have already indicated, when the Studio School opened at the Santa Fe Indian School in the fall of that year, stylistic affinities shared among the older generation of painters were transformed into a pedagogical imperative. Dunn encouraged her students to search exclusively for “traditional,” collective, indigenous precedents in their work. Though her tenure there was short—five years—she spoke and published internationally on behalf of Native art for another thirty years. By the time the Studio School was replaced with the Institute of American Indian Art in 1962, a new, politically charged generation of Native artists had rejected the movement in its entirety. In an interview with *Art in America* in 1972, Navajo painter R.C. Gorman is blunt: “Stale. Overstated. Pretty. Gimmicky. Dumb. Lazy. I say, and I’m speaking to the young artists, leave Traditional Indian painting to those who brought it to full bloom.” Kiowa painter T.C. Cannon was equally unforgiving in 1975: “I am tired of cartoon paintings, of Bambi-like deer reproduced over and over.” Their words resemble many an avant-garde manifesto, in rebuffing the art of the immediate past in order to clear a space for new practices. The dependence of this politicized generation on Pueblo foundations is another facet of the story waiting to be told.

Our role as narrators is to fold time. Whereas some critics in the second half of the twentieth century sought to push Pueblo painting into the past, we draw 1932 close again. The five contiguous planes of this chapter span Santa Fe, New York, Venice, and Nice, situating Pueblo painting at the intersection of relationships that include Awa Tsireh, Velino Herrera, Tonita Peña, Fred Kabotie, Alice Corbin Henderson, Ananda Coomaraswamy, John and Dolly Sloan, Emilio Cecchi, and many others we did not have the space to address. Dorothy Dunn, R.C. Gorman, T.C. Cannon, and the authors of this chapter are also part of 1932, a year of “infinite folds.” The strength of a folded American art lies in its multiplicity; an ongoing process of furling that can accommodate manifold subjects, places, and times without insisting on a
single, definitive account. In remembering that Pueblo painting was once poised to become “an art that is really American,” we are challenged to reassess the contours of American art today—to fold what is outside, inside, and what is past, near.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Nancy Palm, Alexander Brier Marr, and the editors of this volume for their close critical reading of this chapter. Jessica L. Horton’s contributions were written under the sponsorship of a Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts Wyeth Fellowship and a Social Science Research Council International Dissertation Research Fellowship.

Notes


2 Pach, 1931. For an account of Works Progress Administration programs that involved Native artists beginning in 1933, see McLerran, 2009.

3 The sole exception, American Encounters, co-authored by Berlo, briefly covers this movement, focusing on Awa Tsireh. Miller et al., 2008, fig. 15.16 and pp. 500–503. Beyond the scope of our chapter, but coeval with events narrated here, a smaller group of Kiowa artists in Oklahoma were engaged in similar pursuits. See Dunn, 1968, pp. 218–223, and Wyckoff, 1996, pp. 23–26. For an essay that focuses more broadly on Pueblo art and culture in New Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s, see Penney and Roberts, 1999.

4 A number of recent symposia and edited volumes attest to this widespread trend. Notable are “Mapping Modernisms: Cultural Exchanges in 20th Century Global Art” at Carleton University in 2012; O’Brien et al., 2012; and Wollaeger, 2012.

5 See Brody, 1971. Fuller histories can be found in Brody, 1997; Bernstein and Rushing, 1995; and McGeough, 2009.

6 We have chosen to use the names most commonly associated with these artists, although each had a Native and a non-Native (baptismal) name that they used at different times. Awa Tsireh (1898–1955) from San Ildefonso Pueblo also went by Alfonso Roybal; Tonita Peña (1893–1949) from Cochiti Pueblo also went by Quah Ah; Velino Shiije Herrera (1902–73) from Zia Pueblo also went by Ma-Pe-Wi. At different times they signed their paintings with their Native or baptismal names.

7 Deleuze, 1993, pp. 6, 11, and 121.

8 Deleuze, 1988, p. 35.


10 All biographical data on Awa Tsireh is drawn from Brody, 1997, especially chapter 4. See also Dunn, 1968, pp. 198–207 on Crescencio Martinez and Awa Tsireh. On the Martinezes family and political events at San Ildefonso, see Wade, 1986.

11 For accounts of antimodernism in the Southwest, see Dilworth, 1997; Penney and Roberts, 1999; and Burke, 2008.
On the importance of protocol and secrecy in Awa Tsireh’s painting and Pueblo cultures more generally, see Scott, 2013.

Dunn, 1956, p. 113.

The Ceylonese philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) lived in New York City in the 1920s, and later was curator of Asian art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Henderson, 1925, p. SM18.

Henderson, 1925, p. SM18.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum owns fifty-one Awa Tsireh paintings from Alice Corbin Henderson’s collection. See http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/results/?page=1&amp;num=10&amp;image=0&amp;view=0&amp;name=awa%20Tsireh&amp;title=&amp;keywords=&amp;type=&amp;subject=&amp;number=&amp;id=0 (accessed August 20, 2014).

Parsons and Beals, 1934.


Art historians have explored the importance of trickster humor for Native artists navigating the art market in the 1980s. As Awa Tsireh’s work suggests, this was not merely a “postmodern” phenomenon. See Fisher, 1992; Shiff, 1992; and Ryan, 1999.

Analyzing the Canadian government’s attempts to ban potlatch ceremonies of the Northwest Coast beginning in the 1860s, Bracken writes, “The fold is a bend in the colonial text where Europe brings itself back into an intimate encounter with all that it situates outside its outermost rim.” Bracken, 1997, p. 5.

The Grand Central Art Galleries was a cooperative system run by retired businessman Walter L. Clark, in which promising young American artists could sell work without forfeiting large cuts to middlemen. See Clarke, 1923.

The Exposition’s extensive itinerary included Rochester, NY, Boston, Washington, DC, St. Louis, Memphis, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Seattle. Elizabeth Amelia White files, AC18.337.2, School of Advanced Research, Santa Fe. For a concise account of the Exposition, see Rushing, 1995. While Sloan and La Farge were the curators of record, Horton’s research in the Elizabeth Amelia White files demonstrates the equal involvement of White and Sloan’s wife, Dolly Sloan, uncredited in the catalogue.

Sloan and La Farge, 1931, pp. 7–9.

It is noteworthy that on December 27, 1931, just three weeks after the opening of the Exposition, Georgia O’Keeffe’s first exhibition of her New Mexican paintings opened at Alfred Stieglitz’s gallery, An American Place. For the rhetoric about an autochthonous American art during this era, see Corn, 1999, pp. 238–291.

Rushing, 1995, p. 15.

Hartley, 1920. His second piece appeared alongside a lengthy article on American Indian painting by the archaeologist Edgar L. Hewitt, employee of the School for American Research in Santa Fe and a supporter of Pueblo painters, including Awa Tsireh. Ten watercolors by Awa Tsireh, Herrera, and Fred Kabotie illustrate the text. Hartley, 1922; Hewett, 1922. The cosmopolitan and inclusive impulse among artists,
art historians, and the well-educated general public is well demonstrated within the pages of *Art and Archaeology* in this era: articles on subjects ranging from contemporary Native and non-Native artists to Mayan and Egyptian archaeology routinely populated its pages.

31 Millington, 1932, p. 83.
32 Millington, 1932, p. 91.
33 See, for example, Troyen, 2000.
35 Quoted in Penney and Roberts, 1999, p. 35.
38 “Indian Art,” 1932, p. 12.
40 While Native artists represented Canada at the Venice Biennale in 1995 and 2005, Native American artists have been involved only in collateral and unofficial exhibitions since 1999, never as part of the official US entry. This recent history is recounted in Anthes, 2009.
41 Cecchi, 1932, p. 556.
43 In an earlier letter to More organizing the Indian’s visit, Dolly Sloan suggests that “American painters should see the first American museum.” Dolly Sloan, letter to Hermon More, ca. November 1931; Hermon More, letter to Dolly Sloan, December 1, 1931. John Sloan collection, Box 42, Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts, Organizational Records, Delaware Museum of Art.
44 Cecchi, 1932, pp. 563–564.
45 Cecchi, 1932, p. 573.
46 Dunn, 1968, p. 265.
48 Elizabeth Amelia White files, AC29.038.
49 Elizabeth Amelia White files, AC29.038, p. 55.
53 Seymour, 1988, p. 168.
54 Oscar Jacobson was familiar with the precise and crisp results being achieved in the color print workshops of France and arranged for the portfolios to be produced there. For a history of this project, see Berlo, 2009a and 2009b. *Kiowa Indian Art* was the first portfolio, published in 1929. The portfolios are now available online, courtesy of the University of Cincinnati Digital Press (2008), with an introductory essay by Berlo, at http://digitalprojects.libraries.uc.edu/szwedzicki/ (accessed August 20, 2014).
When Elizabeth Amelia White donated some watercolors to the Newark Museum in 1937, she provided documentation of the retail prices of those paintings that had been for sale in her Gallery of American Indian Art in New York: Awa Tsireh ($75), Peña ($100), and Herrera ($300). Accession files, Pueblo Watercolors, Newark Art Museum. In 1932, the Saint Louis Art Museum bought a Herrera for $50 and Basket Dance by Peña for $25. Accession records, SLAM, provided by Jill Ahlberg Yohe.


Sioux painter Oscar Howe may have been the first to write a manifesto against the Studio School aesthetic. Outraged when one of his works was rejected from a 1958 juried competition at the Philbrook Museum in Oklahoma for not meeting the standards of Native painting, he wrote in response: “There is much more to Indian art than pretty, stylized pictures. … Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting, with no right for individualism, dictated to as the Indian has always been, put on reservations and treated like a child, and only the White Man knows best for him?” Dockstader, 1982, p. 19.

Critiques of progressive, teleological views of time as colonialisit and heteronormative are numerous and growing; some of the critiques most relevant for this chapter can be found in Deloria, 1973; Latour, 1993; Chakrabarty, 2000; and Fabian, 2002.


I teach at Dartmouth College, where we have one of the most powerful artistic responses to the settler imaginary of US nationalism located at the geographical heart of campus. I refer to the Mexican artist José Clemente Orozco’s *The Epic of American Civilization*, a mural cycle comprising twenty-four scenes, painted in true fresco between 1932 and 1934 in the reserve reading room in the basement of Baker-Berry Library. In this, his largest and most important mural painted while residing in the United States, Orozco challenges the standard US narrative of American history that begins with British colonization along the eastern seaboard and tracks the heroic journey west of settlers bringing cultural enlightenment and technological progress in their wake. Instead, Orozco presents a Mexican story rooted in Mesoamerican civilizations and the devastation wrought by the Spanish conquest. In so doing he locates America’s origins in Indo-Hispanic instead of Anglo-European culture, while characterizing our civilization as a traumatic colonial inheritance.

To illustrate this argument Orozco uses the architectural division of the reserve reading room to divide his fresco into two related but separate epochs. The two halves of the cycle are physically separated by the reserve desk, which functions, in turn, to mark the historical rupture between pre- and post-conquest America. The west wing initiates the epic with scenes depicting an ancient “golden age” inaugurated by the arrival of the man-god Quetzalcoatl (Figure 17.1). The story concludes along the east wing with disturbing images of the modern world that follow from Hernán Cortez’s military and spiritual conquest of this civilization (Figure 17.2).

Orozco critiques nation-building (both US and Mexican) as part of the legacy of colonial violence across the eastern wing of the cycle. In the adjacent panels depicting “Anglo” and “Hispano” America (Figure 17.3), the relative success and failure of the two Americas seem to flow from the technology-aided greed displayed by the conquistadors. Anglo-America, while politically stable, is stultifyingly conformist, peopled by

a homogenized race of zombie-like white ethnics. Hispano-America is dynamic, but riddled with political corruption and caught up in cycles of bloodshed. Its populist revolutionaries stand up for the unrepresented underclass, but are routinely done in by a foreign and domestic elite. The subtle variation of skin tone between the guerrilla and the bourgeois and military figures that surround him reflects the intersection of race and class privilege that perpetuates social inequality in Latin America.

Both Americas suffer from the racial antagonism that European exploration and colonization set in motion. In its relentless promotion of a singular white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant identity, Anglo-America excludes all difference from its national imaginary. Hispano-America, on the other hand, exploits racial difference to maintain and exacerbate class hierarchy. Through the juxtaposition of these panels, Orozco foregrounds race and racism as key features of American nationalism and state-formation. He shows that national imaginaries predicated on the empty promotion of racial hybridity are as socially destructive as those structured by its disavowal. Neither America has grappled effectively with the ethical dilemmas of the postcolonial settler state. And thus both (and implicitly all nationalisms) fall prey to the blood-ritual of industrialized warfare depicted in the *Modern Human Sacrifice* panel (see Figure 17.1).

Despite the Mexican standpoint from which Orozco paints, his mural should not be mistaken for a patriotic assertion of Mexican nationalism. Rather, he situates his New England audience in this oblique way in order to estrange US Americans from their habitual (and parochial) understanding of American history. Orozco reminds his US audience that “America” is a shared land mass, not a synonym for the United States. The epic stories we tell about America, he insists, are not universal, but rather particular. The America we see depends upon where, within the Americas, we stand.

In the 1930s Orozco’s continental perspective countered the celebrated provincialism of Protestant New England and the region’s privileged place within an increasingly xenophobic and isolationist national imaginary. In particular, “Anglo-America” engages with the Colonial Revival and contemporary debates over the national

![Figure 17.3](https://example.com/figure17.3.png)

*Figure 17.3* José Clemente Orozco, *Epic of American Civilization*, 1932–34, view of “Anglo” and “Hispano” America from the East Wing, fresco. Orozco Room, Baker-Berry Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH. *Source*: Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College. © DACS 2014.
importance of the New England town hall meeting as the core of US American
democracy. Rather than simply reproduce the anodyne image of a quaint rural past
like that immortalized in so many post-office murals and then commercially exploited
with the founding of Yankee Magazine in 1935, Orozco queries the idealized image
of America evoked by such propaganda. His panel includes all of the hallmarks of an
iconic rural America: the red barn, the white Protestant church/schoolhouse, the bale
of wheat, the town hall meeting, and universal elementary education presented as the
origin of a stoic adult citizenship. And like comparative works executed by his US
contemporaries, such as Paul Sample’s Beaver Meadow (1939), “Anglo-America”
evokes this nationalist ideal only to undermine it with the suggestion of a stifling con-
formity. However, unlike his US peers, Orozco situates his appraisal of white, Anglo-
Saxon, Protestant values within a broader critique of European “encounter” narratives,
thereby implicating the settler mode of colonization in the violence of conquest.

While Orozco’s critique was aimed at the variants of cultural nationalism within the
Americas in the interwar period, his mural could just as well serve as a challenge to our
own practices today within the American field of art history. What might the epic of
American modernism look like if approached from the standpoint of Latin American
modernisms? Like Orozco, I propose this shift in perspective not to assert the superi-
ority of a Mexicanist’s point of view. Rather, I seek to demonstrate the value of a
hemispheric framework for analyzing the development of US American modernism.
That is, of considering US America within the wider context of the ethical and aes-
thetic concerns expressed by modernists within the Americas.

In the first section of this chapter I attend to the ways scholars in the Latin
American field have reconsidered nationalizing modernisms to reveal their relation-
ship to settler politics and the legacies of colonialism. “Settler politics” refers to
those practices—legal and cultural—that rationalize, naturalize, legitimate, or man-
age the claims of settler populations and their contemporary descendants to colo-
nized lands, often at the expense of the culture, ways of life, and political claims of
indigenous inhabitants and their contemporary descendants. The first section argues
that a comparative view of modernism within the Americas would better enable us
to consider the settler politics of US American modernism.

In the second section I provide a specific example of how a hemispheric rather than
transatlantic or isolationist view would alter how we read and teach US American mod-
ernism. By recalling an important, but overlooked, moment in attempts to define
American modernism—the Museum of Modern Art’s 1933 exhibition American Sources
of Modern Art—I demonstrate the profound and structuring influence of the Mexican
School of painting on US American modernism and, in particular, the postwar develop-
ment of Abstract Expressionism. “Mexican School” refers to painting and sculpture
executed by Mexican artists from the 1920s through the 1950s. The Mexican School is
stylistically diverse, but for the most part figurative. Its artists engage national themes
with an emphasis on working-class politics and peasant or indigenous subjects.

By reading Abstract Expressionism as a product of the hemispheric relays between
Mexico and the United States—as exemplified by MoMA’s American Sources of
Modern Art exhibition—I offer a critique, rather than a celebration, of the settler
politics of abstraction, and thereby draw out the implicitly racialized formulation of
Americanness that underpins much US American art of the first half of the twentieth
century. Recognizing the structural significance of the Mexican School for the inter-
war and postwar avant-garde helps to make visible the racial discourses that underpin
US modernism as a consequence of a settler politics that continues to be disavowed.
Settler Modernism in Latin America

Within recent studies of modernist culture in Latin America scholars focus on the race politics of the region’s various avant-gardes. This follows from the historical practices of artists and writers who placed race or racial antagonisms at the center of their radical aesthetic and social mission. The two most prominent articulations of this would be the assertion of *Mestizaje* as an idealized principle of racial and cultural fusion in post-revolutionary Mexico or the endorsement of cultural *anthropophagism* (cannibalism) elaborated within the Brazilian avant-garde. In each instance artists sought to overturn the stigma of racial and cultural impurity within the West, while claiming an authenticity rooted in their natal homeland and its historically subordinated populations.

*Mestizaje* and *anthropophagism* are very different ways of addressing the problematic of American modernism, or what I prefer to call settler modernism. *Mestizaje* establishes a racialized binary (Indian/Spanish) as the essentializing ground for the cultural negotiation of relations of self–other, old–new, traditional–modern, authentic–foreign that haunt the settler imaginaries within the Americas. Thus in the Manifesto of the Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors Union of Mexico, published in *El Machete* in 1924, its authors write:

> Noble work and virtue are not the only gifts of our people (especially of our natives). The fact is that our people are the root of even the smallest expression of the physical and spiritual existence of our race as an ethnic force and, what’s more, of its admirable and most particular ability to create beauty: the art of the people of Mexico is the greatest, healthiest spiritual expression in the whole world, and its indigenous tradition is simply the best of them all [emphasis in original].

This famous manifesto presents a radical version of *Mestizaje*, in which indigeneity is conceived not only as the foundation of the Mexican “race as an ethnic force” but also as an authentically collective culture that might authorize both the socialization of art and a proletarian revolution. Yet, even as the authors hold up “indigenous tradition” as the model for a popular, collective, and ultimately “historically transcendental art,” they do not promote indigenous sovereignty, for example, but rather dedicate their call to “the world proletariat.”

*Anthropophagism* operates according to the principle of parodic deconstruction, undermining European (and Euro-American) claims to civilization by crafting its accomplishments as products of cannibalistic encounters with Brazil. In his “Anthropophagous Manifesto” from 1928 Oswald de Andrade writes: “Only anthropophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. The only law in the world. The masked expression of all individualisms, of all collectivisms. Of all religions, of all peace treaties. Tupí or not Tupí that is the question ….” “Tupí” refers to the main ethnic indigenous group in pre-contact Brazil. The Tupí became famous among Europeans as a result of a capture narrative published by the German soldier Hans Staden in 1557 in which he described their cannibalism and claimed to have nearly escaped being eaten. The legend of Tupí cannibalism was embroidered over the centuries and is now debated among scholars. However, in Andrade’s time, the Tupí were believed to have captured warriors from warring tribes for the purposes of ritual cannibalism in order to ingest them and absorb their strength. It is for this reason that Andrade chooses the sensationalist practice of cannibalism as the ur-metaphor for his avant-garde manifesto.
Andrade takes the cultural discourse on barbarism emanating from Europe and valorizes its stigmatized terms: taboo over totem, cannibalism as a generative rather than destructive practice, danger over purity, and matter over ideas. In his hands, Hamlet’s melancholic meditation on ethical action becomes an inducement to rethink the modern dilemma from the standpoint of the postcolonial settler. The question is not about being, but rather one of becoming, of choosing to reject the so-called advantages of the Christian “catechism” in favor of the vitality and danger of the Brazilian “carnival.”

Andrade posits a cultural process whereby the American settler ceases to identify with the colonizer and instead embraces his status as the colonized.

Unlike the long history of settler identification with indigenous Americans, which Philip Deloria has characterized as “playing Indian,” Andrade’s parodic identification foregrounds the paradox of being a settler within a postcolonial nation-state. He does not exempt settlers from their European peers as somehow more authentic inheritors of the Americas. Rather, in his poetry and photography he performs what Esther Gabara calls an “errant modernism,” a term she derives from Andrade’s theory of modernism in Brazil as necessarily errado, meaning both “lost and mistaken.” Gabara notes that Andrade deliberately errs in his photographs of the Brazilian landscape through bad cropping, unesthetic angles, poor focus, and over-exposure. She links these errors to his awareness that travel writing, ethnography, folklore, and the genre of landscape have long been tools of empire within European colonies. As a light-skinned, urban intellectual taking pictures of an impoverished rural landscape and its largely dark-skinned populations, Andrade identified with both the colonizer and the colonized. His errant position as both an insider and an outsider within Brazil recalls the race privilege and alienation of the settler class within postcolonial nations in the Americas. His solution to this paradox, however, is not to overcome it by identifying with indigenous Americans, but rather to perform his “errancy” through photographs that are “ethically engaged but judged to be wrong.”

While Andrade attributes cannibalism to the Amerindian peoples of the Brazilian Amazon, his principle does not ascribe values to the various cultural sources being cannibalized the way that Mestizaje would seem to do. Ultimately, Mestizaje is an assimilative principle that values indigeneity only insofar as it is subsumed into a dominant culture still conceived of as modern and therefore Western. Anthropophagism eschews the language of transcendence or synthetic reproduction in favor of digestive metaphors. The cannibal eats his enemy. Ingesting cultural others increases the cannibal’s power. The new culture that results from this metabolization of difference is not a transcendent synthesis, but rather figured as excrement, the basest form of matter. Returning to the errant nature of the settler, Andrade’s embrace of shit reminds us that to identify with the colonized, one must divest oneself of white privilege and take on the debased status of the racialized other, rather than assuming the guise of an idealized other as is the case with “playing Indian.”

These metaphors of mixing from the Mexican and Brazilian avant-gardes speak to the anxiety of origins that characterizes the settler class within any postcolonial settler state. And while they offer very different figures for imagining postcolonial settler identities, they are similar in that they acknowledge that modern culture is rooted historically in colonial experiences that are violent and driven by unequal power relations (“Socially. Economically. Philosophically,” quoting Andrade). While both manifestos are expressions, albeit radical, of the dominant settler class, they nonetheless register the violence done to indigenous populations and argue that the solution to the identity crisis of the modern Mexican/Brazilian/American lies in recognizing that the colonial other is not an
external other that shores up the ego boundaries of the civilized self but rather an internal other that radically challenges any normative claim to civilization on the part of Americans. Thus, the degraded internal other must be brought into the cultural imaginary, and the self must be thought through this relation. In this double move, these artists give voice to the peculiar condition of being a postcolonial subject in a settler state.

Scholars who work on Latin American modernisms have contextualized and problematized the settler politics that emerge in the manifestos and cultural practices of the historical avant-gardes. For example, in my work I have demonstrated the relationship between the populist artistic Mestizaje of the Mexican muralists and the sexist and racist governmental practices of the post-revolutionary state. Gabara, on the other hand, characterizes such expressions as an “ethos” through which modernists in Brazil and Mexico demonstrated a “sense of ethical responsibility to sectors of society that were increasingly defining modernity [the folk, the ethnographic, the popular classes] in these countries, and an aesthetic that reflects its formulation through disciplines and discourses not proper to high art.” While Gabara notes that Latin American modernists often grounded their thinking about modernism in racial formulations that were themselves the tenacious by-products of colonialism (for example, accounts of cannibalism among the Tupí), in attempting to mediate between the colonial past and modernity, between the high and the low, their work “makes possible critiques of race (and racism)” that might otherwise have been historically invisible. That is, the self-reflexive meditation on the so-called race problem within modern art movements in Mexico and Brazil, while problematic, has enabled contemporary scholars to see postcolonial race relations as a central concern for the modern project. The relative silence on the “race problem,” particularly with regard to Native peoples within US American avant-gardes, has meant that scholars of that period often sidestep the paradoxes of settler politics in US American visual culture in favor of more celebratory accounts of its “Americanness.”

With these two examples at hand, we can begin to appreciate not only the differences between the scholarship on Latin and US American modernism, but also why it might be productive to put these two fields into a historical, theoretical, or critical dialogue. In the next section I demonstrate that the discourse on modernism in the United States is also rooted in a settler imaginary that associates indigeneity with “Americanness.” And yet its peculiar mode of expression avoids any reference to or entanglement in the legacies of colonialism, thereby rendering the “possible critiques of race (or racism)” historically invisible to subsequent scholars. My analysis of the historical and conceptual connection between efforts like MoMA’s American Sources of Modern Art exhibition and the postwar construction of Abstract Expressionism demonstrates but one instance in which the settler politics of US American art becomes visible when we view it from the standpoint of Mexican modernism. As a consequence the racial codes implicit within the construction of postwar abstraction emerge, thereby enabling a more critical assessment of the way that an unmarked nationalized indigenism authorized the shift from figuration to abstraction.

**American Sources of Modern Art**

Survey texts routinely inaugurate the modern period in American art with a historical bifurcation between modes of realism and the impulse toward abstraction. From Barbara Rose’s American Art Since 1900 (1967) to Wayne Craven’s American Art:
History and Culture (1994) through Erika Doss’s Twentieth Century American Art (2002) we begin with the Henri Circle and the Armory Show as the origins of what Wanda Corn would eventually codify as the “rooted” versus the “transatlantic.”15 Within this cultural dialectic, Abstract Expressionism emerges from the “transatlantic” impulse toward abstraction while Pop Art represents an ironic rearticulation of the “rooted.” This structure instantiates figuration as a nativist—even isolationist—phenomenon, largely concerned with the “Americanness” of American art. Conversely it characterizes abstraction as the product of a transatlantic (read: international) dialogue that eventually culminates in the so-called “triumph of American painting” with the rise of the New York School.16 What gets lost in this coding of realism with a democratic nationalism and abstraction, with its transcendence into a sophisticated cosmopolitanism no longer marked by nationalist concerns, is the role played by Mexico’s post-revolutionary cultural renaissance in the development of both.

Lauren Kroiz’s recently published study of the racial metaphors employed by members of the Stieglitz circle reveals that the “race problem” has indeed informed the development of abstraction in the United States since at least the turn of the twentieth century. Her focus on the role of transnational figures like the Mexican Marius de Zayas in articulating a defense of cosmopolitanism rooted in concepts of miscegenation, and her analysis of the “racial implications” of Georgia O’Keeffe’s interest in Native American cultures for Stieglitz’s promotion of “American” abstraction lends ballast to my argument.17 However, while she focuses on the cultural politics of race and ethnicity within the context of immigration and isolationism, I emphasize the cultural politics of indigenism within the context of settler nationalism, a phenomenon that is marked within Latin American avant-gardes, but which is rarely noted within US artistic circles. Similarly, scholars have investigated the connection between the Mexican School and the development of the New York School, most notably Michael Leja and Ellen Landau.18 However, this is often a story about influence on particular artists or theorists rather than the more radical claim that I am making, that an unmarked indigenism—modeled on the Mexican example—helped to authorize the turn toward abstraction in the postwar United States, even as its model was denigrated precisely for its displays of cultural nationalism.

In recent survey texts the period from 1900 through 1945 has been elaborated beyond this simplistic binary to reveal a more kaleidoscopic vision of American modernism in which artists working in each tendency participate in the heroic effort to image the land, the people, the city, and sundry American “things.” An important part of this expansive treatment has been the acknowledgment of the “vogue for all things Mexican” in the 1920s and 1930s following Helen Delpar’s important book of the same title and James Oles’s more in-depth discussion of US–Mexican exchanges in his exhibition and catalogue, South of the Border.19 For example, the authors of American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity (2008), include the “Mexican Muralists and Their Influence on Public Art.” However, they relegate this discussion to the last of five chapters devoted to interwar modernism, and only treat muralism for its impact on the New Deal public art initiatives and the discourse about a “usable past.”20 In Framing America: A Social History of American Art (2002, 2007, 2012), Frances K. Pohl treats US–Mexican exchanges with greater depth and breadth, devoting as much time to this hemispheric dialogue as she does to the transatlantic one. In Pohl’s treatment, Mexico emerges not only as an important influence on the development of public art and the search for a usable
past, but also as related to the Taos colony and the boom in Native arts of the Southwest, the cultural nationalism of the Harlem Renaissance, and the emergence of straight photography.

However, even in Pohl’s admirable approach, the Mexican vogue is treated as a period of cultural influence, rather than a structural necessity for the emergence of a postwar cultural identity purportedly unmarked by the parochial concerns of nationalism. This, I would argue, is a function of the ongoing dominance of the transatlantic view, one that is naturalized in the rise of Abstract Expressionism and the Cold War denigration of figuration, socially engaged art, and cultural nationalism. In conventional accounts of post-1945 American art, the late 1920s and the 1930s are construed as an anomalous period of radicalization in which socially engaged art became the norm, only to reach its limit with the existential crisis of World War II, the Holocaust, and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Thereafter, until the re-radicalization of the art world in the 1970s, direct political engagement is viewed as naive, a vestige of an outmoded socialist or Marxist cultural orientation that was definitively rendered bankrupt by Stalinism. Within this view, the Mexican vogue is cast as a symptom of the anomalous radical politics of the period, even by scholars who situate these changes with respect to the cultural Cold War.

I suggest that hemispheric exchanges, while elided and denigrated in the Cold War discourse on art, were essential for the development of American modernism. In particular, the Mexican example provided cultural promoters in the United States with a viable model of an autochthonous modernism that, while formally indebted to European avant-gardes, was distinctively American. At a moment when the United States was becoming the economic power in the West, intellectuals and cultural promoters continued to lament its cultural underdevelopment. However, artists did not simply look to the cultural authority of France to figure a way out; they just as often looked to Mexico. In the 1920s and 1930s the search for an autochthonous modern art was, therefore, not exactly national, but rather continental, as the Americas, broadly conceived, were imagined as an alternative to continental Europe. Within this cultural imaginary, the United States was part of a hemispheric America, and Mexico was the regional leader.

My claim is exemplified by the Museum of Modern Art’s 1933 exhibition American Sources of Modern Art. This exhibition was one of many that the museum undertook in its early years as it searched for a way not only to educate US Americans about modern art (then synonymous with European art), but also to present an accurate representation of American accomplishments in the field. For this reason, the first two retrospectives exhibited at the museum in 1931 were dedicated to Henri Matisse (Old World modern master) and Diego Rivera (New World modern master). The goal of American Sources was to present the hemisphere’s pre-Columbian heritage as a formal resource for US-based artists and to compare a group of modern artists working in the United States with members of the Mexican School. Within its terms, the Mexican School’s synthesis of these ancient sources with avant-garde styles offered a model for modern artists in the United States. Accordingly, Maya, Aztec, and Inca sculpture and decorative arts were displayed and posited as ancient sources from which American artists could draw, just as Europeans had appropriated aspects of African, Iberian, or Polynesian sculpture in the elaboration of an experimental modern art. But if Europeans viewed these so-called primitive sources as exotic others to their over-cultivated selves, US artists and audiences were
encouraged to see both pre-Columbian and modern Mexican art as “American” sources and therefore as part of an emergent hemispheric self in which Mexico was a partner rather than an exotic other.

As Sarah Selvidge has argued, MoMA’s endeavors to craft a hemispheric identity for American art in which Mexico and the United States were partners was radical for the time, but also tentative.23 In his catalogue essay, curator Holger Cahill asserted that in Latin America, “the influence of ancient American art has been present since the conquest,” and singled out “metropolitan artists” in Mexico, in particular, citing the Manifesto of the Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors Union discussed above, along with the work of the Boasian cultural anthropologist Manuel Gamio.24 However, he was careful to insist that the “purpose of the exhibition” was to “show the high quality of ancient American art, and to indicate that its influence is present in modern art,” not to “suggest that American artists should turn to it as the source of native expression.”24 Cahill walked a fine line between endorsing a hemispheric, or regionally specific, cultural identity for American modernism and adhering to the universalizing discourse of formalism.25 Ultimately, he sought to strip pre-Columbian art of the cultural specificity that had made it so important within the cultural nationalism of the Mexican School and to present it instead as an aesthetic legacy to be appreciated for its quality as fine art. “It will be seen that during the past thirty years,” he asserts, “ancient American art has come to be … looked upon as one of the great arts of the world.”26

While Cahill was at pains to get his US American audience to view pre-Columbian culture as “a profound and original expression of the spirit of man,” he excluded entirely anything produced by indigenous groups within the continental United States.27 His conception of ancient American art was limited to the cultural production of the Aztec, Maya, and Inca that had been made familiar to curators by Latin American modernists. Likewise, he strove (unsuccessfully) to demonstrate that US modernists, like Max Weber and William Zorach, were drawing “unconsciously” on these sources in a manner similar to the influence consciously “accepted or sought” by artists like Diego Rivera, Jean Charlot, and Carlos Mérida.28 Thus, while the work of artists from the Mexican School served as a model for the “American art” Cahill wanted to highlight, he crafted the radical indigenism of these artists as a formal influence instead of as a cultural politics. In so doing, he substituted a regional identity for a national one to orchestrate an autochthonous modernism that could be appreciated for its formal qualities instead of its provincial purview.

For these reasons, Selvidge characterizes the American Sources exhibition as a failed experiment in MoMA’s early attempts to codify modern art. “The exhibition,” she writes:

was caught between these two paradigms, at once championing modern and ancient art based on formal qualities, and at the same time searching for meaning in the cultural context of Latin America’s ancient cultures. The latter tendency was motivated by a desire to assert cultural independence from Europe, the former was part of an attempt to remain within a formalist cultural model determined by European artists and institutions.29

Ultimately, the museum would distance itself from this hemispheric impulse in favor of the formalist paradigm in which US-based artists were the inheritors of a universal cultural legacy rather than situated within a continental America.
What does this failed experiment from MoMA’s early years tell us about American modernism? This exhibition emblematizes a much broader phenomenon. The tension it reveals between the assertion of cultural independence from Europe—the identification with a hemispheric America—and a desire to claim a culturally unmarked formalism might be understood as an alternative formulation of the so-called “rooted” and “transatlantic” impulse in American art. This tension might thereby be viewed as a structural dialectic rather than as different modalities of modernism, and as such it might recast how we read both the interwar and postwar trajectories of American art. By taking the Mexican School’s embrace of ancient American art as the model for a hemispheric American art, the exhibition reminds us that Latin America is a missing referent within a US American art history that too often privileges transatlantic exchanges or, conversely, laments and/or celebrates an isolated nativism.

The American Sources example reveals that the Mexican School was a model, not only for the conception of public art during the New Deal, but also, and more profoundly, for early attempts to codify US modernism. As such it prompts us to reconsider the postwar discourse on American art in light of the exhibition’s attempts to assert American specificity while adhering to the discourse of universal formalism. For even if MoMA abandoned the hemispheric paradigm in subsequent years, the tension that structured this exhibition would be resolved not by eschewing American sources, but rather by universalizing them in what one critic dubbed an emergent “globalism” in American painting.

I refer to the early writing and work of Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. In their 1943 “Statement,” Gottlieb and Rothko responded to Edward Alden Jewell’s review of their paintings by explaining that though their experimental work was abstract it nonetheless had subject matter. They write, “There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.” As Michael Leja has shown, the “kinship” that Abstract Expressionists asserted with “archaic and primitive” art was rooted in a “modern man discourse” that equated the American primitive (read: indigenous art) with the “universal” archaic (read: Greek and Egyptian art). By bringing indigenous art into alignment with European antiquity, these artists were essentially recapitulating the strategy pioneered by the Mexican School. However, unlike the Mexican muralists, they did not put their art in the service of social justice, nor did they call attention to the nationalism of their project. Rather, like Cahill, they read indigenous art not through the specificity of particular cultures (for them Native Northwest Coast art was synonymous with pre-Columbian art), but rather as a universal emblem of, in this case, what Leja terms, the “crisis culture” of the post-Holocaust, atomic age. And unlike Cahill, they embraced not only Aztec, Mayan, or Incan sources, but also indigenous cultures within the borders of the United States, thereby signaling an unarticulated desire for natal inspiration.

If there is any doubt as to the national location of the “primitive” art these artists privileged, one need only look at the early “pictographs” of Gottlieb, or to Barnett Newman’s famous essay on the “Ideographic Picture” (1947). Both Gottlieb and Newman ground their work in Kwakiutl painting. For Gottlieb the “pictographs” of Native Northwest Coast art are the formal equivalents of carved medieval façades or Egyptian hieroglyphs. For Newman, the Kwakiutl artist serves as a “primitive” proxy for the contemporary American painter. In a gross distortion of Kwakiutl cosmology and cultural practice,
Newman writes, “The Kwakiutl artist painting on a hide did not concern himself with the … Northwest Coast Indian scene, nor did he, in the name of a higher purity, renounce the living world for the meaningless materialism of design.” Here, replace “Indian scene” with “American scene” to recognize the target of his critique.

But in attacking figurative painting from the 1930s, he is not, therefore, embracing abstraction for its sake alone. He continues:

The abstract shape he used, his entire plastic language, was directed by a ritualistic will towards metaphysical understanding. The everyday realities he left to the toy-makers; the pleasant play of non-objective pattern to the women basket weavers. To him a shape was a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of the awesome feelings he felt before the terror of the unknowable.

In Newman’s hands, Kwakiutl painting (and not a feminized weaving or infantilized object-making) is an expression of man’s transhistorical “terror” in the face of the “unknowable.” As Leja argues, this construction of man and his experience is both highly nationalistic and particular to the post-World War II existential crisis spawned by the twin horrors of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. He notes as well that this reading of indigenous art is indebted to Surrealist anthropology as well as the example of Rufino Tamayo, a Mexican artist whose modernist indigenism was appreciated by the Abstract Expressionists because it was perceived to be apolitical. While Leja acknowledges the importance of Tamayo, he does not account for his relationship to the Mexican School, nor does he note the formative impact of travels to Latin America on the Surrealist émigrés residing in the Americas as part of the New York–Mexico City axis. These Surrealists are routinely credited with introducing postwar artists to the creative potential of the psyche, but rarely do scholars of postwar abstraction work out how their earlier travels through Mexico and Brazil informed their understanding of indigeneity as a portal to the “primitive” mind.

The Abstract Expressionists’ defense of a “metaphysical” painting is hard to imagine without the prior example of the Mexican School. Even as the artists and their interlocutors rearticulated indigenism from a culturally specific, national, or hemispheric register to a universal one, they nonetheless grounded their claims about meaning in abstraction through an appeal to Native North American and pre-Columbian art. Thus, the “triumph of American painting” represents not an abandonment of the discourse of “Americanness”—whether conceived of as settler modernism or a democratic rootedness—but rather its reformulation. This reformulation ultimately served to mask the settler politics of postwar art, as Cold War intellectuals sought to distinguish Abstract Expressionists not only from their interwar selves but also from any meaningful relationship with what Newman dubbed the “professional patriots” of the Mexican School.

By demonstrating the historical and conceptual connections between the Mexican School and both interwar and postwar American art, I assert that US American art has more in common with Latin American modernism than Americanists are currently willing to concede or even able to see. As I have argued, US American modernism is also a settler modernism, and reading it through the explicit concerns of other concurrent American modernisms can prove productive as much for what it reveals they have in common as for the differences that emerge. One major difference within US settler modernism is the lack of any self-reflexive engagement with the privileges of race or the legacies of colonialism for the hegemonic American subject. My hope is
that, along with my colleagues in the Latin American field, other scholars of twentieth-century art in the United States will join me in establishing a critical postcolonial approach to American modernism in which hemispheric dialogue takes precedence over an explicit or disavowed search for the “Americanness of American art.”

Conclusion

I return to Orozco’s Epic of American Civilization to meditate on its confounding coda, titled Modern Industrial Man (Figure 17.4). After completing the cycle, Orozco turned his attention to the wall facing the reserve desk in Baker-Berry Library. His original sketch shows the Reverend Eleazar Wheelock, the founder of the college, teaching Native American students, perhaps in deference to his institutional patron (Figure 17.5). However, over the course of the project he modified his plan. He maintained his interest in addressing education on this wall (the mural is, after all, located in the campus’s main library). Ultimately, he abandoned his focus on the founder and teacher Wheelock and concentrated instead on the student as self-educating reader.

Preparatory drawings demonstrate that Orozco modeled his reading figure on a Dartmouth undergraduate (Figure 17.6). In the sketch, we see a square-jawed collegiate male with a crew cut wearing a sport coat. In every way this figure corresponds to the conventional image of the Dartmouth Man—an athletic, studious, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant. However, as his concept evolved, Orozco turned his Dartmouth WASP into a racially ambiguous worker. This worker reclines before a modern building, its steel framework exposed, revealing that it, like the worker, is under construction. He has put aside his hammer (the symbol of his identity as laborer), and while still wearing his white worker’s gloves, he has picked up a book. With downcast eyes this “modern industrial man” engages in the quiet privilege of the leisured class. Rather than subjecting himself to the ministrations of a professor—a figure Orozco disparages in an earlier panel as a “god of the modern world”—he educates himself.

It is important to recall that Dartmouth is a private college. A raced worker like the one Orozco depicts would have had a hard time gaining access to the library’s resources in the 1930s, a fact Orozco must have noted. So what are we to make of this coda to the artist’s indictment of the modern history of the Americas? Some are tempted to see it as an endorsement of communist politics, whereby the worker becomes the subject of history. Others see this figure as a Mestizo and read the final panel as a reference to the Mexican School’s endorsement of a future-oriented “cosmic race.” Still others see this man as an African American and read his presence as an overt critique of the racial politics of 1930s United States. All of these readings have merit and are enabled by Orozco’s deliberate ambiguity.

Within the context of this chapter I offer a reading from one of my Dartmouth students, Nichola Tucker, who was given the task of writing about “Orozco’s mural and the epic form” in my senior seminar on Mexican muralism. In her essay, Tucker argues that it is the viewer who plays the part of epic hero in Orozco’s cycle. Treating the fresco as a performative rite through which the viewer undergoes a radical re-education in American history and emerges transformed, she suggests that the Mestizo worker “embodies the new state the Dartmouth student initiate enters after performing the cycle.” In this new state, the hero of America’s epic is transformed from the hegemonic privileged white subject into a working-class Mestizo. She is no longer the progeny of a European
Figure 17.5  José Clemente Orozco, study of Eleazar Wheelock with Indians for The Epic of American Civilization, 1932–34, graphite on cream paper, overall: 10 1/2 × 26 5/8 in. (26.6 × 67.6 cm). Source: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; purchased through gifts from Kirsten and Peter Bedford, Class of 1989; Jane and Raphael Bernstein; Walter Burke, Class of 1944; Mr. and Mrs. Richard D. Lombard, Class of 1953; Nathan Pearson, Class of 1932; David V. Picker, Class of 1953; Rodman C. Rockefeller, Class of 1954; Kenneth Roman Jr., Class of 1952; and Adolph Weil Jr., Class of 1935. © DACS 2014.

Figure 17.6  José Clemente Orozco, figure study for Modern Industrial Man (central panel 2 of 3, panel 23) for The Epic of American Civilization, 1932–34, graphite on tracing paper, overall: 12 1/2 × 18 3/4 in. (31.8 × 47.6 cm). Source: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; purchased through gifts from Kirsten and Peter Bedford, Class of 1989; Jane and Raphael Bernstein; Walter Burke, Class of 1944; Mr. and Mrs. Richard D. Lombard, Class of 1953; Nathan Pearson, Class of 1932; David V. Picker, Class of 1953; Rodman C. Rockefeller, Class of 1954; Kenneth Roman Jr., Class of 1952; and Adolph Weil Jr., Class of 1935. © DACS 2014.
genealogy, but rather the hybrid offspring of the violent encounters between Europeans and their colonized or enslaved “others” (and here it is significant that Orozco’s figure could just as easily be read as African American as he could Mestizo).

Tucker’s reading is radical and speculative, and certainly not one that Orozco himself would have been willing to concede (he was after all a creole-identified Mexican of the early twentieth century). However, in offering a new and creative interpretation of the cycle as a whole that honors the continental perspective Orozco endorsed, it offers the kind of reading that the shift in perspective I endorse might enable. Her reading of Orozco’s mural locates his work within the ethos of Latin American modernisms and their foregrounding of the paradoxes of the postcolonial settler subject. She reminds us that Orozco was painting (and to a great extent still exists for) a predominantly white, upper-middle-class, student audience. And in the spirit of Andrade’s “Anthropophagous Manifesto,” she inverts the classic scenario of education as a mode of assimilation or the achievement of universal subjecthood unmarked by the particularities of race, nation, class, or gender. Instead, she imagines that the outcome of a Dartmouth education would be to reinsert the student into a hemispheric imaginary in which the self must be thought through its relation to an internal other. This is one of my goals as a professor of the modern art of the Americas. Thus I call upon Andrade’s critical deconstructive impulse and ask of my fellow US Americanists: “Tupí or not Tupí?”

Notes

1 See Cooper, 2008.
2 See Coffey, 2012; Gabara, 2008; Tejada, 2009; and Zavala, 2010.
6 Hans Staden, True Story and Description of a Country of Wild, Naked, Grim, Man-eating People in the New World, America, originally published in 1557. For an updated and annotated English translation see Staden, 2008.
7 See, for example, Arens, 1979.
8 Andrade, quoted in Ramírez and Olea, 2004, p. 466.
15 Corn, 1999.
16 This phrase was coined and popularized by Sandler in his salutary history of Abstract Expressionism (Sandler, 1970).

References


Cartography can clearly be made to serve a political end. In a school atlas the world’s nations appear as a mosaic of clashing colors. Pink Canada looms large over butter-tinted United States; there can be no doubt about where one ends and another begins, nor of their sharply contrasting identities.¹

What is the impact of place on the creation of both artworks and histories of art? Does it matter where a critic or art historian resides when she writes or teaches about an American artist or where an American artist resides when she depicts a French or US or Canadian landscape? Historians of American art have addressed these questions in various ways, most often under the rubric “context.” They have helped expand our understanding of the variability and contingency of the meanings of works of art and of writings about art across space and time. I would like to explore such questions further through an examination of the cross-border travels of two American artists who visited Canada in the second half of the twentieth century, prefacing this exploration with a brief reflection on my own border crossings as an art historian.

I was born in Canada and, after having completed my MA in art history at the University of British Columbia and my PhD at the University of California, Los Angeles, I was hired as an assistant professor of art history at Pomona College, just east of Los Angeles. Most Canadians grow up with a heightened awareness of the significance of the relationship—cultural, economic, and political—between the United States and Canada. As a Canadian living in the southwestern United States, close to the Mexican border, I was therefore interested in situating the history of American art within a continental framework and embarked on the creation of a series of courses that compared the art not only of Canada and the United States, but also of Mexico. My textbook, Framing America: A Social History of American Art, grew out of these courses.² While it focuses on the art of the United States, it is informed throughout by a continental perspective.
In recent years scholars in many fields have increasingly looked north and south to expand their understanding of the emergence and evolution of the United States as a nation. Considerable attention has been paid in recent decades within both academia and the mass media to the southern border, prompted in part by the immigration of large numbers of undocumented low-wage workers from Mexico and Central America into the United States. Most immigrants from Canada tend to hold higher-paying jobs and enter with various types of work permits, contributing to the relative lack of attention to the Canada–US border. The destruction of the World Trade Center and attack on the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, by Al-Qaeda changed that somewhat. More articles about security at the Canadian border now appear in the American mass media and a few politicians have even proposed constructing a fence along parts of it, similar to the one currently in place along segments of the US–Mexico border.

In addition, within the field of border studies, scholars are paying more attention to the distinctive culture that has emerged along the US–Canada border. Some, in fact, have argued that almost all of Canada is a “border culture,” as virtually all of the country’s population lives within 150 miles of Canada’s boundary with the United States. Others have focused on regional histories, claiming, for example, that the Pacific Northwest—Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon—is more of a cultural and economic unit than British Columbia, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia, or Oregon, Ohio, and Delaware.

Research on visual representations of Mexico or Mexican culture by US artists, or on the influence of travel to Mexico on their overall artistic production, has revealed much about both American art and the relationship between the two countries, for example the staying power of racial and ethnic stereotypes (often deemed “romantic” in paintings, sculpture, and graphic art) and the material effects of these stereotypes on Mexicans and Americans of Mexican descent. Investigating the careers and images of US artists who have traveled to Canada and/or depicted its landscapes or populations can help us to understand not only a particular artist’s work, but also the significance of this work at specific moments in US–Canada relations. Why did these artists look north for ideas or inspiration? Was Canada itself, if not its art, a presence in the work or imaginations of American painters and/or critics? If so, were their images based on the material realities of Canadian landscapes and cultural traditions or on myths and stereotypes? And how might an examination of the experiences of American artists in Canada and the work they produced complicate our answers to that foundational and ever-present question within the field: “What is American about American art?”

In writings about Canada, both popular and academic and by both Americans and Canadians, the very shape and nature of the land plays an important role. Political and cultural boundaries are discussed as either flaunting or following the geological formations of the continent. In fact, Canada has most often been envisioned as a geological, rather than cultural or political, force. In 1985, Andrew Malcolm, Toronto Bureau chief for the New York Times, described Canada as follows: “It sits atop the Western Hemisphere, a brooding geographic colossus, immense, hostile, forbidding, and unforgiving of those who ignore its natural rules of survival.”

Yet Canada also exists as a political entity, a fact learned by every schoolchild in the United States, if only briefly, and reinforced every time one looks at a map of North America (Figure 18.1). As Yi-Fu Tuan writes: “Maps in school atlases and history books show nation-states as sharply bounded units. Small-scale maps encourage
Figure 18.1  Map of North America. Source: New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th edition, 1985, vol. 24, page 959 / © RM Acquisition, LLC d/b/a Rand McNally. Reproduced with permission. License No. R.L 14-S-014. All rights reserved.
people to think of their countries as self-sufficient, discrete entities.” Yet Canada and the United States have never been self-sufficient, discrete entities. They have a shared past, present, and future. We can discern some of the characteristics of this interconnectedness in the experiences of Barnett Newman and Allan Sekula, who decided to turn north as they explored new aesthetic and geographical terrain.

Several studies have been produced in recent decades that compare the works of Canadian and US artists or that focus on US artists who made the trek northward. Of particular note is the 1989 essay, “Where the Hell Is Saskatchewan and Who Is Emma Lake?” by the Canadian art historian John O’Brian, which addresses Barnett Newman’s 1959 visit to Saskatchewan. The title questions were posed by Newman upon his invitation to Emma Lake. O’Brian comments that for the humor in these questions to have worked in Newman’s New York City circle, people would already have had to have known something about Saskatchewan and the Emma Lake Artists’ Workshops, initiated in 1955 by the Canadian painters Kenneth Lochhead and Arthur McKay, art professors at the Regina campus of the University of Saskatchewan. O’Brian wanted to find out exactly what that something was, or “why a number of artists and critics in New York cared at all about Saskatchewan or about a small, unpretentious workshop for professional artists on the shores of a shallow, reedy lake to the north and a little bit west of Prince Albert.”

As O’Brian observes, one of the main reasons Americans knew about Saskatchewan in the 1950s was the election in 1944 of a socialist government, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), led by Tommy Douglas (the CCF stayed in power until 1964). This election was covered widely in the US press. What was particularly intriguing for American reporters was that a primarily rural province of land-owning farmers, rather than an urban, industrial region, supported such a political move. The Saskatchewan government was thus presented as a unique event, and the coverage of its actions through the late 1940s and 1950s in the US press—during the height of the Cold War—ensured that many Americans were aware of this geographically remote province. Among them was Barnett Newman. His longstanding leftist sympathies, according to O’Brian, would have predisposed him favorably toward accepting an invitation to visit Canada’s “red province,” as would the $450 honorarium, considerable for the time, plus travel and accommodations, all paid for by the Saskatchewan Arts Board, established in 1948 (the Canada Council, the federal arts organization, wasn’t founded until 1957).

Ultimately, several New York artists and critics accepted invitations to visit Emma Lake, including Newman, Clement Greenberg, Frank Stella, and Donald Judd. Some envisioned Saskatchewan as an “exotic” locale, a barren northern expanse of windswept terrain that functioned as a site for the testing of one’s strength and endurance and a retreat from the emasculating forces of an urban modernity. According to O’Brian, “Newman once recounted to [Canadian sculptor] Robert Murray his enthusiasm for the
northern tundra.”\textsuperscript{16} This myth of the north was certainly strong in the 1950s in the United States, the result in large part of the many popular books and films set in Canada (575 such films were produced before 1970), where stunning landscapes played a central role, reinforcing the image of Canada as a terrain or direction or climate. The most popular settings were the rugged Rocky Mountains or the inhospitable Arctic.\textsuperscript{17}

This myth of the barren, windswept north was also promoted by Canadians themselves, be they historians, poets, novelists, painters, museum professionals, government officials, or travel agents.\textsuperscript{18} In constructing a national image distinct from England—what Benedict Anderson has called an “imagined community”—the Canadian political and cultural elite focused on the geological features of the Canadian landscape, in particular the region of northern Ontario known as the Canadian Shield.\textsuperscript{19} Embedded in this national myth was the notion that Canadian cultural development emerged not from exposure to, or as a continuation of, European traditions, but from the soil itself, thus engendering a form of autochthonous cultural nationalism that denied both past and present European cultural debts, while at the same time acknowledging the material resources that constituted much of Canada’s economic wealth.

The painters known as the Group of Seven (A.Y. Jackson, Frederick Varley, Lawren Harris, J.E.H. MacDonald, Frank Johnson, Franklin Carmichael, and Arthur Lismer), who became, through strategic promotion by the National Gallery of Canada, the first “national” art school, described their work in a 1921 exhibition catalogue as follows: “These pictures have all been executed in Canada during the past year. They express Canadian experience and appeal to that experience in the onlooker. These are still pioneer days for artists and after the fashion of pioneers we believe wholeheartedly in the land.”\textsuperscript{20} The Canadian author Frederick Housser reaffirmed this cultural isolationism in no uncertain terms in his 1926 book on the Group of Seven: “Our British and European connection in fact, so far as creative expression in Canada is concerned, has been a millstone about our neck. … The modern European schools have been largely influenced by Cézanne. The modern Canadian so-called school was inspired as the result of a direct contact with Nature herself.”\textsuperscript{21}

In the mid-1920s, as Housser and the Group of Seven were proclaiming their cultural independence from Britain and the rest of Europe, the Canadian economy was also beginning to rely less heavily on British investment. Yet this was not a sign of impending economic independence. In 1926, the same year Housser’s book on the Group of Seven was published, the United States replaced Britain as the largest foreign investor in Canada.\textsuperscript{22} As World War II drew to a close and the Cold War began, this investment continued to expand. At the same time, US mass media and consumer products began flowing northward across the border at an unprecedented rate.

In an attempt to deal with the effects of this incursion into Canadian culture, the federal government set up the Massey Commission, which issued a report in 1951 that pointed out that “a vast and disproportionate amount of material coming from a single alien source may stifle rather than stimulate our own creative effort and … may weaken critical facilities. We are now spending millions to maintain a national independence which would be nothing but an empty shell without a vigorous and distinctive cultural life.”\textsuperscript{23} The report also noted with regard to American culture: “We import newspapers, periodicals, books, maps, and endless educational equipment. We also import artistic talent, either personally … on the screen, in recordings and over the air. … American donations are good in themselves, [but] it does not follow that they have always been good for Canadians.”\textsuperscript{24} As O’Brian points out, with Canadian popular
culture “contentedly awash in American goods and media, ‘high’ culture was the one arena in which Canada might hope to operate in a way that was consciously independent of the U.S.”

The Commission advocated greater federal support for the arts but stopped short of suggesting protectionist measures; nevertheless, such measures were undertaken over the ensuing decades.

By inviting New York artists and critics to their workshop, Saskatchewan artists were resisting this renewed cultural protectionism at the federal level, which they saw as dangerous and as leading ultimately to defeatism. These artists wanted more contact, not less, with the best of American high culture, which included Barnett Newman. Arthur McKay, co-founder of the Emma Lake workshops, wrote in 1964: “Curiously enough, we accept political coercion, economic domination, Coca-Cola, and predigested mass communication, while we resist exposure to the more humane and civilized arts from the U.S.A.”

The north/south cultural and geographical regionalism mentioned earlier may have been one reason why Saskatchewan artists were less interested in cutting ties with the United States than their counterparts in Ontario, like the Group of Seven. While feeling more isolated from the US and European art worlds than their eastern counterparts, Saskatchewan artists were also part of a population that often aligned itself with its US counterparts to the immediate south, who shared not only an agricultural economy, but also a “Prairie radicalism.” US art critic Clement Greenberg, who led the 1962 Emma Lake Workshop, captured both this regional imperative and geographical isolation in a passage in his 1963 article, “Painting and Sculpture in Prairie Canada”: “Saskatchewan could be considered, I suppose, the remotest or most isolated of the provinces of western Canada that border on the United States. Manitoba has Minnesota directly below it, while British Columbia has next to it the Pacific Ocean and the American Northwest, in whose proximity Alberta seems to share; but Saskatchewan has only North Dakota and Montana to the South.” Greenberg goes on: “What makes Saskatchewan unique, however, in my experience is not its isolation as such, but that its inhabitants seem to face up so squarely to the fact of it. … Unlike Podunk or San Francisco, the place does not waste its mental energy in conjuring up illusions of itself as a rival to New York or London.”

Newman expressed a similar sentiment regarding the relationship between Saskatchewan and New York, and the value of accepting the cultural and geographical isolation within which Saskatchewan artists found themselves, but in a different way. He didn’t make any art during his time at Emma Lake. “The first thing I did not do was to bring my work with me,” he later wrote. “I brought no new aesthetic theories of color, form, or facture. … I did not bring any New York message. Nor did I agitate for a Canadian art. … Yet I never worked harder in my life, because what I did bring was myself.” Rather than trying to directly influence the painting practices of the participants in the workshop, a process he viewed as “the exploitation of willing students that corrupts both them and the instructor,” he engaged in conversations with them—often over a bottle of vodka—about their work, about the New York art world, and perhaps also about the CCF and the Saskatchewan Art Board.

Newman’s and Greenberg’s celebration of the isolation of Saskatchewan artists can be seen as a continuation, on the one hand, of the “organic cultural nationalism” of the Group of Seven—the frontier artist whose creativity emerges from a struggle with the land—and, on the other, of Newman’s call in the early 1940s for an inter-American art based on the “primitive” objects created by pre-Columbian Mexican and
pre-twentieth-century Northwest Coast Native American artists. The geographical and temporal isolation of the Aztec and the Kwakwaka’wakw (formerly Kwakiutl) from Europe and its aesthetic traditions, which, according to Newman, made it a valuable rejuvenating force for US modernism in the 1940s, parallels the geographical isolation of Emma Lake from New York.

Newman did not “agitate for a Canadian art,” but instead encouraged the Emma Lake artists to discover their own authoritative and authentic visual language, their own distinctive gesture or signature informed if not by the isolated, pristine landscape of northern Saskatchewan then by their own feelings in the face of the sublime existential isolation faced by all artists in the post-World War II world. In his 1948 essay, “The Sublime Is Now,” Newman writes: “We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or ‘life,’ we are making them out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.”

For Newman, the language of abstraction was universal, and, thus, the forms that emerged from the artistic efforts of Emma Lake (which were predominantly abstract) would communicate across borders, bridging the distance between Emma Lake and New York. Through encounters with a group of individuals who shared his commitment to avant-garde art-making, Newman gained a more intimate knowledge of one segment of the cultural and political Canadian landscape, while at the same time reaffirming his belief in the viability of an aesthetic language and community that would transcend national borders. Greenberg would provide the more pragmatic institutional presence for this community through his reviews of Canadian art, his organization of exhibitions of US artists in Canada, and his inclusion of Canadian artists in exhibitions in the United States.

* *

Canadian cultural protectionism expanded after the 1960s. In 1971 legislation was put in place requiring Canadian radio stations to play Canadian music for at least 30 percent of the duration of their music broadcasts and Canadian television to have Canadian programming for 60 percent of the time between 6 p.m. and midnight; in 1985 legislation was passed making it illegal for foreign companies to own Canadian publishing houses. However, this legislation did not prevent the continued domination of the Canadian economy by American interests, or Canada’s increasing participation in a complicated global capitalist marketplace. It was this economic reality that informed a series of photographs taken by the American photographer Allan Sekula in 1985–86 titled Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes.

If Newman was drawn by the myth of the pristine, empty Canadian wilderness (although one shepherded by a socialist government), Sekula was drawn by something else: his understanding of Canada as a populated landscape tied inextricably to its southern neighbor and to the broader forces of global capitalism. Rather than celebrate the outdoors as a purifying force, a landscape of redemption and renewal, he reveals a non-landscape or anti-landscape, a terrain denuded of vegetation by the processes of industrialization. His vision of the world, and the nature of vision, was not necessarily transformed by his visit to Canada, but confirmed, refined, and complicated.
Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes was the second in a trilogy of works, begun in 1983 with Sketch for a Geography Lesson and finished in 1995 with Fish Story. In each series, through a combination of images and text, Sekula focuses on the ways in which the material and imaginary geographies of certain locations, and the lives of those who occupy these locations, are disrupted and transformed by the movements of global capital. In the seventy-nine captioned photographs that make up Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes, he locates the Canadian landscape not outside of and in opposition to industry and commerce, but as one of their constituent parts. Landscapes are constructed and deconstructed. They are mobile, floating from museum to bank office to union headquarters to industrial worksites. They are part of an ongoing and shifting narrative about the transformation of geological formations through aesthetic, industrial, and monetary processes—landscape paintings by the Group of Seven (Figure 18.2), nickel baked in open fires, slag piled in heaps (Figure 18.3), gold secured in underground bank vaults. These processes are made manifest in Sekula’s photographs through juxtaposition—the lush landscape in the industrial

![Figure 18.2](image-url)
workplace or artificially lit museum, the romantic language of tourism alongside the categorizations of industry.

Sekula describes Canada as an absence within the American mental landscape. He recognizes that “For citizens of the United States, Canada is typically neither here nor there. ‘Canada’ occupies a zone of conceptual indifference: unthought, insignificant, simultaneously the same and different, but in ways that do not seem to matter much in an ‘American’ scheme of things.” He wanted to counter this indifference, and began his project with a look at one of the most visible reminders to American visitors that they are in a foreign country: Canadian currency. “If money is peculiar,” he writes, “simultaneously abstract and concrete, what is especially peculiar about Canadian money? What mysteries lurk in these innocent and optimistic engravings depicting a productive industrialized Nature [the Polymer Corporation in Sarnia, Ontario on the back of the 10-dollar bill, a salmon seiner off Vancouver Island on the back of the 5-dollar bill]? How is this imagery repeated in an official architecture of Canadian finance, and within the productive (and not so productive) ‘landscape’ itself?”

Sekula attempts to answer these questions through color and black and white photographs and written text that center on two cities in Ontario: Ottawa, the federal capital, and Sudbury, at the time the site of the largest nickel mining and smelting complex in the world. In Ottawa he looked, in particular, at the Bank of Canada, designed by the Canadian architect Arthur Erickson and completed in 1979 (the original building [1938] has been embedded in the façade of the new structure)

Figure 18.3 Allan Sekula, Sudbury, from Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes, 1985–86, silver dye-bleach print (Cibachrome). Vancouver Art Gallery. Source: The Estate of Allan Sekula.
In Sudbury he photographed the operations of the Canadian multinational firm Inco, formerly the International Nickel Company of Canada, which has subsidiaries in Indonesia, Guatemala, and the United States. He visited these two locations in August and November of 1985 and February of 1986, embedding in his photo-essay the passage of time and the seasonal practices to give a fuller picture of the daily activities of those who populated both locations and of the connections between two seemingly disparate sites.

The Bank of Canada is an independent federal agency, yet, like all Canadian federal agencies, it is enmeshed in a global financial network. Located across the street from the neo-Gothic parliament buildings, its reflective glass surface literally and figuratively “reflects” the relationship between capital and government. The building itself is both open and closed to the public. People are free to enter the lobby, which is filled with tropical plants and a large stone from the island of Yap in the South Pacific, while the wealth of the nation is safely tucked away in underground vaults. The present is embedded in the past, with the Yap stone, an ancient form of currency, on one side of the lobby and a currency museum on the other. At the same time, the connection between wealth and nature is reinforced.

While Sudbury is a source of much mineral wealth, it is a far cry from Ottawa, or the lush tropical lobby of the Bank of Canada, or the paintings of the Group of Seven. Sekula reveals three “secrets” about Sudbury. First, it is not a landscape. Years of roasting nickel ore over open fires have destroyed the region’s agricultural economy and defoliated the

![Figure 18.4](image-url)
surrounding territory, which is adjacent to sites celebrated by the Group of Seven. Sudbury also contains a large object symbolic of currency, yet less romantic and less historical. It is not an ancient Yap Stone but a giant “faux” Canadian nickel. This large nickel suggests that the wealth from the mines is Canadian, yet this is not exactly the case. The second secret about Sudbury is that Inco is not really a Canadian company. In 1902 the newly consolidated steel industry, directed by J. Pierpont Morgan, formed the International Nickel Company. Originally incorporated in New Jersey, International Nickel only became a “Canadian” company in 1928 in order to avoid anti-trust action in the United States. By 1977, the measure of Canadian ownership of Inco stock was running at 30 percent, with over 50 percent of stock ownership residing in the United States. Thus, the pictures of the Canadian landscape found in smelters and museums and bank headquarters, while celebrated as symbols of Canadian national pride, were implicated from the time of the Group of Seven onward in a system of global capital.

In 1976, as Erickson was beginning work on the Bank of Canada, the company changed its name to Inco, mechanized much of its operations, and moved the more labor-intensive jobs overseas. In 1969 the company employed 18,000 workers; in 1986 it employed 6,500. Thus, Sudbury’s third secret is “class struggle,” a struggle that, like the changing ownership of the nickel-smelting operations, was played out across the US–Canadian border and was complicated by the fact that Canadian unions are not Canadian. “Canada is unique,” argues labor historian Jack Scott, “in that it is the only country in the world with unions [in this instance the United Steelworkers of America, which represented most Sudbury workers] whose headquarters are located in a foreign country, unions which at the same time are subject to the laws and labour legislation in the country where the headquarters are situated.”

Unlike Newman, Sekula brought with him the tools of his trade—cameras—and created a series of images during his time in Canada. Like Newman, Sekula engaged in conversations, although of a different sort and with a different audience. Whereas Newman’s tales were directed toward a small group of artists and anchored in a particular space and locale, Sekula’s conversations took place with bank executives and union members, among others, in two cities. They were continued in his gallery installation and book, which were exhibited and sold in both Canada and the United States. Thus, the creation, exhibition, and reception of Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes echoes the cross-border narrative contained within the photographs themselves, a narrative that reminds us that pictures place individuals “in a particular relation to the land,” one informed by one’s social, political, and economic place in society.

* 

Comparison confronts the beliefs that have become the status quo, the old guard, the establishment … In many ways, it can be a rebel force within the study of history.

A standard pedagogical tool within the field of art history is the “compare and contrast” assignment. Its popularity speaks to the belief that we are able to understand more fully the formal qualities and subject matter of a work of art when we compare it to another that is different in significant respects. Such comparisons are also able to shake up certain conventional beliefs that prevent us from seeing what is in front of our eyes. The same can be said when we compare the artistic production within the United States with that of another country, or when we situate that production within
the cultural traditions and artistic practices and expectations of another country. As historian Carol Higham writes, “Myths, about our own countries and other countries, shape actions and policies. Comparative history challenges those myths.”

At the same time, through comparisons we are able to discover certain commonalities we had not seen before. A 1996 study entitled The North American Trajectory: Cultural, Economic, and Political Ties among the United States, Canada, and Mexico argues that fundamental changes are taking place in all three countries, among the most significant of which is a lessening of differences in the key values held by their general populaces. These changes are attributable in part to an increase in the number of border crossings between all three countries.

According to O’Brien, the most important aspect of Newman’s visit to Emma Lake was his conversations with the Canadian artists he met. Through them, he came to a clearer understanding of his own position as an American artist, while at the same time providing his hosts with an opportunity to see themselves as a cohesive community that was both distinct from, yet connected to, the contemporary art world of New York City and beyond. His visit was an argument in favor of free and open exchanges, which meant, among other things, the ability to freely cross borders. Such border crossings between the United States and Canada, however, have become more difficult since September 11, 2001, and the initiation of the US government’s War on Terror, which led to a tightening of US immigration policies. The Bush Administration claimed that Canada’s vaunted openness and liberalism in the area of immigration was a liability, because terrorists would have an easier time crossing what many acknowledged was a permeable border between the United States and Canada. The US–Canadian border is also the longest continuous border between any two nations in the world, and policing it is complicated not only by its length, but also by the fact that Canada is the United States’ largest trading partner. Any impeding of border crossing would have an immediate economic impact.

Two of the photographs in Sekula’s Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes record a border station in Buffalo, New York. One focuses on a Department of Justice Immigration and Naturalization Service logo attached to a reflective surface, which obscures the heads of the visitors and immigration official sitting opposite each other across a table (Figure 18.5). The other contains six men, in a brightly lit room; the caption reads “Bus passengers from Canada detained by United States Immigration.” Four of the men have dark hair and skin and features that would allow them to be identified as of East Indian, or perhaps Middle Eastern, descent.

Sekula could not have predicted in 1986 how intense the policing of the US–Canadian border would become in the first decade of the twenty-first century. But he was well aware of the racial profiling and racialized policies and cultural practices present in both Canada and the United States and their impact on both border crossing and visual representation. As Ian Burn has written, “a picture isn’t just a picture, it is a particular visual construction with all sorts of implications— for both the artist and the viewer. A landscape is not something we look at but something we look through.” The “barren, empty lands” in Group of Seven paintings erased the presence of indigenous peoples in order to facilitate the appropriation of this terrain as the “natural” expression of white Canadian identity. Sekula’s photographs emphasize the pervasiveness of this erasure, with Group of Seven landscapes appearing there not only in the halls of the National
Gallery of Canada, but also in the reception room of Eldorado Resources Limited (a uranium mining and processing firm) in Ottawa and the office of the president of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union, Local 598 in Sudbury. At the same time, he foregrounds what (or who) is absent from these landscapes in a photograph of Louis-Philippe Hébert’s sculpture *The Last Indian* (1901), also located in the National Gallery of Canada.

Sekula’s *Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes* provides a model for historians of American art. It repopulates the Canadian landscape, bringing into focus how geography is constructed and represented through “the interrelated economies and decision-making apparatuses of the United States and Canada.” It engages in cross-border conversations that resist cultural protectionism and national parochialism. Sekula worked at a moment when heated debates were taking place about the economic and cultural impact of the proposed bilateral trade pact with the United States (signed January 2, 1988), which led to the trilateral North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) (Canada, the United States, and Mexico) (signed January 1, 1994). He understood that even in an era when capital circumvents national boundaries, borders still matter, as do attachments to specific places and national identities—two of his photographs depict a naturalization ceremony for Vietnamese immigrants in an Ottawa shopping mall. His work provides a way to understand the implications of these attachments and their visual manifestations, how they can function both as mechanisms of exclusion and as tools of resistance to the exploitative forces of global capitalism.

The experiences of Newman and Sekula in Canada reveal the specific value of cross-border exchanges, for the artists themselves and for the history of American art. They
suggest that Canada does matter “in an American scheme of things,” not because it has produced artists of equal or greater importance to those working in the United States, but because it provides a place of both similarity and difference from which to engage certain foundational assumptions—political, economic, and aesthetic—about both American art and the country in which it is produced.

Notes

I dedicate this chapter to Allan Sekula, who passed away on August 10, 2013.

1 Tuan, 1977, p. 178.
3 Levander and Levine, 2008; Groseclose and Wierich, 2009; and Adams, 2008. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994 between Canada, the United States, and Mexico provides another reason for a consideration of the cultural, political, and economic relationships between the three countries. For those looking west to Asia, see Chapter 14, by J.M. Mancini, in this anthology.
4 For more on US–Canada relations, see The American Review of Canadian Studies. A special issue of this journal entitled One West, Two Myths was expanded and reissued as Higham and Thacker, 2006.
5 CBC News, 2011.
6 See Evans, 2006. For the Atlantic Coast and Great Plains as regions with common cultures and economies, see Hornsby and Reid, 2001. For the view of the US–Canadian border within Native American studies, see Nichols, 2001, and Huhndorf, 2009.
7 Garreau, 1981.
8 See Oles, 1993.
10 Malcolm, 1985, p. 5.
12 “Famed N.Y. Art Critic Coming Here,” Star-Phoenix, March 21, 1962, quoted in O’Brien, 1989, p. 32. While this quote referred to the visit of Clement Greenberg to the Emma Lake Workshop, it could also apply to Newman’s 1959 visit.
17 Burton, 1975, p. 44.
19 Anderson, 1983.
20 Quoted in Lord, 1974, p. 136. Tom Thomson was also a key figure within this group of artists but died in 1917, before its official formation in 1920. For the role of the National Gallery in the promotion of the Group of Seven, see Jessup, 2001.
21 Housser, 1926, pp. 18, 24.
23 Quoted in Barber, 1958, p. 75.  
24 Barber, 1958, p. 73.  
27 Smith, 1959.  
31 Quoted in O’Brien, 1989, p. 35.  
34 Anthes, 2006, p. 84.  
37 Burn, 1995, p. 21.  
39 Sekula, 1988. The essay and photographs were republished under the same title in book form in 1997 by the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Sekula, 1997), with additional essays by Gary Dufour and John O’Brien.  
40 Sekula, 1988, p. 23.  
41 Sekula, 1988, p. 4.  
42 Sekula, 1988, p. 4.  
43 Quoted in Sekula, 1988, p. 24. While most Sudbury workers belonged in the early 1980s to the United Steelworkers of America, one small local of 2,000 workers was still represented by an earlier, more radical and militant, union, the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, which had been expelled from major US labor federations in the anti-communist purges of the 1950s and 1960s.  
44 Burn, 1995, p. 21  
45 Higham, 2004, p. x.  
46 Higham, 2004, p. x.  
47 Basanez, Nevitte, and Inglehart, 1996.  
48 None of those responsible for the hijacking of four planes on 9/11 came across the Canadian border, despite repeated suggestions by American government officials that they did. See Curry, 2009.  
49 Zirin, 2009. See also Ackleson, 2009.  
50 Burn, 1995, p. 21.  
51 See Bordo, 2002.  
53 See Basanez, Nevitte, and Inglehart, 1996.  
54 For the significance of attachments to place, see Tuan, 1977.
References


Despite the remarkable advances in the field of American art in recent years, historians of the visual culture of the United States can seldom forget that their area of study has existed for a far shorter time than most others within the discipline of art history—really only a matter of decades. This simple fact is evident to anyone who compares the literature of American art history to the more developed lineage of scholarship in traditional fields, examines the continuing place of the field within the curricular structure of many art history departments, or frequents international circuits of academic art history and curatorial exchange. Moreover, until very recently, American art history has developed almost completely within the intellectual context (both university and museum) of the United States, without the benefits of a more international community of scholars. It is, in some ways, the art-historical field most bound by isolation and provincialism of several sorts, and it came into being through a discourse of “exceptionalism,” the belief that there is something different, even something unique, about the democracy of the United States and the culture to which it gave rise. This claim of an exceptional status, largely uninflected by international exchange, communication, and transit, is hardly a promising topic for a generation of scholars seeking to envision a global art history.

In his book *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, British historian Godfrey Hodgson reminds us of the deleterious effects of the political exceptionalism that still operates in some quarters of United States foreign policy, especially the notion that sees American military power as a morally ordained force emanating from an almost biblically authorized “City on a Hill,” a redeeming wave issuing forth to splash American truths upon distant shores. “It is not wholly untrue,” Hodgson says about the exceptionalist narrative. “But important truths have been left out.” In a bit of waggish understatement, he notes that it is not particularly healthy “for individuals or nations, to believe things that are not quite true.” If that is the case, then we might well throw up our hands and conclude that much of the rhetoric concerning American
art and society produced over the last 250 years is very unhealthy indeed. Yet Hodgson also allows that there are some ideas relating to American exceptionalism that should not be dismissed so summarily. What I hope to do here is test a few of those ideas to see what they may offer in the way of a historical explanation of the phenomenon while also pushing a bit beyond the simple notion of exceptionalism. I want to suggest that a more complex understanding of provincialism, along with a recognition of the historical facts of colonialism that have structured the relationship of the United States to other nations, might offer a more palatable way of integrating a purely “national” art-historical narrative into one that participates in the give and take of global exchange.

However, it must be said that the historical texts with which we have to work don’t always make this an easy task. For example, in 1845 the New York author and politician Joel T. Headley gave an address to members of the American Art-Union, in which his nationalistic pride was on full display. In ringing, vigorous language, he stated:

Every nation, worthy of the name of nation, has its native soul, as well as native soil—its own peculiar views of all that makes up this life, and its own mode of uttering those views. ... If there ever was a people on the face of the earth with peculiar and striking characteristics, it is the American people; and if we could only release ourselves from that strange infatuation about foreign artists, and foreign literature, and foreign every thing, and dare and love to be ourselves, we should soon have an American school of art, as well as a peculiar form of government.

Curiously, although American sculptors resident in Italy were routinely criticized for abandoning their country and producing works out of step with American tastes, Headley used the example of the Florence-based Hiram Powers’s Eve (Figure 19.1) to prove his point, writing,

Powers builds an Eve beside the Venus de Medici, and gives to the world an American’s conception of a woman. ... I must confess there is something cheering in thus beholding Western men on the classic ground of Italy, flinging abroad their arms in the same unrestrained freedom they did on their native soil. ... There is good strong, Saxon hearts here as ever beat on the soil of England.²

I suspect that few viewers today would see any unmistakably “American” characteristics in Powers’s statue of Eve (and perhaps few of Headley’s listeners saw them at the time), but this only underscores the capacity of exceptionalist rhetoric to strain for effect. In these few lines, Headley hits nearly every issue pertaining to American exceptionalism. He invokes racial distinctions, he demonstrates an antipathy to foreign manners, and he gives the debate a gendered tinge for good measure. He also stresses two concepts that are the poles around which all exceptionalist discourse circulates in the United States: government—that is, the democratic experiment, in contrast to European monarchies—and nature—the native soil so often held up as distinctive. This sweep of exceptionalism is certainly broad—then and now—and twenty-first-century historians of American art cannot escape its capacity to color all that they do as interpreters of the United States. Indeed, given the current landscape of the discipline, one could go so far as to say that the minute a graduate student declares a specialization in historic American art, he or she engages in an exceptionalist act.
My own thoughts on exceptionalism cannot help but be inflected by the fact that I was a student of Barbara Novak, one of a handful of Harvard-trained art historians who constituted the first generation of professionals in the field. Novak’s landmark works, two books published in 1969 and 1980, had unprecedented influence among both Americanists and non-Americanists. American art history has come so far in recent times, that it is easy to forget how radical and epiphanic her first book, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, was over forty years ago, in its rich, allusive prose and its thoughtful subjection of American painting to the intellectual tools of a gifted

![Figure 19.1](Figure19.1.jpg)

**Figure 19.1** Hiram Powers, *Eve Tempted or Eve Before the Fall*, modeled 1842, marble, $68\frac{7}{8} \times 29\frac{7}{8} \times 20\frac{1}{2}$ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. *Source:* Photo Smithsonian American Art Museum / Art Resource / Scala, Florence.
art historian, rather than the dry, antiquarian or chatty, anecdotal writing that had often been its lot until then. It is a book of astonishing ambition in its attempt to formulate a comprehensive explanatory model for American painting, to create an intellectual structure and formal apparatus that bestowed value on works of art that had rarely been treated with such seriousness. Today, it is true, our expanded understanding of American art history prompts questions about the many important artists who did not make it into her selective account. And our embrace of pluralism and diversity (of race, region, gender, style, and more) makes it impossible to contemplate a single encompassing narrative of the type she advanced, however important it was to the development of the field.

Those who have read Novak’s books can probably imagine the kind of classroom experience we had at Columbia University, where she taught. Each semester would normally begin with a consideration of one of her most beloved paintings, John Singleton Copley’s Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait (Figure 19.2), an expansive and wonderfully heaped image that was also a generous font of Novak’s core intellectual precepts concerning American pragmatism and the object. A devoted reader of Ernst Gombrich,
she used the Gombrichian binary of “making” and “matching” to help elucidate her theory that early American artists approached the object with a conceptual bias, willing it into form as idea rather than trying to “match” it through a perceptual act. She always thought that her first job was to teach her students to read form, American form, as she termed it, and once they came to the realization that they would break a tooth if they ever tried to bite into one of Copley’s conceptual apples, she felt they were well on their way. Her own insight into the formal dynamics of images, as I still believe can be discerned from reading almost any sentence she writes, is prodigious, and most students left her courses with sharply honed tools of vision.

Despite the strong strain of exceptionalism in her scholarship (she was interested in pointing out what she called the “indigenous” traits of American art, which she nevertheless stressed need not be unique to American art), Novak believed in the comparative method, and we were often struck by the slide pairings in her lectures. Many of the most arresting of these took viewers beyond the parochial boundaries of American art, as in her celebrated juxtaposition of William Sidney Mount’s *Power of Music* with Piero della Francesca’s *Flagellation* from her first book, which in his definitive article on the Mount work, Bruce Robertson dubbed “famous” in the literature of American art, crediting it, partially, with establishing the renown of the painting. Another comparison in her first book placed Winslow Homer’s *Snap the Whip* alongside Nicholas Poussin’s *Bacchanalian Revel before a Herm*. In her classes, Novak used this pairing to explore what she called Homer’s “classic” structure, an adjective she took pains to distinguish from “classical,” not wanting to leave the false impression that there was anything “Homeric” about Homer’s subjects. One may well object that such comparisons are ahistorical and characteristic of a now discredited formalist impulse to universalize distinct cultures and eras through abstract principles of design. Still, the very act of loading these two slides into the projectors (a “humble” American work next to an Old Master masterpiece) was an audacious one for the time, suggestive that American art might well be understood by moving beyond its borders. Indeed, there is a certain irony that despite Novak’s association with exceptionalism, she regularly looked with inquiring eyes at more Dutch, German, Scandinavian, English, and French art than just about any American art historian I know.

Yet, the comparative method alone is no guarantee of the absence of exceptionalism, and often it simply reinforces the notion of separate, immutable national characteristics. Art historians are perhaps aware of this in ways that colleagues in history and literature may not be, for in contrast to some of those text-based disciplines, the parsing of national “schools” has been at the foundation of art history—thanks to the ordering necessities of the museum, the catalogue, and the auction house. As far back as the early nineteenth century, Goethe proclaimed an era of *Weltliteratur* that superseded national schools, but he did not make the same assertion about art, which he knew well. Many historians have written forcefully about the nationalist myths that are reified by this practice, suggesting that such classification only fuels the propensity to make essentialist claims based on language, borders, or ethnicity. Certainly as it is practiced in the political arena, I think it is fair to say that this type of nationalism has been a great evil—thwarting cooperation and communication, flouting international law, and justifying the most unspeakable acts of violence that we tend to perpetrate on each other (only religion rivals nationalism in this respect).

And the notion of national “schools” has not been particularly friendly to American art. Novak once recounted a story of her days as the lone Americanist
doctoral candidate at Harvard in the mid-1950s. All the art history graduate students were put in a room with unidentified paintings from the Fogg Museum, and their task was to sort them by school. The one work they could not identify they decided to call “American School,” saying, “Here, Barbara, that must be yours.” (If I remember the story correctly, the painting turned out to be by Emil Nolde.) I encountered much the same thing when I worked briefly at the National Gallery of Art in Washington after completing my PhD: I was assigned to research a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portraits of unclear attribution. I discovered that some time prior to my arrival, all the unidentified portraits in the gallery’s collection had been brought together, and that consummate connoisseur and Berenson protégé Sydney Freedberg, then the gallery’s chief curator, had gone around the room with other curators trailing behind, confidently saying, “French,” “English,” “Dutch,” “German,” etc. Only those portraits that stumped him were designated “American School.”

So in the eyes of many non-Americanists, the “American School” was anything left over, anything that didn’t fit elsewhere, anything one did not understand or recognize, or anything with which the chief curators of the time did not want to deal. This is hardly the construction of a coherent, “exceptional,” national production, exemplary of “pure” embodiments of shared mores, of common blood. It is, instead, definition by negation, by absence. It is not exceptionalist but, rather, it is a kind of vacuum, a non-category. That’s not a very exciting place to be, and if this was the prevailing view when American art history emerged as a scholarly field, it is no wonder that our predecessors adopted an exceptionalist model, almost as a defense mechanism. The German scholar Winfried Fluck has recently written that not so long ago, European students of American studies (even those with a leftist political orientation) adopted exceptionalism as an explanatory structure, not because they necessarily agreed with its nationalist premises, but because they found it useful to justify a field of study that was beleaguered and disdained within their larger departments of literature, history, or sociology.5

David Peters Corbett, who has revealingly reflected on the similarities between the development and intellectual placement of historic British and American art vis-à-vis the mainstream modernist art-historical narrative, has described the same dilemma.6 Those who wish to “recover” a neglected historical tradition (such as nineteenth-century English painting) are awkwardly forced to become an apologist for it, often making exceptional claims about why it is different and why it is worthwhile to reconsider, that it represents a rich opportunity for intellectual and even aesthetic engagement—essentially, that it matters. This was certainly the position of the early Americanists of Novak’s generation trying to explain themselves to skeptical colleagues. They found themselves on the outside of their own discipline and they used exceptionalism as a way of arguing themselves back into it. Once the recovery is launched, though, it becomes necessary to move on from that initial cheer-leading position.

Thus, it may be worth thinking about American exceptionalism as an operative intellectual construct in a comparative or international setting. In an essay published in 2007 on provincialism, Milan Kundera observed, “It is in foreign universities that a work of art is most intractably mired in its home province.” Kundera might also have added “foreign museums,” if the example of the exhibition, De l’Allemagne, a long-awaited survey of German painting that took place at the Louvre in 2013, is any indication. It was fascinating to watch the debate surrounding the Louvre’s nationalist curatorial interpretation, which was denounced by German academics in particular,
as essentialist, romantic, and teleological, bent on finding some sort of anti-modern German “soul” to explain the entirety of German visual production. As art historian Christian Joschke wrote in *Le Monde*, “All of this is happening as if the curators of the exhibit had ignored the intense historiographic debates that took place in the 1980s and 1990s around the question of German national identity.”

Episodes such as *De l’Allemagne* remind us that the United States does not have a monopoly on exceptionalism and that other communities of scholars are grappling with the issue in much the same manner as Americanists. For if the field of American art history came into existence as an exceptionalist practice, it has recently taken pains to define itself as anything but. This is a salutary development, and Americanists are certainly not alone in shifting their attention to transnational models, or to the cultural productions of social and ethnic groups who occupy the periphery of traditional centers of power—to name just two alternative emphases. Such a retreat from exceptionalism has nevertheless impacted Americanist scholarship in unanticipated ways. One example worthy of consideration is the phenomenon known as luminism, the mid-nineteenth-century landscape mode that was christened and celebrated in the latter half of the twentieth century as a home-grown alternative to over-composed, noisy, and dramatic paintings of sublime American mountain ranges or formulaic Claudian landscapes steeped in picturesque theory. Advocates of luminism celebrated its quieter, subdued tone, its radiating light, its strong sense of flat, linear design and mensuration, and its treatment of the human figure that seemed to call to mind the American philosophical tradition of Transcendentalism.

Along with that of her colleague John Wilmerding, Novak’s writing was at its most impassioned when it came to luminism, specifically in relation to Fitz Henry Lane and Martin Johnson Heade. Yet some critics disputed the use of terms such as “indigenous” and “unique” to describe their art; the topic became problematic for later generations of scholars, who chafed at the exceptionalist claims made on behalf of luminism, which were magnified by a splashy exhibition that took place at the National Gallery of Art in 1980. Thus, even though it has a historiographic importance well worth considering, many scholars today avoid discussions of luminism, eschewing both the term and, more troublingly, the artists most identified with it. This is a shame, because when capable historians do actually take on luminism, the results can be stimulating and rewarding. The fact is that the exceptionalist controversies surrounding Lane and Heade have tainted them somewhat and apparently discouraged younger scholars from taking up their work (this is particularly true of Lane). The exceptionalist baggage is just too heavy to bear.

Though she did not discuss Lane at length in her important book, *Empire of the Eye*, Angela Miller usefully suggested in an aside that his idiosyncratic art production may best be understood as a local, regional phenomenon, with, I would add, complex social and mercantile ties to his communities in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and coastal Maine. What this amounts to is interpreting Lane as a provincial artist (or what Kenneth Clark suggested fifty years ago we might call a “micropolitan” artist), and I would propose that the concept of provincialism is a much more useful tool than exceptionalism for understanding nineteenth-century, and even early twentieth-century, American art. Whereas exceptionalism traffics in the intangibles of ethos and essence, of race and soil, provincialism has greater historical traction. It is dependent not on myth, but on real relationships of center to periphery, of metropole to province. This is true whether you are speaking literally about goods and services, or
figuratively about art and culture, and it is especially applicable to the United States, which is one vast settler-colony nation, even as it operates in the modern era of globalism.

In the Milan Kundera essay I cited earlier, the author has quite a bit to say about provincialism as it relates to cultural production. He distinguishes two types: large-nation provincialism and small-nation provincialism. The large-nation variety occurs when a country has such a high opinion of itself that it takes no interest in the art or literature of other peoples (Kundera cites the French as the prime example). Small-nation provincialism operates differently. Here, the country worries that its art is inferior when compared to larger international culture, and so it understands and interprets it as belonging only to the home turf. The end result is the same: “the inability (or the refusal) to see one’s own culture in the large context.” While it seems to me that the contemporary United States, in its political and military posturing, as well as in its exporting of popular culture, is definitely of the large-nation variety of provincialism—caring little for the views of those beyond its own borders even as it impacts them severely, American art before 1945 is just as definitely a historiographic example of small-nation provincialism. It is almost always studied in the small context. In this sense, American art historians are provincial. We have a horror of special pleading, of making claims for our material, especially aesthetic ones, that place it alongside contemporary European productions. Where does this sheepishness come from? It may be that the strong current of exceptionalist rhetoric, to which we are heir, pushes us toward one or another variety of self-imposed provincialism. This historiography bears consideration.

In 2009, Sarah Burns and I published a large volume, a documentary history of American art from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries, bringing together over 600 primary sources: letters, diary entries, poems, speeches, legal writings, and criticism. Such an extensive reading project was a unique opportunity to follow a number of themes in American art history through the decades, and one of them was exceptionalism. It is intriguing to discover just how constant the concept of American exceptionalism is in the literature of American art, especially in the nineteenth century. But it is even more interesting to discover its mutability, its easy adaptability to divergent points of view, and its waxing and waning relevance depending on the particular moment in history. It is worth outlining the larger trends.

Not surprisingly, we hear very little about exceptionalism during the American colonial period. With no real nation-state, with American identity in the process of formation, and with ethnic and artistic traditions in active competition (Dutch, Swedish, Moravian, Spanish, French, English), the colonial cultural scene was transcultural, much more so than in the nineteenth century, when the lines hardened. In fact, the eighteenth century is now an area of burgeoning global scholarship for Americanists. What much of this work has in common is the situating of a variety of discourses within a complex mercantile economy and a circum-Atlantic theater of imperial colonialism, including Africa and South America. And in the last few years, important scholarship by Dana Leibsohn, Joanne Mancini, and others has extended this type of analysis to the Pacific world as well, particularly concerning the eighteenth-century Latin American trade with the Philippines, and through it, with China, and Japan.

However, during and after the Revolutionary War, exceptionalism became a prime, early Republican issue. It happened very quickly, and not just on the American side of the Atlantic. Thus the British artist James Barry could create his densely layered print,
The Phoenix or the Resurrection of Freedom in 1776 (Figure 19.3), envisioning a distant American land across a body of water in which the arts, in the persons of the three Muses, could flourish at last, outside of a European monarchical system. While treading on dangerous political territory, Barry hopefully posits the revolutionary American state as something different on the horizon, the savior of art and public culture, as well as a haven from religious persecution.17

In the United States, the roots of exceptionalism were also political, yet this sense of nationalistic hubris and American destiny quickly, and somewhat effortlessly, seeped into the culture at large. Identity formation of this type is almost always tied to organizations—it must operate in a group or social context if it is to have any staying power. Thus, in the field of art, some of the loudest early assertions of exceptionalism occur in the context of the founding of institutions, organizations such as the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts or the Society of Artists of the United States.

It is perhaps surprising how often in the early nineteenth century the thought was expressed that a democratic republic is not a system of government in which the arts can flourish. Quite the opposite has been the general postulate of so much cultural nationalist writing of the twentieth century. Yet when architect Benjamin Latrobe delivered an oration on the occasion of the first exhibition of the Society of Artists, in Philadelphia in 1811, he admitted, “we cannot disguise from ourselves, that, far from enjoying the support of the general voice of the people, our national prejudices are unfavourable to the fine arts. Many of our citizens … dread a high grade of perfection in the fine arts as the certain indication of the loss of political liberty.”18
Nevertheless, Latrobe goes on to make a forceful argument for the natural marriage of democracy and the fine arts. He labors to dissociate art and architecture from despotistic rulers, wealthy individuals, sensual gratification, and general idleness. In the end he invokes “the spirit of commerce” as a hopeful sign of private patronage in the United States. We might dub this “market-driven” exceptionalism, and it reappears often, nowhere more strongly than in Massachusetts politician Thomas Cary’s publication of 1845, with its striking title, *The Dependence of the Fine Arts for Encouragement in a Republic, on the Security of Property.* Here, Cary endeavors to connect patronage of the fine arts with a defense of private property. The specter of some kind of revolutionary overthrow of individual capital lingers oddly in the background of the essay, and Cary links anti-communitarian sentiment with the freedom to patronize the arts. In his mind, American artistic “consumption” locates itself within a stable, self-correcting market, one that respects the “private rights” of the rich, who have earned their wealth honestly.

Less mercantile, and generally more cheering, is Gulian Verplanck’s address before the American Academy of the Fine Arts, in 1824. Verplanck grew up with a fine portrait of his father by John Singleton Copley (Figure 19.4), and he objects to the

Figure 19.4  John Singleton Copley, *Daniel Crommelin Verplanck*, 1771, oil on canvas, 49 1/2 × 40 in. (125.7 × 101.6 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Bayard Verplanck, 1949. Acc. no. 49.12. Source: Image copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource / Scala, Florence.
Exceptionalism, nationalism, provincialism

European denigration of portraiture (as evidenced in Sir Joshua’s hierarchy of genres), sensitively defending it as of particular interest to Americans. A Democrat in politics, his attitude toward the arts was populist. He describes a universal language of form that could address “our common nature,” and he also recognizes the power and utility of reproducible forms of art, such as engravings. But he quickly passes from the specific social conditions of the United States to a more typical essentialism, writing that the arts “should be loved and fostered … because they call forth the exercise of a peculiar sort of talent, apparently native to our soil.” Of American artists, he assured his listeners, “Nature was their only teacher, her works their great Academy.” Almost as if there were something in the American water, he attributes their success to “the existence of some organic physical cause, or some mental peculiarity, strongly impelling talent in that direction.”

What interests me during this period is that alongside these exceptionalist claims was a counter-discourse, not quite as loud, arguing a kind of anti-exceptionalism. As early as 1816 an essay in the *North American Review* asked, “It may … be a favourite project with some of our artists, to labour to give their works an original character, and by striving for a species of individuality in their labours, to found a new school in this country. … But is there not some hazard in indulging a sentiment so honourable?” The author makes a suggestion, anathema to many other critics, that American scenery—vast and raw—may not provide artists with suitable material for cultivating a higher taste. American nature is unrefined in this view, and it is too familiar to Americans, who will want to see their own preconceptions mirrored in recognizable landscape images. This last prediction certainly came true in the case of Thomas Cole, who bemoaned the fact that his American patrons wanted only recognizable views of their own terrain, rather than the programmatic, Italian-inspired compositions he found more rewarding.

An even more assertive essay appeared in the *Knickerbocker* magazine in 1839, opening with the line, “We are not among those who are very anxious to see an American school of painting.” During a period of knee-jerk celebration of all things American, the *Knickerbocker* author declares that American subjects (Native Americans, pristine landscapes, nostalgic views of childhood) are too limiting and that artists should strive to be citizens of the world, aware of the teachings of art beyond the Atlantic shore and aspiring to move beyond local anecdote and transcriptions of regional scenery. Further, the patriotic and indiscriminate vaunting by critics (which the author believed typical of the literature on art of the period) did nothing to help artists but rather killed their desire to improve themselves. In short, blind nationalism debased American art, encouraging it to cater to the lowest level of taste.

Both of these essays are steeped in received picturesque theory, and it is clear that for some, the English picturesque was incompatible with American subject matter. The essays also suggest rather plainly that American artists needed to get out more. In some ways, Frederic Church did just that when he traveled to South America, gathering material for perhaps the most famous of all American landscape paintings, *Heart of the Andes* (Figure 19.5). Church is relevant here because the exhibition and tour of his masterwork unleashed a flood of exceptionalist claims. Here is just one example, from the *New York Herald*: “From the exhibition of Church’s great picture, the ‘Heart of the Andes,’ may be dated the inauguration of this new art epoch. This extraordinary work may be said to embody all the peculiarities and excellences which … have given the stamp of originality to American art.” What is even more remarkable is that
when *Heart of the Andes* was shown in London, some English critics also prostrated themselves, declaring repeatedly that not only was a distinctive American school born, but that it surpassed anything being done in Europe at the time. Thus, the London *Art Journal* went so far as to declare that the English public was experiencing “poetic Art, taught us anew in a land where nature is most untrammeled [sic], and freedom broadest.”

This was the zenith of American exceptionalism in nineteenth-century art writing, for the terrible conflict of the Civil War prompted a wave of anxiety and self-questioning that did not dissipate for decades. It also encouraged a relatively new phenomenon of regional exceptionalism, as when Samuel Davis published “The Fine Arts at the South” shortly after the war broke out, in which he connected the visual arts to the “temple of our Southern nationality”—“Far removed from the cold artificiality of Northern taste, which sacrifices the living feeling in its effort after elaborate forms of expression.”

After the war, there were occasional reassertions of Southern nationalism in the arts, but in general, the rapid relinquishing of exceptionalism throughout the United States is astounding. An article entitled “The Conditions of Art in America,” which appeared a year after the surrender of Robert E. Lee, declared, “It seems … that there is nothing in forms of government alone to lead us to conclude, in any given case, that art will or will not flourish. … Most foolish, then, and inconsequent is the … assertion that ‘free institutions secure the greatness of the fine arts.’”

This is, of course, the period in which the majority of successful American artists sought training abroad, and the loss of national characteristics to a kind of one-world cosmopolitanism became a leitmotif in criticism of the period. We see it from the Europeans as well, as when the German engraver and critic Friedrich Pecht reviewed the American paintings
on display in the Munich *Internationale Kunstaustellung* in 1883: “these American pictures acquaint one with everything under the sun excepting American life itself, the peculiarities of which would, naturally, interest one most. ... scarcely a dozen treat subjects taken from the nature or people of the great trans-atlantic republic.”

Another German, Sylvester Koehler, who moved to the United States in 1868 and was surely one of the most thoughtful art writers of his time, diagnosed the lack of distinctive American characteristics by looking at the actual type of painting done by late nineteenth-century Americans, which he referred to as “Stimmungs-Malerei,” a concept that can be imperfectly translated as “sentiment painting” or “affective painting,” and which is probably the first use of that term in an American publication. In explanation of this moodiness, he wrote, “To be able to understand what really is modern art ... we must try to get a clear insight into our own state of mind. ... Now it must be admitted,—whether we like it or not,—that the prevailing characteristic of the modern state of mind is doubt.” Nevertheless, Koehler was not greatly troubled by this absence of confident nationalism or defining traits in American art. Looking to the future, he observed,

> Although we aspire to be a nation, we are yet without a national name ... and we present a mixture into which enter ingredients brought together from every quarter of the world. Our pride, therefore, must be in a greater, broader humanity than is possible among the better defined nationalities of the old world, which are really only tribal organizations on a larger scale. But the world’s progress is towards universal brotherhood, and we are its most advanced exponents, however limited and hampered we may be by the old Adam still clinging to us.

I rather like Koehler’s dismissal of European nation-states as “tribal organizations on a larger scale” and its hopeful anticipation of a kind of League of Nations of art. Even such a nationalist artist as Will Low could write in the early twentieth century: “it would be folly to carry patriotism so far as to claim that we have a distinct school.” Charles Caffin, writing in 1907, went further: “there are no longer distinct schools anywhere, since the reasons which accounted for their existence in the past no longer exist to-day. ... The whole trend of modern art has been toward a free-trade in motives and methods.”

Caffin’s invocation of a cultural “free trade,” though written over a hundred years ago, would seem to bring us squarely into our own era of globalization, and while this is not the place to make any concluding pronouncements on the geopolitical world order, it does seem to me that there are some issues of more modest importance within the contemporary and increasingly international practice of American art history that we might examine through the lens of American exceptionalism.

As international interest in historic American art grows, and as more and more historians of American art take up opportunities to teach abroad I worry greatly about language training—for American art historians certainly, but also for Americans in general. At my own institution, a student, if she chooses, may graduate with a liberal arts degree without ever having studied a foreign language at the college level. This self-imposed parochialism may be simple laziness, but it is also *de facto* exceptionalism, based on willful ignorance and a kind of imperial lack of interest in other cultures. And it has infected art-historical education in the United States as much as it has primary and secondary education.
The de-emphasis on language training in the United States must certainly be felt by the newest generation of American art historians, who are largely products of that national system. When I attended Columbia University a quarter-century ago, PhD students specializing in American art had to demonstrate a facility in three foreign languages, but those requirements have since been relaxed, as is the case in most art history programs. This is a shame, and it means that we’re losing a certain comparative perspective. Of course at that time many of the classic texts of art history were not yet available in English, so perhaps language training was more of a necessity. In the early 1980s, for example, Erwin Panofsky’s _Die Perspektive als “Symbolische Form”_ had been translated into French and Italian, but not into English. Neither Alois Riegl’s _Stilfragen_ nor his _Spätromische Kunstindustrie_ were available in English, and it was hoped that your German would at least be good enough to get through the more important parts of those works, and to get something useful out of them. To cite just one instance, the concept of Riegl’s _Kunstwollen_ in his _Stilfragen_ seemed very appealing to us back then, with its suggestion that form and artistic expression were historically and regionally contingent, not necessarily based on some kind of universal mimetic development toward higher degrees of finish and complexity—this latter model one in which American art was always playing catch-up. And Riegl’s example in repeatedly writing about cultures and movements far to the periphery of those considered “important” also spoke to Americanists who were working in what one of my Renaissance and Baroque professors was pleased to call the “fringe fields” of art history.

This lack of a broader, supra-national and trans-historical context is not unique to the history of American art. I recently served on the outside review committee of one of the oldest and most prestigious art history departments in the United States, where the specialization and parochialism were striking. In their entire graduate career, the students in this department were only required to take one course outside of their narrow field of interest, whatever it might be: Renaissance, or contemporary, or ancient. I hope there is still room in twenty-first-century art history for the comparative method to help us get beyond these field-specific blinkers.

This brings me to a last point I will make, this one regarding a particular debate going on in the field of American art history, but one that has ramifications for all fields that are based, or were once based, in a national tradition. Among American art historians there has recently been a great deal of talk about what we might think of as a kind of “Maginot Line” of 1945 that separates the study of historic American art from that made in the postwar era, this later art having had a much greater international impact. The boundary of 1945 has governed disciplinary specializations for decades. Among those who argue that this boundary should be erased, there have been complaints of chronological discrimination—that scholars who work on postwar topics are not invited to Americanist symposia, or that certain funding organizations are interested only in historic American art, not contemporary. I have to admit that I find these complaints uninteresting and also a little hard to swallow. It is difficult for me to see scholars who work on Jackson Pollock, or Donald Judd, or Jenny Holzer—artists esteemed the world over and welcomed into the institutional corridors of the discipline—as the underdogs, kept down by the powerful Americanist mafia who work on the Ralph Earls, Lilly Martin Spencers, or Kenyon Coxes of art history.

More interesting is the assumption that art after 1945—or we could say after 1965, or 1985, for the line demarcating contemporary art seems constantly in motion—is
international and global in ways earlier art is not, that there is now a new field of
world contemporary art that is post-national, hybrid, fluid, migratory, and trans-
spatial. James Elkins has predicted that this new entity will take center stage in
art-historical debates in the next ten years, writing somewhat pessimistically, “No one
knows what contemporary international art expresses, or how best to interpret it.”
I would say that global contemporary art has already taken center stage. It dominates
the interest of our students. It has seen an efflorescence of university positions devoted
to it in the United States, while new positions in historic American art have nearly
disappeared. This is a kind of presentism that risks skewing the historical education of
our students, but it also risks eliminating discrete fields of hard-won local knowledge,
as fewer practitioners go through the process of formation in these fields, learning the
scholarly tools and immersing themselves in the key monuments of scholarship that
shaped them.

What is happening in art history is akin to what has already happened in a number
of social sciences, such as geography and anthropology. There, the study of global
processes has replaced expertise in regions, which is seen as backward and limiting,
often reifying structures inherited from colonialism. The fixedness of place is local; the
fluidity of space is global, or so the argument goes. The study of phenomena across
space now seems more interesting than the study of layered, intersecting phenomena
in a single region. A field like American art history, which essentially got its start as a
kind of area study as they are understood in the social sciences, seems to have little to
contribute to such a liberating, unbounded notion of inquiry. Yet as the new transna-
tional eighteenth-century scholarship reminds us, a thorough and grounded immer-
sion in a particular place (I am tempted to say a particular province) allows for a much
more nuanced study of transnational linkages and mobility. The dynamics of localities
should inform these processes of globalization if we are to avoid a kind of forced
homogenization. I do believe there is still a place for an “area studies” model of art
history, linked to and profiting from a more global orientation.

For when we look at the specifics of local environment, the general narratives of
historic American art are quantitatively and qualitatively different from European
developments, just as American history, folklore, religious development, geography,
and culture are also fundamentally different. To say otherwise is to deny historical
facts. No, the United States are not the Galapagos Islands, preserved in a kind of
democratic bell jar of exceptionalism, but over several centuries American institutions
have evolved differently. And part of our job is to be attentive to the particular and the
local in our field of study. This is more than saying that the art we study needs “con-
text,” that our narratives risk being colorless without it. A belief in the importance of
localities privileges place and space in ways that acknowledge their mutual role in the
production of culture and society. It suggests that sensitive and probing microhisto-
ries that take proximal and temporal relationships into account are the necessary
building blocks for the more sweeping interpretive thrusts that often change a field of
study. It offers us a way of recuperating the overly broad and encompassing adjective,
“American,” by modifying it with situational specificity. After all, perhaps the worst
that one could say about a particular topic is that it is unexceptional.

This is all sounding like a defense of exceptionalism, and I don’t mean it to be. But
it is perhaps true that I don’t go as far as some in disbeliefing national characteristics,
or in condemning them unequivocally as falsehoods. In part this is because I prefer to
see these characteristics as local, regional, and particular in derivation. In part it is
because the subjects I study took them so seriously, relentlessly and obsessively cataloguing and analyzing them. Yes, these exceptionalist narratives are, as often as not, constructions that are manipulated into self-fulfilling prophecies, but they are also a principal means of cultural and societal self-definition, and thus extremely important if we are to take seriously our roles as interdisciplinary historians.

It may be that historians of American art (or Japanese art or German art or Turkish art) might do well to follow Kundera and embrace their provincialism, but try for something between the small-nation and large-nation varieties. We can look closely at the local and push for the finely grained texture of contextual interpretation, but we can do so without erecting a palisade of inward-looking exceptionalist definitions. We can recognize the distinctiveness of the cultural productions we study, while always remaining aware that our subjects were tied to an international network of ideas in ways so numerous that neither they nor we could articulate them all.

Notes

1 Hodgson, 2009, pp. xvi, xvii.
2 Headley, 1845, pp. 12, 13.
3 I am thinking here of some of the early twentieth-century writing on colonial portraiture or some of the popular attempts to survey nineteenth-century art in the decades following World War II.
4 Robertson, 1992, p. 38.
8 Joschke, 2013, p. 17, my translation.
9 Wilmerding, 1980. Here too, the Louvre’s De l’Allemagne exhibition is a reminder of the blockbuster’s tendency to inflate and simplify intellectual claims and push them to the breaking point.
10 Miller, 1993, ch. 7; Manthorne and Mitchell, 2006.
11 Very recently, this seems to have been changing. For example, there is renewed interest in the hummingbird paintings of Heade. See Cao, 2011.
12 Miller, 1993, p. 14. Margaretta Lovell is currently preparing a book on Lane that will contribute immeasurably to this project. Interestingly, though it might seem to be the antithesis of the formal approach of her first book, Novak often tried to interest graduate students in the 1980s in working on the themes of “labor and leisure” in the paintings of Lane.
14 Kundera, 2007, p. 31, his emphasis.
15 I discuss this phenomenon at greater length in Davis, 2003, pp. 561–563.
16 Leibsohn, 2012; Mancini, 2011.
17 On this print, see Symmons, 1976.
18 Latrobe, 1811, pp. 4–5.
19 Latrobe, 1811, p. 30.
20 Cary, 1845.
21 Verplanck, 1824, p. 146. The claim that a national or regional art is direct and factual, derived from nature rather than metropolitan principles of abstraction and
elaboration, is not unique to the United States and can be found in the art-historical literature of a number of European nations on the periphery of the dominant French tradition.

25 Davis, 1862, pp. 661, 658.
27 Pecht, 1884, p. 76. On Pecht, see Bringmann, 1982.
29 Low, 1901, p. 234; Caffin, 1907, p. 332.
30 For more on this issue, see LaFountain, 2007, and Jason LaFountain’s essay (Chapter 20) in this volume.
31 For some of the most incisive and rewarding discussion of this issue, see the essays in this volume by Joshua Shannon and Jason Weems (Chapter 1) and Jennifer Roberts (Chapter 2).
32 Elkins, 2010, p. B14. Some professors of contemporary art history have gone so far (too far I would say) as to suggest that it should not be taught as art history, that it requires a different kind of training from historical fields, or that the art itself is fundamentally different from what other art historians study. See Smith, 2010; Karmel, 2011.
33 For discussions of this problem in the context of European art history, see Nochlin, 2012, p. 197, and, especially, Mainardi, 2011.
34 I am playing a bit fast and loose with my use of the term “area studies” here, for the Cold War era that gave rise to the phenomenon explicitly defined these “areas” as anything that was not the United States. For stimulating treatments of this debate in the social sciences, see Mirsepasi, Basu, and Weaver, 2003, and Moseley, 2009.

References


For the first eight years of my life, I lived in the small town of Keeseville in the North Country of New York State. It is located 15 miles from Plattsburgh, a ferry ride across Lake Champlain from Burlington, Vermont, and 80 miles south of Montreal, which was the nearest big city. My father’s side of the family is largely French in extraction, and I was raised Catholic. Among my earliest memories of viewing anything that might be construed as “art” is my experience, while attending weekly Mass, of looking up at the polychrome reliefs of the Stations of the Cross ringing the interior of Keeseville’s French Catholic church. Beneath each of the reliefs appeared a painted French caption (Figure 20.1). These reliefs provided not only my first encounter with art, but also my first experience of difficulty with a non-English language. Whereas I could “read” the images well enough, based on a rudimentary understanding of the life of Christ, the content of most of the captions eluded me.

Although my father’s family had learned French at home for generations, in his lifetime (he was born in 1949) he learned it at school, or not at all. This movement from French language as integrally important to everyday life and identity to French as a kind of educational supplement paralleled other cultural changes in the area in which we lived. Whereas the inscriptions on the gravestones dating to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Keeseville’s French cemetery bear francophone surnames and other French inscriptions, as the decades proceed, surnames become anglophone (my own surname, LaFountain, is typical), and the use of French in general is displaced by English. I studied French for a year in the seventh grade, but was unable to absorb much of it. I had particular difficulty with pronunciation—more so than with the non-English languages I have studied since (German, Italian, and Latin). As a graduate student I traveled to France on four occasions for various purposes, and given my experiences there, I doubt I will ever feel confident speaking French. I am now able to read the captions on the reliefs I have mentioned, but that
ability has at least something to do with my knowledge of art history and the pictorial elements of the reliefs, which—for a French-poor viewer such as myself—act as contextual clues (pictorial captions, one might say) for deciphering the text.

This lack of confidence in navigating non-English languages is not altogether specific to the historian of American art. I am acquainted with art historians specializing in a range of periods and cultural contexts for whom lack of facility with this or that language has been a problem, whether in travel, research, or writing—but, I would contend, it is a defining characteristic of the field of American art history. In what follows I discuss language as a central problem in both past and present study of American art history. Beginning with the establishment of the field in the 1960s, so-called foreign languages have been woefully underused in researching and writing histories of American art, and consequently these histories, generally speaking, are governed by avoidance of primary and secondary sources in languages other than English. I call attention to some of the ways in which English monolingualism has shaped

Figure 20.1  *Jésus est mis dans le sépulcre* (Christ being laid in the tomb), Station of the Cross number XIV with French caption, painted relief sculpture. St. John’s Catholic Church, Keeseville, New York. Source: Photo www.semerarophotography.com.
the production of histories of American art, and I reflect on my own experiences of linguistic difficulty in research, writing, and teaching. Drawing on scholarship that addresses the multilingualism of American literature, especially the writings of literary historians Marc Shell and Werner Sollors, I argue that despite growing attention to manifold categories of difference—particularly as a result of postmodern multiculturalism—language is a type of difference with which American art history scholarship has not yet contended. In my conclusion, I posit some solutions to the problem.

There are two things this chapter is not intended to be. First, although I discuss the work of individual scholars, it is not intended as an indictment of particular historians of American art for their linguistic inabilities. Rather, it aims to analyze an important discursive structure that determines how scholars have tended to approach and interpret the history of American art. Second, although the chapter addresses some subjects for which understanding of non-English languages is critical—mainly in the study of early American art—it does not serve as an inventory of the full range of topics in American art history that can or should be taken up by those with multilingual abilities. For most cultural circumstances studied by historians of American art there existed both spoken and written languages, and scholars, especially those trained in the United States, need to prioritize studying languages beyond English.¹ A final note: this chapter about multilingualism is written in English and addressed to readers of English—a necessity given its target audience, but an irony that is not lost on its author.

“the great car of English”

The first section of Billy Collins’s The Art of Drowning, a poetry collection published in 1995, opens with a poem entitled “Consolation,” a reflection on feelings of comfort and discomfort in reading and speaking familiar and unfamiliar languages. Collins writes,

> How agreeable it is not to be touring Italy this summer, wandering her cities and ascending her torrid hilltowns. How much better to cruise these local, familiar streets, fully grasping the meaning of every roadsign and billboard and all the sudden hand gestures of my compatriots.

[…]

Instead of slouching in a café ignorant of the word for ice, I will head down to the coffee shop and the waitress known as Dot. I will slide into the flow of the morning paper, all language barriers down, rivers of idiom running freely, eggs over easy on the way.

And after breakfast, I will not have to find someone willing to photograph me with my arm around the owner. I will not puzzle over the bill or record in a journal what I had to eat and how the sun came in the window. It is enough to climb back into the car as if it were the great car of English itself and sounding my loud vernacular horn, speed off down a road that will never lead to Rome, not even Bologna.²
Collins skillfully describes what it is to feel at home with a language. Like a pleasant small town, to the person who knows English the language is “familiar” and “agreeable.” The places associated with English are “much better” than those where other languages, whether written or spoken, are to be unhappily confronted. Like one’s encounter with the morning newspaper, English “flows.” And, like a fried egg, it is “easy,” it even “runs freely.” It is a “great car” that takes us places.

Yet Collins’s poem is tinged with allusions to what is lost to the homebody in occupying a place of comfort, a linguistic location seemingly without boundaries (“all language barriers down”) because it is so self-contained. That Collins names his coffee shop waitress “Dot” is no mere coincidence. The pleasure he finds in going to see Dot is, at the same time, a dot of another kind: like the period that concludes a sentence, it is an ending. The eggs of English that she serves him are not only “over easy” but perhaps overly easy. And the road along which the great car of English travels, it turns out, “will never lead to Rome, not even Bologna.”

In “Consolation,” the slouch is the posture of ignorance—a self-conscious sinking, exposing that the slouching person knows she does not know. In his final book, Humanism and Democratic Criticism (2004), Edward Said argues for the value of slouching, for the importance of self-criticism among humanities scholars. In the book’s foreword, the philosopher Akeel Bilgrami summarizes Said’s position: “It is Said’s claim that until we supplement self-knowledge with self-criticism, in fact until we understand self-knowledge as being constituted by self-criticism, humanism and its disciplinary manifestations (‘the humanities’) are still not visible on the horizon.” Said’s attitude toward self-criticism is reminiscent of that of Margo Machida, a scholar of Asian American art, who argued at the symposium “American Art in a Global Context,” held at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2006, that efforts to internationalize American art history demand humility on the part of Americanists working in the United States. To me, this was one of the most important points made at the symposium, and it applies well to the matter of languages.

Humanism and Democratic Criticism also argues for a “return to philology,” which according to Said will facilitate the cultural diversification of the humanities in a global age. He defines philology as “a detailed, patient scrutiny of and a lifelong attentiveness to the words and rhetorics by which language is used by human beings who exist in history.” In the decade that has elapsed since the publication of Said’s book, ecocriticism and studies, for instance, of the “non-human animal” have become increasingly important to humanities scholarship, including art history. As Robin Kelsey puts it in his contribution to this volume, the current global ecological crisis “threatens to make any predominant concern for human society seem parochial and chauvinist.” And Alan Braddock has convincingly argued both here and elsewhere that narrowly “humanistic” humanities scholarship should be a thing of the past. In this day and age, to write in favor of philology can seem, as Said himself admitted, reactionary. Philology is associated with traditionalist humanism, the connotations of which are, to early twenty-first-century scholars, primarily negative. At the same time it is impossible to imagine thoroughgoing studies of the history of culture that do not attend to languages.

Without losing sight of the important arguments against humanism as it has been traditionally or narrowly defined, I want to consider the following: where will English take us, and where will it not? In a global context English is, unquestionably, the
single most useful language. But to a scholar who is traveling or conducting research abroad lack of additional language skills is, equally unquestionably, a major barrier. And within the borders of the present-day United States there are places English will not take us either. Today, as in the colonial and national past, many Americans are not at home with English. Yet languages that are mystifying to the English-only speaker or reader are always home to someone else.

In Other Words (Translations)

John Davis’s 2003 state-of-the-field essay, “The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States,” revisits a provocative review of Bryan Wolf’s 1982 book, Romantic Re-Vision: Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature, written by Alan Wallach in 1987. Wallach argued that Romantic Re-Vision is, among other things, woefully inattentive to social and economic history, and suggested that Wolf’s psychoanalytic account (“summed up,” for Wallach, “by the name of Freud”) could be countered with an analysis grounded in the thought and writings of Karl Marx. Davis appropriates Wallach’s formulation (Freud vs. Marx) as a binary through (and against) which to describe the state of the American field circa 2003. Davis associates Jules Prown and some of the graduate students he trained at Yale University—Wolf, David Lubin (especially Lubin’s first book, Act of Portrayal: Eakins, Sargent, James [1985]), and Alexander Nemerov—with Freud, while he allies Wallach and other social art historians, if loosely, with Marx.

For the purposes of this chapter, I am less interested in what separates Prown and Wallach than I am in what they seem to have in common. Since I first read Davis’s essay, I have often wondered whether Prown, if and when he read Freud, read it in the original German, or whether Wallach reads Marx in German. Neither of these scholars’ published works show evidence of having done so. Wallach once told me he occasionally picks up Marx in German to verify English translations, but, surveying his scholarship, this would seem to be the depth of his engagement. I dare say that Americanists have almost always read non-English works of philosophy or theory in translation. While this practice cuts across methodological dispositions, it is particularly interesting to think about some of Prown’s statements on method in relation to the practice of reading Freud in English.

Prown’s commitment to examining objects themselves, rather than images of objects, is well known, yet this seems to have been the inverse of his approach to reading theory, where, in a sense, an image (i.e. a translation) of the original sufficed. A linguistic authenticist might say that English translations are to original, non-English texts not as a high-resolution digital image of a painting is to its painted original, but as something like a charcoal drawing of a painting—often a poor one—is to a painted original. It is notable that despite a background in literary studies, and despite the literary-historical roots of the “close reading” he advocated, Prown consistently downplayed the significance of “verbal” or “written” expression in his methodological essays, and he rarely worked on objects bearing much text, let alone text in non-English languages.

This leads me to ask: is it possible that Prown’s material culture methods were developed in tandem with multilingual indifference or inability? In “Mind in Matter:
An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method” (1982), “language” is not part of his listing of salient characteristics that distinguish different social groups. He includes “nation, locality, class, religion, politics, occupation, gender, age, race, [and] ethnicity.” Much influential material culture theory focuses on formal analysis of non-textual elements of artworks or other objects. Although Prown asserts that one should take note of texts appearing on objects and consider them in interpretation, the place of text in material culture theory is underdeveloped and usually a mere footnote to formulations concerning what is to be gained through a more purely atextual brand of formal analysis. Prown was reacting to a scholarly climate that fetishized textual evidence as a gatekeeper to historical interpretation, and to be sure, material culture approaches have done a great deal to make scholars more aware of the cultural significance of everyday objects and the analytical promise of close attention to their forms. Yet many of the binaries with which Prown works are too simplistic. “Material culture” is not the opposite of “art” or “literature”; “style” is not the opposite of “writing.” And throughout art’s history there have been many hybrids of “nonverbal materials” and “verbal data”—as Prown divides them in “Style as Evidence” (1980).

Let’s consider the following hypothetical: how would a scholar armed with the methods outlined by Prown deal with a work bearing intracompositional writing in a language she could not read, like the one reproduced in Figure 20.2? The figure illustrates a page from a book created in 1903 by the Ipswich Summer School students of the artist and teacher Arthur Wesley Dow, gifted to him in anticipation of a trip he took around the world that year. Each student contributed a page, and like many pages, this one indexes the importance of Asian cultural production, including calligraphy, to Dow’s pedagogy. In the center of the page appears the name of the student who created it, “Kate K. Van Duzee,” and that of her hometown, “Dubuque, Iowa,” in script oriented vertically and styled to look Asian but which is in fact clearly English. To the left, a date (August 1903) has been similarly inscribed in a cartouche. To the right appears Chinese cursive calligraphy—a group of semi-legible fragments that read (I have learned from Asianist colleagues) as if a non-native speaker translated an English farewell note into broken Chinese. The calligraphy is a species of “pseudoscript.” As Alexander Nagel has argued in his recent work on pseudoscripts in Italian Renaissance art, there is a significant relationship between exoticizing pseudoscripts and the history of style. According to Nagel, experiments in the production of such pseudoscripts have rehearsed stylistic innovation in Western art. Which is to say that style and written expression, if seemingly at odds, are intimately interrelated.

The signature style of the Los Angeles graffiti artist RETNA—whose work simultaneously recalls ancient Mayan, Egyptian, Hebrew, Latin, Greek, Chinese, and Japanese writing traditions, as well as Latina/o “cholo” writing—is fully constituted by pseudoscript (or pseudo pseudoscript, as some viewers claim they can actually “read” his paintings) (see Figure 20.3). In the case of both Van Duzee’s page and RETNA’s murals, style and writing systems come together, with textual mark-making standing as a sign of style. While there may be something to the idea that looking carefully at works of art without reading relevant languages can help a scholar to see things she otherwise would not (the “naive” encounter as described by Prown), the only way to evaluate intra-compositional textual markings is through knowledge of written languages. Building contexts for works of art also demands grappling with writings,
primary and secondary, in languages besides English. Despite the interest in art as strangeness, and ostranenie, or “making strange,” as a method among Prown and the scholars he trained (Alexander Nemerov, in particular), in such scholars’ works we find little evidence that strange languages are a strangeness worth either appreciating or confronting.\(^{19}\)

Further evidence of a relationship between English-centered scholarship and material culture approaches can be found in the work of Margaretta Lovell, a student of Prown and another key figure in promoting material culture approaches to the history of American art. In *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans, and Patrons in Early America* (2005), Lovell argues that there is a lack of textual evidence related to
the production, reception, and theorization of art in the American colonies, and she tethers this lack to an argument in favor of material culture methods:

The rich pool of art criticism and art theory that scholars of British and continental eighteenth-century art have to call on to gloss “reception” and to build rich interpretive models concerning displaced political and social public contests echoed in the canvases and material culture of their patrons, is not found in America. No newpaper articles, no theory tomes, no Boswellian biographies exist. However, this dearth of verbal evidence gives us opportunity; indeed, it forces us to read the objects themselves.20

Lovell’s statement is inaccurate in a number of ways. For one thing—as I have argued elsewhere—she is inattentive to anti-material theorizations of art, such as those appearing in the literature of Puritan practical theology.21 In the late sixteenth century, English Puritans began to write about art, and this continued in early New England. A good deal of art writing was produced in the Northeast both preceding and coinciding with the period on which Lovell focuses (approximately 1730–90), but—and this is perhaps the barrier that led to Lovell’s remark—much of this writing appears in non-English languages.

An abundance of Puritan writing on art exists in both Latin (i.e. neo-Latin) and English. Some of the passages I encountered early in my research on the “art of
“living” in Puritanism, which became the subject of my doctoral dissertation, were in Latin. One such passage appears in Samuel Mather’s lengthy Latin epitaph on his grandfather Increase, printed at the end of his father Cotton’s biography, *Parentator*, published in colonial Boston in 1724. Samuel underlines how Increase, a learned man and an early president of Harvard College, still knew his priorities with regard to art: “In Caeteris Artibus peritus; / In Arte Deo Vivendi peritissimus; / Multijuga Eruditione florentissimus” (Figure 20.4). The lines translate: “Learned in other liberal arts, / Learned most in one art, / the art of Godly living.” It is no exaggeration to say that without basic training in Latin I would not, in the first place, have identified the discourse my dissertation addresses. As I researched my topic, it became evident, too, that further training in Greek, Hebrew, and Dutch could only enhance the work I was writing. While writing the dissertation, I could muddle through only very short passages in Greek and Dutch and could not read Hebrew at all. And working French

![Figure 20.4](image-url)
would have enabled me to delve more deeply into the relationship between the Puritans and French Calvinists, including the Huguenots.

Other art-related writings overlooked by Lovell include those of the Moravian Brethren, a community of German Pietists who settled in the American colonies—especially Pennsylvania and North Carolina—beginning in the 1730s. The Moravian painter John Valentine Haidt’s “Treatise on Art,” a mid-eighteenth-century German-language manuscript in the collections of the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is one such document. Excerpts from Haidt’s treatise were published in English in 1984, and a full translation, together with the German original, was published in 2007.23 In a recent essay about German art historians working in colonial America and the United States, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann has argued that, in light of the art-historical content of Haidt’s treatise, we might even consider him the first German art historian.24

Although the number of publications on early American art and architecture rooted in analysis of non-English source materials remains small, I would like to mention two scholars whose language skills have enabled them to conduct work that otherwise would have been unthinkable. The historian Kenneth Lockridge has been working for some years on Gustavus Hesselius, an important, if under-studied, Swedish painter who worked in the culturally diverse mid-Atlantic region. Lockridge has utilized his knowledge of Swedish to unearth remarkable, previously unknown information in Swedish historical collections.25 Similarly, the architectural historian Jeroen van den Hurk, a native speaker of Dutch, has studied Dutch-language contracts for early Dutch colonial architecture, illuminating unrecognized relationships between “Old World” Dutch building practices and building practices in the colonies. Van den Hurk studied vernacular architecture at the University of Delaware, and his work demonstrates that material culture approaches are not necessarily at odds with text-based (multilingual) research, but that the different types of analysis can be productively combined.26

In their contribution to this volume, Joshua Shannon and Jason Weems describe differences between the main journal of American art history, American Art, and the most important journal of modern and contemporary art history, October. One difference they do not address is the work of translation. Since October was founded in 1976, it has served as a venue for the translation of non-English-language art history writing. Until very recently, translations have not appeared in American Art (or its predecessor, Smithsonian Studies in American Art). American Art now receives submissions in a range of languages for the Terra Foundation for American Art International Essay Prize, which was initiated in 2010. Thus far, essays have been submitted in Italian, French, German, Japanese, Mandarin, Spanish, and Dutch, though the only essay that has been translated for publication in the journal was the first to win the prize, Sergio Cortesini’s “Invisible Canvases: Italian Painters and Fascist Myths across the American Scene,” which was composed in Italian.27 Paradoxically, translation initiatives tend to be a good index of the importance of multilingualism to a given area of study. To date, such initiatives in the field of American art history have been few. Among Americanists working in the United States, the only scholar with a sustained commitment to the practice of translation is Kenneth Haltman, who has translated the writings of Gaston Bachelard from the French and is currently preparing a critical edition in translation (also from French) of René Brimo’s “classic study of American patronage and art collecting,” L’Évolution du goût aux États-Unis, d’après l’histoire des collections (1938).28

Several senior Americanists to whom I have spoken about multilingualism have scoffed at my suggestion that exciting scholarship is being published in languages
other than English. Such responses are the product of unfortunate ignorance, and they further naturalize the bias against non-English writing in the field, which, if not explicitly owned by established scholars, is operative in practice. One example of important work being written in non-English languages is that of a Polish colleague, Filip Lipiński, on Edward Hopper. Lipiński is writing excellent new scholarship on Hopper and virtuality, and I am hopeful that I can take advantage of this work in devising future syllabi and lecture content. I only know about this scholarship because Lipiński can speak and write in English. He has shared English versions of talks with me and has now published some shorter pieces in English, as well.29 As I will not be able to learn Polish anytime soon, I have to hope that someone will translate his first book, Hopper wirtualny (2013).30

**From “English Only” to “English Plus”**

During the past decade, efforts to internationalize the study of American art have multiplied exponentially. In 2002, when I started graduate school, there was a sense that one would have few if any opportunities to travel abroad as a historian of American art. As I complete this chapter in early 2014, the possibilities for work in other countries—whether research, writing, exhibition design, or teaching—seem almost boundless. Such possibilities only seem likely to increase moving forward. This sea change in the field has much to do with the funding initiatives of the Terra Foundation. The Foundation now supports a wide range of activities, including research travel, conferences, exhibitions, postdoctoral and visiting teaching positions throughout Europe and in China, and an annual summer residency for artists and art historians in Giverny, France, with a particular commitment to bringing American art to foreign audiences and facilitating international cooperation in the production of new scholarship. As the lowest common denominator, English has become the language used for most of the events, publications, and positions sponsored by the Foundation.

With the exception of concise commentaries by John Davis and myself, though, recent reflections on the internationalization of American art have not devoted substantial attention to the issue of multilingualism.31 Pervasive English monolingualism hampers internationalization, and it delimits one’s intellectual prospects. Since the early 1990s, the literary historians Marc Shell and Werner Sollors have led calls for a move away from the “English Only” disposition that has long structured that field, advocating instead an “English Plus” model of American literary studies. Their writings are instructive for thinking about the stakes of a similar shift in American art history. Both writers have underlined the persistently multilingual character of American cultural history. Alluding to the English-only movement that took root in the United States during the 1980s, Sollors writes that although the “ideal of monolingualism … seems to have captivated the contemporary United States … this country has an impressive multilingual past and present all the same.” Sollors has also commented on the seemingly “natural” quality of the exclusion on non-English-language writings from American literature.32 And he aligns himself with the comparative literature scholar Mary Louise Pratt, who has argued for “expunging the term foreign to refer to languages other than English” in describing the linguistic make-up of the United States.33 Although monolingualism and the English-only movement are, in some respects, appropriately associated with conservative politics in the contemporary United States, Sollors writes that
“[t]he blind spot of language is shared by the ‘conservative’ and the ‘radical’ sides in the multiculturalism debate.” Indeed, Sollors has called the inattention to multilingualism “the most glaring blind spot in American letters.”

Late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American interest in multiculturalism has not remedied this problem. Sollors writes, “multiculturalism has largely been an ‘English-only’ movement (though it professes to abhor that slogan). As Gerald Early put it in commenting on the provincialism of what he calls the multiculturalism craze, ‘multiculturalists generally do not see learning foreign languages as a major part of their educational reform.’” Sollors goes on to query: “how can one talk convincingly about ‘cultural diversity’ without talking about language?” Shell has highlighted the suppression in the United States of “the category of language itself.” He makes the following comment about the American university system’s partial investment in the politics of difference:

The American academy’s passing over most non-Anglophone American languages and literatures is, of course, partly explicable by the fact that it is easier to talk about other peoples’ cultures in English than to learn other people’s talk. But the main explanation is that America, faltering always between its horror of race slavery and its ideal of race blindness, has always liked to emphasize racial difference instead of language difference … Even as the American university claims to foster a tolerant heterogeneity of cultures, then, it perseveres in the traditional American homogenization of the world as English.

One can see evidence of what Shell means in American art history scholarship—in studies in which other varieties of difference are dealt with at great length, but examination of linguistic difference is still usually absent. A notable exception is to be found in new writing by Alison Syme (who is a modernist, not an Americanist) on John Singer Sargent, wherein wonderfully textured analysis of linguistic difference (especially along a French–English axis) is combined with equally thoughtful attention to other forms of difference, including class, gender, sexuality, and even life form—ranging from human beings to plants and insects.

At “Practicing American Art History,” a colloquium organized by Jennifer Greenhill, Guy Jordan, Dorothy Moss, and myself, and hosted by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in December 2007, Mark Ledbury, then associate director of the research and academic program at the Clark, asked whether anyone is writing “in some complex way the history of America in fragments, or America as a splintered thing—not as the imperialist, Cold War nasty, but as [a] kind of fractured, dislocated, strange … universe.” Shell and Sollors have argued that attention to multilingualism effectively compels the denationalization of American literature. Shell relates, “In many American universities, professors of literature still say that nonanglophone American literature—American German, say, or American Chinese—belongs properly neither to departments of foreign languages nor to departments of English and American language and literature.” Sollors insists that work on multilingual American literature will “reveal how [such] literature is part of a transnational world—though authors who complicate the fit of authorship, citizenship, and language have been marginalized by the pervasive national organization of literature.” Just as Shell and Sollors’s co-edited Multilingual Anthology of American Literature (2000) “complicate[s] our understanding of what exactly ‘American literature’ is,”
art-historical scholarship informed by non-English-language research complicates our understanding of what American art is. It contributes to a post-national reframing of the field, in the “splintered” and “dislocated” spirit described by Ledbury.

In relation to the subject of this chapter, it is important to note that multilingualism is hardly incompatible with imperialistic ideology. Indeed, multilingualism has been famously deployed for imperialistic gains in an American context. Shell recounts, “In 1492, when Columbus sailed the ocean blue, Antonio de Nebrija gave Queen Isabella of Spain a copy of his Gramática sobre la lengua castella. The Queen asked: ‘What is it for?’ Antonio answered: ‘Your majesty, language is the perfect instrument of empire.’” And Shell observes of Thomas Jefferson’s interest in French language: “Of course, Jefferson’s internationalist pose was partly a short-term strategy for a border-changing, expansionist period. After the Louisiana Purchase (1803)—under President Jefferson—francophones were Americanized.” Practices of multilingualism, including translation, transliteration, and the production of written versions of oral languages, played a major role in the European colonization of the Americas and later US cultural imperialism. During the 1950s, “area studies” was conceived as part of a hegemonizing US foreign policy, and study of non-English languages was an integral aspect of area studies models.

In the early twenty-first century, though, it is English monolingualism that has become more closely associated with cultural imperialism. In Linguistic Imperialism, published in 1992, the literary historian Robert Phillipson produced a trenchant critique of the rise of English as a world language, connecting this phenomenon with a wide variety of oppressive, nationalistic ideological operations. The continuing relevance of Phillipson’s arguments can be measured by the publication in 2009 of Linguistic Imperialism Continued, a collection of writings on the subject that appeared in the wake of his earlier volume.

In recent decades, monolingualism has been met with sometimes brutal reproaches, and by a wide range of writers. In an online conversation with Sollors about multilingualism and American studies, John Edward Philips, an Africanist who teaches at Hirosaki University in Japan, asserted, “Monolingual people, a category which includes an appalling proportion of Americans, are undereducated, culturally deprived, and incapable of understanding even their culture properly, much less others! Multilingualism is an issue that we as educators should be militant about.” In her work on the phenomenon of the “no-foreign-tongue” foreign film trailer of the 1980s and 1990s, the critic B. Ruby Rich describes the United States as “a nation prone to global illiteracy, bound by linguistic leashes to a univocal universe,” and US Americans as “impervious to subjectivities not their own.” Echoing Shell, she contends that this is a “childlike image of the world,” “an image of the self unwounded by the other, a self uninformed by the other, oblivious to its status, inured to its needs, cozy in the cocoon of what once upon a time was called ethnocentrism and now, borrowing a term from queer studies in order to change it, might be known instead as imperial normativity.”

Forward (Foreword)

The decision to become an Americanist art historian has been, in the United States, often predicated upon not needing to know or study “foreign” languages. Highly coveted Americanist positions in the academy and in museums remain available to
scholars with little or no working knowledge of non-English languages. (In today’s United States there is no neat equivalency of class privilege or level of education and multilingual ability. In fact, in some respects many first- and second-generation immigrants have better language skills than Americanist art historians with PhDs.) This only naturalizes the relationship between “English-only” art-historical practice and scholarly authority. When one scans the most influential American art scholarship, the textual sources utilized are virtually all in English—with, at times, some works in French. To be clear, this is not only a matter of publication conventions dictating that English versions of primary or secondary sources be cited where available.

Of course, the above statement must be qualified if one is including writing on art after 1945 in the category “American art,” which I believe we should. Indeed, scholarship on more recent American art, much of which is written by art historians who do not self-identify as Americanists, and to which multilingualism is more important, supplies a useful model for what multilingual work in early periods might look like and accomplish. As does—it is worth mentioning—a lot of the scholarship on art in the Caribbean and Central and South America, areas of research to which language study is already considered indispensable.

In this chapter I have addressed both the ideological implications and functional limitations of English-only American art history. Current science suggests that multilingualism has great benefits generally for one’s cognitive abilities. In a 2012 opinion piece in the New York Times, the science writer Yudhijit Bhattacharjee discusses new research into bilingualism, which has overturned the longstanding idea that knowing more than one language interferes with cognitive function. On the contrary, writes Bhattacharjee, “The collective evidence from a number of … studies suggests that the bilingual experience improves the brain’s so-called executive function—a command system that directs the attention processes that we use for planning, solving problems and performing various other mentally demanding tasks.”47 With so much lost to the monolingual scholar, and with so much to be gained through multilingualism, the question becomes: how can interested parties make the field of American art history more multilingual?

The language training of younger generations of scholars remains the key, above all else, to altering the course of the field. This should be among the first priorities of budding art historians, Americanists included. Although Billy Collins’s notion of “fully grasping” any language is a fantasy destination that ultimately cannot be reached, it is one well worth working towards. At many universities, language requirements for graduate degrees in art history have been opened up to include languages besides French or Italian and German. This is a great thing, and will foster deconstruction of how imposed forms of narrowly Eurocentric multilingualism have shaped the discipline.

Acknowledging the problem of monolingualism will require humility on the part of advisers, many of whom may lack language skills themselves. In a course on ancient Near Eastern art in which I enrolled in graduate school at Harvard, Irene Winter once mentioned that she had taken time off in the middle of her career to acquire important language skills she lacked. She even said that these skills had made all the difference to her later scholarship, which is wonderfully creative, combining the skill sets of the art historian, archaeologist, ethnographer, and philologist. While there are many practical obstacles to taking a year or more off mid-career to concentrate on language study, I can imagine a stream of funding from the Terra Foundation earmarked for
jason d. lafountain

just such a purpose. As Winter’s language training directly informed her scholarship, language study at any stage must be continuous with practice if it is to be meaningful.

Soliciting help from people with pertinent language skills is another strategy. Colleagues, students, and staff skilled in non-English languages surround those of us who teach at colleges and universities. Again, slouching is required here. Some institutions even have official translation services. I was surprised to learn, rather too late in my stay as a predoctoral fellow at the Smithsonian American Art Museum to take advantage of it, that the Smithsonian offers staff and fellows access to translation services free of charge. There are scholars in the field of American art history who have a working knowledge of one or more languages but do not necessarily use these skills, depending on their research program. These scholars might take one for the team, so to speak, by putting these skills to work in crafting studies to which the skills are critical.48

Embracing new formats for American-art-related publications could also help matters. The new, Mexico-based multilingual art history journal, Nierika: Revista de Estudios de Arte, launched in 2012, publishes essays in Spanish, English, French, and Portuguese, and includes several historians of American art on its editorial board. Although to date translation has occurred only at the level of the abstract, Nierika models what a different type of American art history journal might look like. Such a journal, peer-reviewed and with a multilingual board of editors, would make good American art scholarship written in a variety of languages more widely available. By rendering such work visible, it might motivate, or even force, English-only scholars of American art to address scholarship written in other languages. One can also imagine the development of an Americanist journal akin to Art in Translation, started with funding from the Getty Foundation in 2009 with a mission “to publish the most interesting and significant texts on the visual arts—both historical and contemporary—which have not previously been accessible to the English-language readership.”49 This would be an ongoing translation effort in the spirit of what Sarah Burns and John Davis have begun with their impressive, albeit mostly monolingual and translation-free, American Art to 1900 anthology (2009).50 Ideally, such a journal would pair writings in their original languages with the English translations. At the same time, greater efforts must be made to translate the best English-language American art history writing into other languages, so that people who do not read English have access to the stimulating work being done. Some events sponsored by the Terra Foundation have modeled reciprocal translation through use of closed captioning and/or live oral translation in order to make content accessible to the largest possible audience.51 This approach could also inform new publications.

During the fall of 2013 I taught the introduction to global contemporary art in the Department of Art History at Northwestern University. Each of my lectures demanded considerable language-related preparation. We looked at artistic production on six continents, and I consistently struggled to pronounce artists’ names and culturally specific terms derived from many different languages. In order to teach the course in what I felt to be the most responsible way—treating a broad range of artistic practices, well known and more obscure, from all around the world—I was compelled to embarrass myself on a regular basis. Non-English languages have never come easily to me, yet the implications of a monolingual practice are so problematic I would rather do what I can, even if it is sometimes at the expense of my pride.52
In his writings on multilingualism, Shell has proposed that language—above all else—is “the essential component of culture.” In “Mind in Matter,” Prown observes that language, though culturally significant, “is not solely human.” He writes, “Animals communicate by arrangements of sounds and, in the case of dolphins, for example, may have languages. Perhaps more special to man than language is the capacity to make implements and, more special yet, objects for aesthetic gratification.” Even as this chapter has vied with Prown’s material culture methods, I would like to conclude by suggesting that Prown lends support to its claims. If language is a category that differentiates human populations, it also unites people, and even different forms of life. In light of the ecological imperatives of the early twenty-first century, turning to language might be one way, strangely, of throwing off the old-fashioned humanist preoccupation with the “specialness” of human beings. While dolphins do not make teapots, they are linguistic creatures, and this is something that brings us together.

Acknowledgments

I thank the following individuals for input about the relations between monolingualism, multilingualism, and the study of American art: Austen Bailly, Jonathan Bordo, Mary Coffey, John Davis, Jennifer Donnelly, Catherine Dossin, Amanda Douberley, Jennifer Greenhill, and Filip Lipiński.

Notes

1 To be clear, this chapter does not advocate the study of languages to engender bias against cultures without written language systems.
6 See, for example, Braddock and Irmscher, 2009, and Eisenman, 2013.
12 Leora Auslander’s essay “Beyond Words” is indicative of the persistence of anti-textual framings (whether rhetorical or practical) for material culture studies. See Auslander, 2005.
13 Prown, 1980, p. 198. Ethan Lasser’s essay (Chapter 6 in this volume) further illustrates what material culture methods can do, even as it extends Prown’s anti-textualism.
14 For basic information on the life and work of Van Duzee, see “The Stone City Art Colony and School 1932–1933: Kate Keith Van Duzee” at http://projects.mtmercy.edu/stonecity/otherartists/vanduzee.html (accessed August 23, 2014).
15 Thanks to Yukio Lippit and Hao Sheng for translating, to the extent possible, this part of the page for me.
352

16 See Nagel, 2011.
17 For more on RETNA, see http://www.digitalretna.com/blog/ (accessed August 23, 2014).
18 Another subject that could be brought to bear on this discussion is Arabic-language-based abstract art, exhibited in the United States since the late 1940s. See Lawrence, 1997.
19 On *ostranenie*, see Jennifer Roberts’s contribution to this volume (Chapter 2). In an essay that attempts to revive Prown’s methodological statements for art history today, Michael Yonan argues for the irreducible strangeness of material culture. See Yonan, 2011, p. 243.
20 Lovell, 2005, p. 3.
21 See LaFountain, 2013, p. 4.
22 Mather, 1724, n.p.
24 Kaufmann writes, “If one takes into account what the expectations were of his time, and the horizon of understanding that existed before Winckelmann, whose tracts he probably could not have known, Haidt may therefore also be considered to be an art historian. Thus he may be regarded as the first German art historian.” Kaufmann, 2007.
27 Cortesini, 2011. Thanks to Emily Shapiro, the executive editor of American Art, who provided me with this information via email on January 13, 2014.
28 Although not primarily known as a material culture scholar, it is notable that Haltman co-edited a collection of material culture essays with Prown in 2000. He seems to have pursued his linguistic interests separately from his material culture interests.
29 See, for example, Lipiński, 2013a and 2014.
30 Lipiński, 2013b.
35 Sollors, 2000, p. 4.
37 Shell, 1993, pp. 119–120.
39 Mark Ledbury, quoted in Greenhill et al., 2007, p. 6.
41 Sollors, 2000, pp. 7–8, 10. For additional information about scholarship on multilingual American literature, see the website of the Longfellow Institute at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~lowinus/ (accessed August 22, 2014). Directed by Shell and Sollors, the Institute was founded in 1994 “to support the study of non-English writings in what is now the United States and to reexamine the English-language tradition in the context of American multilingualism.”
42 Shell, 2000, pp. 691–692.


Bhattacherjee, 2012.

For an example of a study that does just that, see Boone, 2007.

Burns and Davis do include, for example, a version of Vernon Nelson’s translation of the J.V. Haidt treatise I have mentioned in this chapter. See Burns and Davis, 2009, pp. 16–20. It is notable that the presentations for the “Words Matter!” symposium organized in celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the Charles Eldredge Prize in September 2008—which was also related to the publication of American Art to 1900—focused entirely on English words. See the short papers derived from talks in Burns et al., 2009.

For example, “A Deeper Look at Surface Beauty,” an online colloquium organized by the Freer Gallery of Art/Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, May 12, 2010. The event advertised both closed captioning and live voice translation in Korean and Japanese.

My feebleness in pronouncing non-English languages should be distinguished from instances of cultural producers willfully transgressing linguistic conventions to critical advantage. The Chicana/o art collective ASCO’s strategies of “mispronunciation” are a good example of the latter. See Jones, 2011.

References


Part III

Subjectivities
An ambitious young man on the horns of a professional dilemma: this is how colonial Pennsylvanian Benjamin West (1738–1820) appears in a self-portrait drawing made around 1762, toward the end of his largely self-directed artistic education in Italy (Figure 21.1). Britons had for generations found portraiture the most reliable way to earn a living, even as European art theorists disparaged such work as merely imitative and subservient to private desires. History painting—encompassing allegory and subjects from the Bible and mythology, as well as social and political history—offered the exalted alternative. To advocates, it demanded intellect and invention from the painter and bestowed the public responsibility of figuring virtue. British patrons were prepared to collect historical canvases by Europeans, but with modern demand for portraits so high they had little inclination to support native painters in that endeavor. West, like other internationally aware anglophone artists, wanted more.

This chapter focuses on emerging professional discourses and practices of fine art during the colonial and early national periods, when the means to and meaning of professionalism were in the midst of being defined. In Britain, the ministry, medicine, and law had acquired the privileged status of learned professions, as distinct from occupations involving hand labor. That status, already won by elite Continental artists, tantalized their eighteenth-century British and American cohort, who worked hard to create exclusive professional fraternities, to which only a few women were grudgingly admitted. The would-be elite among earlier American artists sought differentiation: the margin to their imagined center lay in artisanry—a paradox since artisans vastly outnumbered fine artists and by any other historical measure could hardly be considered marginal. Painting as a trade constitutes the near and pervasive background apart from which American (and British) fine artists sought to distinguish themselves. Accordingly, they and their works must be set into context with artisan or trade painters and the utilitarian and ephemeral images and texts they generated.
Collectively, these attest to the diversity of experience among American painters and to the fitful pace of change in public perceptions of the American artist.

**Portraits, History, Theory**

West’s eventual career demonstrated beyond all probability what an American artist with elite aspirations might accomplish. But much was uncertain when he drew the Italian self-portrait, a private and technically hesitant work that has been largely overlooked, despite the exceptional circumstances in which West then found himself. As the first American artist to study in Italy, an essential component of a British gentleman’s education and increasingly of other anglophone artists as well, West sensed that he had career options. He weighed them in the self-portrait.

The artist positioned himself at left on the 6×7-inch sheet, perpendicular to the picture plane with shoulder out and face turned obliquely toward the viewer (originally himself, if he used a mirror, as self-portraitists customarily did). Bodily orientation and gesture direct the viewer’s eye toward the right, where a sculpted bust and other less clearly defined objects appear, presumably atop a table that is not delineated. Rough and heavy lines of charcoal darken much of the paper surface but not the right side of
West’s face, set off further by his bright, broad square collar. The densest passages encompass West’s torso. He wears a vest, tonally differentiated from the one visible sleeve, but his figure otherwise remains largely concealed by drapery, a cape that West draws over an outstretched right arm; from the clasped left hand, fabric cascades to the far side of his body.

West’s attire bears no relationship to everyday men’s clothing yet would have been instantly recognizable to contemporaries as what they called “Vandyke” dress. The look was widely familiar from portraits by (or believed to be by) the Flemish artist Anthony Van Dyck, who was active in England during the 1630s. Numerous mid-eighteenth-century British men and women were portrayed in Vandyke dress, including two of West’s three known male portrait subjects in Italy. In the Italian context, the outfit constituted a clear marker of British identity, as also employed by leading Roman portraitist Pompeo Batoni, who catered to British Grand Tourists. West himself wears such attire in a refined contemporaneous drawing by Angelica Kauffmann, the young Swiss artist whom he met in Florence in 1762. His costume communicated fashionability and social currency, not least through its popularity at English masquerade parties, while also connecting West to the founding moment in the modern British portrait tradition (which the young American might have expected to continue). Van Dyck’s Continental artistic glamour and sophistication, embraced at the court of Charles I, had completely vanquished a lingering Elizabethan portrait style (still evident in the earliest known Anglo-American portraits, made in New England around 1670). The king rewarded Van Dyck with a knighthood, granting him a status of which most English artists could only dream; later British rulers extended the honorific to their court portraitists, also Europeans. By the time of the Hanoverian monarchs, British artists stood ready to claim nobility for themselves, whether bestowed or symbolic, as a quality arising from their self-identification as gentlemanly practitioners of a liberal art. Those who traveled to Italy, West included, found encouragement for this expanded horizon of expectations in Rome’s international artistic community.

In his Italian self-portrait drawing, West more fully embodied Van Dyck than most male sitters in Vandyke dress. While they routinely sport carefully curled and dressed contemporary hairstyles, as West does in Kauffmann’s portrait, West chose longer, tousled locks, like Van Dyck’s own in a self-portrait then widely known through a print by Lucas Vorstermann. West’s drawing has a clear model in that work, notably the sweeping, collared cape held high before the body and the fold of fabric that falls from mid-shoulder but is not part of the sleeve. The engraved Van Dyck self-portrait had been added, after his death in 1641, to a group of his portraits of notable persons, which Van Dyck arranged to have engraved and published beginning in 1634. A decade later, the set numbered eighty works, fifty-two representing connoisseurs or artists, while an expanded total eventually included more portraits of artists based on other originals by Van Dyck. Instead of being identified by tools referring to the manual aspect of their occupations, most of the painters, sculptors, architects, and engravers in the series appear as do the scholars, in fulfillment of Renaissance ideals of their professional dignity. This gallery of portrait prints, known in English as the *Iconography*, appeared in multiple editions beginning in 1645; the last, with 132 plates and concise sitter biographies, came out just prior to West’s arrival in Italy.

If Van Dyck’s self-portrait was West’s most obvious referent, his drawing also invokes Raphael, an artist revered by eighteenth-century Britons. Raphael’s self-portrait at
around age 23 (ca. 1506) could be found at the Uffizi, home to over 200 artist portraits and self-portraits by the time West arrived in Florence. But that work was not necessarily well liked. Edward Gibbon, whose fourteen visits to the Uffizi in 1764 attest to its availability even in advance of the museum’s public opening, noted: “The worst portrait in the collection is that of the first of painters,” Raphael, in this case guilty of “bad gothic taste.” The apparent timidity of the self-portrait, not yet expressive of Raphael’s mature classicism, might actually have reassured the 24-year-old West. Even the Renaissance master had to become a master.

A then newly identified Raphael self-portrait (in fact Raphael’s portrait of banker Bindo Altoviti) offered a much more appealing alternative. The physical beauty of the sitter and refined artistry of the Altoviti painting—called “stupendissimo” by Giorgio Vasari in his groundbreaking, mid-sixteenth-century volumes of artists’ lives—made it fully worthy to be not only by but of Raphael. Wishful observers overlooked both notable disparities with Raphael’s Uffizi self-portrait and the anomaly of the visible hand in the Altoviti portrait, which would have to have been the artist’s right, working hand, as reflected in the mirror that facilitated self-portrayal. From an eighteenth-century perspective, the young man’s sensitive appearance better suited artist than banker. West’s loose curls have something in common with Altoviti’s flowing locks, which part above the low back neckline of his tunic in an alluring exposure of bare skin, a pale expanse echoed by West’s unarticulated seventeenth-century-style collar. That allusion would not have been supported had West included any hint of the lacy border seen in the Van Dyck self-portrait he emulated, in West’s other portraits of men in Vandyke dress, and in the portrait Kauffmann drew of him.

West returned Kauffmann’s favor, drawing her in the classicizing garb more fashionable for women’s portraits by the 1760s than Vandyke dress (in which he never portrayed a female sitter, even when paired with her husband’s portrait showing such attire) (Figure 21.2). In Kauffmann’s case, the costume and hairstyle (somewhat Bindo- or Raphael-esque) support a specific conceit: with palette and brushes in hand and a small mask hanging from the chain around her neck, Kauffmann embodies Pittura, an allegorized representation that she, as a woman, could inhabit. West’s familiarity with the attributes of Pittura, which artists cherry-picked from Cesare Ripa’s extended but unillustrated description in Iconologia (1593), suggests that his thick, wavy hair in the self-portrait drawing was more than emulation of Van Dyck’s appearance. As for Van Dyck himself in the famous Self-Portrait with a Sunflower, West’s disordered hair evokes the imaginative energy of Pittura.

Unable as a man to personify painting, West chose to model his self-image on esteemed painters: Van Dyck, Raphael, and possibly also Nicolas Poussin. He deeply admired the French painter, whose career-long residence in Rome and veneration of ancient and Italian Renaissance masters redeemed him among the English, otherwise greatly antipathetic to France. In two self-portraits made for French patrons in 1649–50—which West could have known through print variants—Poussin showed himself as artist. He holds a drawing implement in the first and, in both, rests his hand on a drawing folio. An engraved adaptation of the second work, produced by Charles Errand for Giovanni Bellori’s Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects (1672), replaced the folio with a book marked “De lum[en] et umb[ra]” to emphasize the science of painting and theoretical concerns over studio practice. West made a similar shift in alterning his self-portrait. The lower right portion, difficult to read, suggests that his right arm once extended downward toward a table, where his hand met a curved object, the edge of an
oval palette perhaps. West also gave Kauffmann painter’s tools in the drawing contemporaneous with his Italian self-portrait. In revising his gesture, West elevated his depicted right hand so it rests atop an upended volume, seen from the spine and identifiable as a bound book by its thickness and raised bands. The motif also appears in Van Dyck’s portrait of French court painter Simon Vouet, engraved for the Iconography, in which the depicted book is marked “Trattato della Nobiltà dell’ Pittura,” in reference to Romano Alberti’s 1585 treatise, composed for the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, one of the first associations that distinguished the fine arts from trade. While West preserved an allusion to manual practices in the drawing implement threaded through his fingers, his inclusion of the book places as much emphasis on learning as on the identity and claimed nobility of the artist.

The most compelling evidence that West had begun to think of himself as something other than a mere portraitist lies in the bust on the table, positioned above the book in the two-dimensional terms of the drawing. The head, slightly larger than West’s, appears nearly in profile, with brow, nose, and chin decisively outlined, so the form stands out on the heavily marked paper. Many eighteenth-century portraits include either specific classical busts or generically classicizing examples. In this case, the distinctive topknot of hair makes the bust identifiable as Apollo Belvedere. West

Figure 21.2 Benjamin West, Portrait of Angelica Kauffmann, 1763, drawing, 6 × 4½ in. Source: Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.
did not overlook the detail in a contemporaneous drawing of the entire statue. As early as the 1720s, busts of this Apollo could be seen in many Roman collections, according to an English visitor, who remarked on their “female Delicacy,” a quality to which the hairstyle, “rais’d like that of Women,” contributed.6 Perhaps that helps explain why the bust rarely appeared in painted portraits, despite its ubiquity and the statue’s fame, at its apogee in 1764 with the publication of J.J. Winckelmann’s landmark History of Ancient Art.

The presence of Apollo in West’s self-portrait lends credence to a well-known later story of the artist’s first encounter with that work, one tale among many in the most decisive act of self-invention in the history of American art. Embroidering a brief version of a tale West first made public in 1794, West’s Scottish biographical collaborator, John Galt, wrote of the circumstances that led the young Pennsylvanian, newly arrived in Rome, to publicly compare the statue to a Mohawk warrior.7 In 1816, Galt’s telling sharpened West’s American identity and helped him cast his lot with artists of the United States, at a time when his reputation was faltering in Britain, despite (or perhaps in some measure because of) his notable career as George III’s history painter and second president of the Royal Academy of Arts. Yet as the self-portrait shows, West defined himself partly in terms of the Apollo Belvedere as far back as 1763. At that time, above all, the bust linked West to the ancient statue most admired by contemporaries and demonstrated his familiarity with the abstracted and idealized classical models that formed the basis of a history painter’s practice.

Unusually for a Briton on either side of the Atlantic, West had received an early commission for a history painting, The Death of Socrates (ca. 1756, loosely modeled on an engraving). Just 18 and living in frontier Lancaster, Pennsylvania, when he made this work, West was no more than an artisan in the eyes of his patron, gunsmith William Henry. Following a convention in engraving, Henry had his own name, in the implied role of inventor, added to the canvas on which West’s name, coupled with the word “pinxit,” signified his manufacture.8 (West signed no other American paintings.) The Death of Socrates attracted Philadelphia patrons, who cultivated West and eventually sent him to Rome. So West was already disposed to think of himself as an artist who could paint history, even as his Vandyke dress in the self-portrait drawing destabilized that connection through its period specificity and firm association with portrait conventions. Still, the impression remains that West was mulling over options and experimenting in ways that, by 1772, paid off in his appointment as historical painter to the king. That unprecedented distinction and a willingness to play mentor made West a role model to young American artists until well into the nineteenth century.

Artisanry and Enterprise

West’s early self-portrait drawing offers an optimistic take on a professional quandary best known to Americanists from the epistolary grievances set down beginning in 1763 by Bostonian John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), West’s exact contemporary. These intensified after Copley ambitiously sent a painting to London for exhibition in 1766, an unusual portrait of his half-brother known as Boy with a Squirrel (Figure 21.3). The work attracted both warm praise and criticism from Britain’s leading painter Joshua Reynolds, who identified the artist’s faults—notably an “over-minuteness”—with
What bothered knowledgeable critics, including West, was Copley’s determined representation of things, of mundane particularities rather than the ideal generalities that elevate painting and painter. West, with whom Copley entered into correspondence at that time, repeatedly urged his countryman to travel abroad, a move not undertaken until 1774. As the most sought-after portraitist in Britain’s colonies, Copley worried about losing a secure income and feared competition from established painters in England. But he chafed at the limitations of provincial artistic practice. Were “it not for preserving the resemblance of particular persons, painting would not be known in the place,” wrote Copley, who shared West’s ambition to paint history. “[T]he people generally regard it no more than any other useful trade, as they sometimes term it, like that of a Carpenter tailor, or shew maker, not as one of the most noble Arts in the World.” Tailors and related clothing tradesmen recur as negative examples in the writings of eighteenth-century British portraitists, for whom flattery and generally ingratiating behavior toward clients were a resented fact of doing business. In naming tailors, carpenters, and shoemakers, Copley—a high-status artisan more on par with a silversmith—exaggerated the occupational slight. Yet his complaint had foundation. In Britain until at least the mid-eighteenth century and later in colonial America,
painters held the status of artisans because they worked with their hands, along a spectrum of activities that fell under the rubric of “painter in general.”

A painter in general, in addition to producing easel pictures, repaired paintings and undertook a range of other practical jobs that also used oil paints, such as the embellishment of coaches, signs, and houses. Few provincial painters could afford to be choosy, and even in London diversification could help keep a career afloat. William Williams (1727–91), a Bristol-born painter whom West later credited for sparking his boyhood interest in art, exemplified artisanal practicality and flexibility over the course of almost three decades in Philadelphia, the West Indies, and New York. He relocated in pursuit of new patrons, placed print advertisements upon arrival, marked his place of business with a tradesman’s sign, and took on whatever work he could find.

*The New-York Gazette, and the Weekly Mercury* for May 8, 1769, let it be known that

William Williams, Painter,
At Rembrandt’s Head in Batteaux-street
Undertakes painting in general, viz. History, portraiture, landskip, sign painting, lettering, gilding, and strewing smalt. N.B. He cleans, repairs, and varnishes, any old pictures of value, and teaches the art of drawing. Those ladies or gentlemen who may be pleased to employ him, may depend on care and dispatch.

Advertisements made up roughly half the content of colonial American newspapers after 1760, with the largest category announcing imported consumer goods and the next comprising notices placed by artisans. Colonial painters were less likely to advertise than other tradesmen, however, and portrait painters least of all, since personal recommendations carried more weight with patrons embarking on so intimate a transaction. (This changed after inexpensive means of reproduction, such as silhouette cutting, made portraits readily available outside elite circles.) Williams’s ad indicates his diversified trade. Gilding and strewing smalt (cobalt-blue pigment incorporating crushed glass) were aspects of signboard manufacture, employed to draw the eye in bright daylight and often used for the textual component of signs (“lettering”) in concert with pictorial elements that remained standard during the eighteenth century. Williams marketed these skills to the artisans and shopkeepers who routinely used trade signs, something painters of portraits and other types of pictures rarely did. In their search for clients, some artists simply moved about too much to warrant setting up shop; but others, even those with diversified businesses, must have wanted to avoid the association with trade encouraged by the mere act of hanging (and, presumably, making) a sign. Williams in that respect presents the exception among painters in New York. On the other hand, his appeal in the newspaper to “ladies or gentlemen” distinguished Williams from more humble artisans, such as stonecutters, whose ads addressed clientele as “any persons.”

Williams’s use of signs, tradesman-like at one level, also suggests professional shrewdness. In Philadelphia, customers could find him “at the Sign of Hogarth’s Head,” which linked Williams to a resolutely English artist whose work was affordable and accessible through the medium of prints. Hogarth’s prints of modern moral subjects were especially popular and, not surprisingly, attracted the attention of Philadelphia’s famed moralist, Benjamin Franklin, who wrote to Hogarth in 1764 and acquired a complete set of his prints for the Library Company in 1768. Williams, who had moved to New York City by the following year, did not rehang his Philadelphia
sign but chose Rembrandt’s Head to target a different clientele. Though part of the British colonies for over a century, New York retained elements of its Dutch heritage. Less than ten years before Williams’s arrival, one visitor to the city found “the People mostly Dutch,” while another estimated, only somewhat more conservatively, that “more than half … are Dutch.” The impression is striking given that Dutch and English populations had become well integrated and that only one-fifth of residents claimed Dutch ancestry in 1770, when the total population reached 20,000.

The prospect of locals with Netherlandish roots offered painters some cause for optimism. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century inventories reveal that persons of Dutch origin or descent had more varied and, in a few cases, much more substantial collections of pictures than did Anglo-Americans, consistent with middle-class consumption of art in the Netherlands. A Swedish naturalist who visited in 1748 observed that the walls of New York houses were “quite covered with all sorts of drawings and pictures in small frames.” Notably, Williams presented himself to New Yorkers as able to clean and repair “any old picture of value.” He also advertised “History” and “landskip” among the types of pictures he made, indicating that he hoped to find clientele for such subjects. His use of the term “landskip” may have been calculated: it derived from landschap, the Dutch word for a genre that the English considered a Netherlandish invention, and it persisted in artistic circles until 1770, whereas “landscape” entered common usage in literary contexts much earlier. Although Williams’s earlier ads make no mention of landscape by any name, his choice of the Dutch-sounding variation cannot be discounted as part of a marketing effort in New York.

Williams’s now-lost list of 241 paintings executed during his career, which survives only in severely abbreviated transcription, indicates that while portraits dominated, the artist found buyers in New York for diverse subjects. Those included a “small Moonlight,” “large Tempest,” and “small Landskip,” together with an extant Imaginary Landscape (1772). He also listed two biblical subjects and an “Emblematical piece for ye Corsican Club,” men nominally affiliated by sympathy for Corsican resistance to French aggression. Williams’s modest success with history painting in New York registers a persistence not shown by painter John Durand, who arrived there in 1768, a year before Williams. Durand was adventurous in announcing his presence; he did not take out a standard ad, with his name and occupation at the head, and offered no details of his business. Instead, he made an argument for the importance of history painting and flattered prospective patrons, “gentlemen and ladies,” by expressing hope for the encouragement that “so elegant and entertaining an Art, has always obtain’d from People of the most improved Minds, and best Taste and Judgment, in all polite Nations in every Age.” Six notices in two different newspapers evidently failed to entice customers. Only a week after the last, “John Durand, Portrait Painter” had resurfaced in New Haven, where his new advertisement made no mention of history painting.

Williams understood that Americans of all backgrounds preferred portraits to any other kind of painting, just like the English, and his calculation in choosing Rembrandt for his sign did not neglect that reality. Writers on art acknowledged the Dutch artist’s merits as a painter of likenesses, one who stayed close to nature. Maryland-born painter Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) said as much to a patron in 1772, observing that while he had no access to “Grecian and Roman statues,” he had a “variety of Characters” and “must paint as Rambrant did [and] make these my Anticks.”
“Wonderful Strength, Sweetness, and Resemblance” were hallmarks of Rembrandt’s portraits, according to the first life of the artist attributable to an English author, a short biography in the 1716 translation of Charles Alphonse Dufresnoy’s *Art of Painting*, a book that Williams apparently owned. By 1740, the market in England had grown exponentially for Rembrandt’s paintings and the works on paper for which he had previously been best known. So during a period that saw Dutch culture in New York marginalized by ascendant English fashion, Rembrandt’s head on Williams’s sign spoke equally to British taste.

Beyond their commercial value to Williams, his signboards of Hogarth and Rembrandt forged professional connection across space and time, of deep resonance for a man known to have collected narratives and portraits of artists. Among London printsellers, an important professional resource for painters throughout Great Britain and its colonies, at least four featured Rembrandt or Hogarth on their signs and trade cards. Nathaniel Smith at Rembrandt’s Head specialized in engraved historical portraits and was an intimate of Williams’s after the Bristol native’s return to England following the outbreak of revolution, raising the possibility of a prior association between them. Williams’s quest for artist portraits, an important genre of print since the sixteenth century, is borne out by the “two large Folio Volumes entitled Heads of Illustrious Artizans” mentioned in his will. The same document and other reliable textual evidence indicate that Williams compiled a manuscript of artists’ lives (now also lost). By the late seventeenth century, books of art theory often concluded with lives, reinforcing intellectual claims by and on behalf of artists. The first two English editions of Dufresnoy’s *Art of Painting*, for example, included lives based on writings of Vasari, Bellori, Felebien, Van Mander, and others. Yet in making his own selection for a manuscript, Williams exhibited an unusually high degree of professional awareness.

Williams presents the example of an artist who remained flexible about working within the constraints of the existing Anglo-American system, while resourcefully nourishing a broader and deeper sense of artistic identity. His interest in artists’ lives and portraits demonstrates professional purpose far exceeding the requirements of his occupation. That engagement allowed Williams to cultivate an artistic community richer than his immediate circumstances afforded. Notably Williams wrote out a list of his own paintings at the conclusion of his manuscript “lives,” thereby joining his career to an illustrious sequence of artists. This imagined professional community sustained and inspired him.

**Colonial Nationalism**

Across the Atlantic in London, artists experienced new levels of community by the 1760s. Two recently founded professional organizations sponsored annual public art exhibitions, with a shared objective of banishing the idea of art as trade and establishing it instead on a footing with the liberal arts. The Society of Artists attained added prestige from a Royal Charter in 1765, the year that West became firmly associated with the group, having resolved to remain in London. Matthew Pratt (1734–1805), a Philadelphian who began his career in apprenticeship to a “limner [a traditional term for portraitist] and painter in general,” became the first of many to benefit from West’s generosity, living and working under his roof. Pratt publicized West’s studio as
the locus of a nascent “American School” when he showed a painting under that title with the Society in 1766, where visitors could also see “A Boy with a flying squirrel by Mr. William [sic] Copley of Boston,” along with works by West. This was the first British art exhibition to include three identifiably American painters.

Pratt’s contribution to the exhibition sought to visually define the terms of professional artistic practice and pedagogy, a major metropolitan preoccupation at that moment (Figure 21.4). His canvas belongs to a group of remarkably similar works by other young British painters, including John Romney and John Hamilton Mortimer. These feature a variety of materials considered necessary to artistic education, especially casts from ancient art. They depict persons thoughtfully engaged in different stages of art-making, attesting to the dual importance of mental and manual skills. And they address the transmission of knowledge and experience. In The American School, West (at left) instructs a group of young men who have defied identification, while Pratt—seated before a canvas already signed with his name and the date 1765—represents the autonomous artist. The depicted canvas once contained the outline of a veiled woman, made transparent by time and now visible only under ultraviolet light. While the classicizing costume and format correspond to fashion in portraits of women, Pratt’s focus on artistic brotherhood forestalls the presumption that a portrait client sits just outside the field of vision. Instead, in the absence of an external referent for the figure on his canvas, Pratt gives primacy to the artist’s imagination—and does

Figure 21.4 Matthew Pratt (1734–1805), The American School, 1765, oil on canvas, 36 × 50¾ in. (91.4 × 127.6 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Samuel P. Avery, 1897. Acc. no. 97.29.3. Source: Image copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource / Scala, Florence. Photo: Geoffrey Clements.
so more directly than had West in his self-portrait drawing. Pratt in effect illustrates a passage from John Dryden’s translation of Dufresnoy’s *Art of Painting*: “At length I come to the Work itself, and at first find only a bare stain’d Canvas, on which the Sketch is to be disposed by the Strength of a happy Imagination; which is what we properly call *Invention*.” Invention, the passage continues, “is a kind of Muse.”

Inventing, Pratt has sketched a figure on the canvas: the Muse herself. She draws aside her veil—a convention by which Nature reveals herself to Art—appearing to whisper in his ear even as he, inspired, creates her.

If from a purely technical point of view Pratt’s work seems only to confirm the tentativeness and modesty of late-colonial American art, the painter had an ambitious goal. *The American School* is neither group portrait (West then had no other students) nor documentation of any pedagogy that Pratt himself experienced. Instead, it is an allegory that constructs history, a painting that projects affirmative regionalism, even colonial nationalism, at a time of North America’s expanded economic role in the British Empire and of attendant prophecies of American cultural greatness—most famously expressed in the poem by George Berkeley containing the line, “Westward the course of empire takes its way.” Whig political thought linked economic productivity and artistic creativity as consequences of freedom from excessive governmental restraints. Such restraints had been imposed on colonists by the British Parliament when it passed the Stamp Act, but American opposition led to repeal. Pratt’s depiction of a self-regulating association of artists who are identified as American metaphorically represents a desired political as well as artistic condition. In its relationship to the mother country, as far as colonists were concerned, America was growing up. Just as America might serve as a political example to its wayward, even corrupt parent, so might it be an example—a school—in the arts.

Caught up in London’s artistic community and buoyed by West’s success, Pratt may have forgotten the sometimes lonely situation of colonial artists. The course between artisanal practicality and artistic aspiration that Williams had charted remained the norm for would-be fine artists in the new United States, including Pratt. Advocates who took up their defense were inclined, like Copley more than half a century before, to blame Americans for the situation. In 1824, *Port Folio*, an important literary magazine with frequent features on art, cast a backward glance at “one of our neglected sons of genius who [was] reduced by want of patronage to portrait and sign painting.” The comment reveals the nineteenth-century ascendancy of genres other than portraiture, in equating the latter with sign painting as occupations to which a worthy painter might be “reduced” if patrons lacked appreciation for fine arts. Though the writer did not name the artist in question, as if to protect his memory, the prominent Philadelphia sign described—for the Federal Convention of 1787 Inn—allows us to identify him as Pratt. Adhering to a vein of modern history painting associated with Copley and John Trumbull, who sought to elevate portraiture by showing men involved in notable events (as in Trumbull’s *Declaration of Independence*), Pratt depicted participants in the momentous constitutional convention. A utilitarian sign framing history for the man in the street was his best shot at the exalted genre, though brought down to earth, at least figuratively, by the metal and wooden artifacts necessary to signboard display. Relative to the often lavish frames of the fine art object, these materials connoted something quite different, arguably the positive signification of honest craftsmanship. Most of Pratt’s signs were as prosaic as their materials. A barnyard cock for a Philadelphia
beer house stirred the memory of William Dunlap, West’s student during the 1780s, a leader of the new National Academy of Design in 1825, and the important early historian of American art. “The execution of this was so fine, and the expression of nature so exactly copied,” Dunlap ventured (and cautiously, since both qualities could be negatives), “that it was evident to the most casual observer that it was painted by the hand of a master.” Trying to make the best of the situation, he conceded: “It is well known that many a good painter has condescended, and many a one been glad, to paint a sign.”

American Genius

Old ways and expectations were upended by Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828), a leading painter of the early republic. Best known for portrayals of George Washington, Stuart was an unapologetic portraitist, who readily claimed nature as his guide, unfiltered by Old Master painting and liberated from the academic desideratum of general effect. He did not cultivate a gentlemanly air, could be disrespectful to social and professional superiors, and made little effort to convince anyone that he served the public good. He was an elite painter who nevertheless relished opportunities to let out some of the hot air from academic rhetoric surrounding the fine art of painting and to behave in ways that undercut the dignity that West, Copley, Peale, Trumbull, and others sought for the profession.

Many anecdotes about Stuart were recorded by contemporaries—a striking sign that artists had become figures of public interest—and they conform to biographical tropes of artists’ lives with roots in antiquity and more widely familiar in the modern (Renaissance) form of Vasari’s Lives. Motifs that resonate with Stuart include the artist’s use of witty remarks and jokes to assert superiority to contemporaries; his irony in highlighting foolish artistic judgments by laypersons; and his destructive alteration of paintings in response to conflicts with the commissioning clients. Anecdotes about historical artists circulated in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century press, and it is fair to assume that some were adapted to and by Stuart. As such, they represent an effort to accommodate him to established artist types, while becoming fully constituent of Stuart’s distinctive public identity relative to Anglo-American predecessors.

Stuart’s combativeness, eccentricity, and humor demand to be evaluated as positions the artist cultivated, consistent with an unruly personality and temperament, to distinguish himself from his colleagues. He was “particularly eloquent on the subject of arts and artists,” a younger painter recalled, adding that Stuart “could wield the weapons of satire and ridicule with peculiar force, seize the strong point of character, placing it so dexterously in the light he wished, that the impression was irresistible and not easily effaced.” The many stories concerning Stuart’s irreverence about painting practice, clients, colleagues, academies, and the status of artists reveal powerful opposition to traditional expectations of and for artists—both the older type of artisan-painter and relatively recent (in Britain and America) conception of the learned and civic-minded artist. Stuart developed a more modern persona, as a painter who, for the most part, maintained willful independence from patrons and professional predecessors, who insisted on personal artistic authority, and who resisted social norms. Scholars have recognized that the commercial pressures of bourgeois
society led to the emergence, in Europe by the late eighteenth century, of a modern (and paradoxically normative) artist type: genius as eccentric—an aesthetic model that others could only misuse by following, polluting its essence in the process. A classic genius becomes a collective model and survives in imitation. A modern genius is singular and tolerates no imitation. But, with an irony very often acknowledged by Romantic artists and writers, in a modern culture, modern genius becomes the classic model. It was Stuart who first manifested the type of artist-genius in the United States.

Patrons, including those Stuart vexed, showed every inclination to recognize his behavior (without necessarily condoning it) as evidence of genius and artistic temperament. “Genius is always eccentric, I think,” wrote Abigail Adams, in exasperation over fruitless efforts to extract Stuart’s first portrait of her husband from the artist. “Superior talents give no security for propriety of conduct; there is no knowing how to take hold of this Man.” Some who knew Stuart believed that he not only made no effort to censor himself but that his behavior was calculated, relieving them of any obligation to mute their impressions. “There is no reason for suppressing the irritable remarks of Mr. Stuart,” Marianne Silsbee (daughter of a sitter) advised a nineteenth-century biographer; “… on the contrary I would make the most of it, as he did. … Biographies do not fulfill [sic] their design if they are merely eulogistic—and the eccentricities of genius are a relief to the grander passions of the character.” Stuart both benefited from and exploited the modern valuation of individuality and subjectivity.

Stuart asserted authority of skill not rank, and he was generally disinclined to be complaisant, in the period sense of courteous and yielding. That was a quality Charles Willson Peale had worked hard to cultivate. As late as 1792, while still America’s most prominent portraitist (just prior to Stuart’s return from eighteen years abroad), Peale offered to repaint a miniature after the subject’s wife complained about the likeness. He acknowledged failure in his diary but asserted that his work ought to have been valued as “a high finished picture.” On the defensive, Peale resorted to a traditional artisanal measure of merit, a quality that in Copley’s case too had reinforced his identification with the artisan-producers of such objects and goods as he included in portraits. Only when virtuosic brushwork became a prominent measure of genius did artists distance themselves from craftsmen, because they were freed from adherence to certain manual standards that governed artisan labor. Though Stuart’s painting manner varied, many of his portraits feature obvious mark-making, and even unfinished works, such as his portrait of fellow painter Washington Allston, were treasured by sitters and their family members for exceptional likeness (Figure 21.5). To clients who complained about facture, Stuart rebutted purposefully. After a man returned a picture because the necktie was painted too coarsely, he sarcastically told a third party: “I am determined to buy a piece [of cloth] of the finest texture, have it glued on the part that offends their exquisite judgment, and send it back again.” An artist of the 1760s or 1770s could not readily have formulated such a retort. Stuart had no intention of satisfying the literal-minded patron, having already transformed the coarse cloth of canvas by his art. Using his brush to produce a more realistic rendering of the necktie, he implied, would violate the integrity of his work as a whole.

The status of American painters did not change according to a neat progression from traditional identification of painter as artisan or mechanic (defined by hand
labor), to artist as gentleman-intellectual, to a more modernist conception of the artist as genius-eccentric. Nor was this latter type a new norm for the antebellum period, despite vivid literary evocation by Nathaniel Hawthorne. In “The Artist of the Beautiful,” a short story first published in 1844, Hawthorne starkly contrasted a no-nonsense artisan with a sensitive and visionary would-be fine artist—inspired by his friend Allston, an anxious perfectionist whose inability to complete an ambitious historical work left “half his conception on the canvas to sadden us with its imperfect beauty.”  

American artists shaped and acquired professional identity in a bumpy and often contradictory process. Yet just fifty years after independence, much had changed. Dunlap, in his pioneering *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (1834), proclaimed that American artists had attained their independence, too: the freedom to succeed by virtue and talent and not according to the whims of aristocratic patrons, to whom the artist was little more than a servant, “an appendage to my lord’s tailor.”  

With new institutions and patrons to promote the cause of American art and artists and new types of subject matter in the ascendant (scenes of American landscape and everyday life especially), artists had reason for optimism. Dunlap’s *History* took stock of the paths they had followed and, on firmer grounds than Pratt in his hopeful painting, projected a great future for the American School.
Notes

1 Von Erffa and Staley, 1986, pp. 486, 548 (cat. 582, 689).
2 Iconographie, 1759.
3 Bonnard, 1961, p. 131.
4 This paragraph draws on Brown and Nimmen, 2005, pp. 9–38.
7 Galt, 1816, p. 31. For West and Galt’s relationship and aims, see Rather, 2004.
9 As related to Copley by Capt. R.G. Bruce, August 4, 1766: Copley and Pelham, 1914, p. 42.
10 Copley to [B. West or R.G. Bruce], [1767?], in Copley and Pelham, 1914, pp. 65–66.
11 For analysis of Copley’s status anxieties, especially in comparison of his late 1760s self-portrait and portrait of silversmith Paul Revere, see Rather, 1997.
12 The date in which newspaper advertisements overtook content is from Breen, 1994, p. 55.
13 On the language of early American advertisements, see Bushman, 1994.
14 Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser (January 13, 1763).
15 Hogarth died in 1764, and there is no record of a reply. Inventories and advertisements document the presence of Hogarth’s prints in colonial British America. See, e.g., Fowble, 1987, pp. 19, 179, 258, 260.
18 See, e.g., Piwonka, 1987, pp. 76–79.
19 Kalm, 1770, vol. 1, p. 250.
20 Sloan, 2000, pp. 78–79.
21 Williams’s late-life benefactor Thomas Eagles annotated Williams’s list in a letter concerning Williams that Eagles had requested from Benjamin West: reprinted in Dickason, 1970a (original letter of October 10, 1810, now in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England).
22 J. Durand, advertisement in New-York Gazette, or the Weekly Post-Boy (April 11, 1768).
25 “R.G. Esq” [Richard Graham], life of Rembrandt, in Dufresnoy, 1716, p. 371. West supplied evidence for Williams’s ownership of a work by Dufresnoy, which he claimed to have borrowed.
26 West, 1810 letter, as reprinted in Dickason, 1970a.
27 Williams’s unsigned first will, dated April 6, 1788, as reprinted in Dickason, 1970b, pp. 185–187.
28 T. Eagles, Williams’s legatee, in a note on his copy of West’s 1810 letter, Dickason, 1970a; further documentation in J. Eagles, 1855.
29 The model of the type, Vasari’s *Vite or Lives of the Artists* (1550, revised and illustrated 1568), did not see independent English translation until the mid-nineteenth century; Aglionby, 1685 included eleven of Vasari’s lives.


31 I am here adapting, in more circumscribed fashion, Benedict Anderson’s highly influential definition of modern nations as imagined communities enabled by print culture, which encourages shared identity among members even when they are not personally connected. See Anderson, 1983.


33 Dufresnoy, 1695, p. 13.


35 Ellis, 1979, pp. 3–21.

36 The sense of school as “example” figures in Aglionby, 1685, pp. 26–27.


38 Dunlap, 1834, vol. 1, p. 102.

39 The classic study is Kris and Kurz, 1934. On Stuart’s persona, see Rather, 2010.


41 On the artist-genius in Britain, see Pressly, 2007.


44 Miller and Hart, 1983–, vol. 5, p. 199.

45 Quoted in Dunlap, 1834, vol. 1, p. 218.

46 Hawthorne, 1846, p. 184.


References


Burnaby, A. (1775). *Travel Through the Middle Settlements in North-America in the Years 1759 and 1760*. London.


Iconographie ou vies des hommes illustres du XVII. siecle ... avec les portraits peints par le fameux Antoine Van Dyck et gravées sous sa direction (1759). 2 vols. Amsterdam and Leipzig.


Strolling with a friend down Sansom Street in antebellum Philadelphia, Dr. Thomas Dunn English spied a “tall, gaunt, spare man, with blue, incredulous eyes, and bronzed, irrevocable features.” The doctor’s companion immediately demanded to know who that striking figure might be, and, on learning that the stranger was the artist Peter Frederick Rothermel, declared “I thought he had the air of an artist. I should have known him for one anywhere.” English, however, was not so sure. In his view, Rothermel lacked that “peculiar appearance, by which the caste may be recognized, each bearing a kind of dreaminess in his manner.” Everything about Rothermel, in fact, signaled the very opposite of dreamy. “For my own part,” wrote English, “were I to meet Rothermel for the first time, I might suppose him to be a lawyer, or a physician, or an engineer, or the projector of a western town … but I never would take him to be an artist, much less one of such eminence.”

English’s observations suggest that artists were presumed to be somehow distinct from lawyers, businessmen, or engineers. But were they—and if so, was that difference help or hindrance? During the antebellum years, artists struggled to find markets and form supportive organizations in a culture still notoriously leery of the fine arts and dubious about their utility to the young republic. Many scholars have rehearsed that story and discussed its manifold ramifications. However, art historians have by and large overlooked the ways in which prevailing gender norms helped shape, or reshape, artistic identity. Yet those norms were central to the crucial question: what kind of man was the American artist to be?

Historian David Leverenz has argued that the greatest ideological tension during the antebellum era revolved around the question of what it meant to be manly and American. There were, in his view, three paradigms. The first was the patrician, a landed gentleman living on inherited wealth. The second was the artisan, his manhood defined in Jeffersonian terms as self-sufficient and self-respecting. These

Sarah Burns

Pantaloons vs. Petticoats
Gender and Artistic Identity in Antebellum America

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
positions were rooted and stable. Upending that equilibrium, though, was the third: the capitalist entrepreneur, socially mobile, aggressively competitive, and bent on domination. In this new arena, notes Anthony Rotondo, the middle-class man’s work was now intrinsic to his identity and key to power and prestige. A man without “business” was less than a man, as a young New York college student made plain in a letter to his betrothed: “it is so unmanly so unnatural to spend a lifetime in the pursuit of nothing.”

Those who wanted to rise in the world could turn for help to the advice manuals that now flooded the market. These books all laid down the same basic principles of success: hard work, irreproachable character, sound morals, self-reliance, self-control, economy, regularity, temperance. A capitalist body required no luxurious or gaudy coverings: the well-regulated man wore a neat, sober suit that proclaimed his membership in the tribe of businessmen. As Michael Zakim persuasively argues, the “monochromaticity” of standard business attire, the dark suits and white linen, constituted a “capitalist aesthetic” that helped individuals recognize each other.

This newly monochromatic world posed problems for the aesthetic tribe. How was the artist to navigate? Where might he find his footing in a society that now so strongly privileged the “capitalist” model of masculinity? Should the public and professional persona he crafted stand out, or blend in? Which “look” would prove better for successful artistic business?

A cartoon in Harper’s Weekly Magazine graphically set forth the terms of that debate. Four New American Pictures (Figure 22.1) presents “American Savans” (scientists), “American Artists,” “American Authors,” and “American Politicians” as sketches for a set of portraits purportedly commissioned by a “liberal Patron of the Arts.” All are identical in arrangement, but each group exhibits distinguishing marks. The bald “savans” wear owlish spectacles; the authors have quill pens tucked behind their ears; the disheveled politicians sport the noses of chronic drunkards. Each group is equally the butt of the visual joke. Even so, the artists stand out. Collectively, they have longer, scruffier hair and beards than the others. They sport wide-brimmed hats with tall, conical crowns at tipsy angles. Probably a reference to self-portraits by Frans Hals or Peter Paul Rubens, the headgear makes these moderns look less like new Old Masters than an assortment of clowns. Several of them (like the authors, but more so) also wear sweeping capes resembling the one worn by landscape painter Thomas Cole in a Mathew Brady daguerreotype (Figure 22.2).

Harper’s burlesque cheekily insinuates that the American artist really did have an image problem. Indeed, this cartoon might well serve as an example of what Walt Whitman derided in “New York Dissected.” Caught up in the flux of metropolitan street life, the poet-flâneur noted that every man wore a uniform to distinguish himself from others while at the same time assimilating him to the group. Thus, one could easily spot the Episcopal clergyman, the Wall Street broker, or the gambler: their dress gave them away. Good or bad, artists too wore distinctive gear: “Wild cataract of hair; absurd, bunged-up felt hat, with peaked crown; velvet coat, all friggled over with gimp, but worn; eyes rather staring, look upward.” This ridiculous figure, in Whitman’s view, epitomized the “Third-rate artist.”

Closely aligned, the Harper’s Weekly cartoon and Whitman’s sardonic prose lead us to wonder if they represented American painters as they were, or if they reflected preconceptions shaped by media-generated typecasting? If the latter, what do such caricatures suggest about the problems American artists encountered in managing
their public personas? Confronted with such trivializing stereotypes, did they strive to refashion themselves along less risible lines? If so, how? And how well did they succeed in their quest to be taken seriously?

A major handicap was the fact that artists—as portrayed in the popular media, at least—were all but interchangeable with dandies, a subculture that became the target of ferocious satire during the antebellum years. Commentators made sport of dandies with their spindly legs in skin-tight pantaloons, huge bow ties, and affected “simpering and twaddling” as they minced their way along urban promenades. Dandies rose at noon and spent the afternoon dressing; they played billiards because that game would not “fatigue their weak muscles or agitate their delicate nerves.” Narcissistic, indolent, and obsessed with all things sartorial, the dandy was in every respect the antithesis of the active, striving entrepreneur in his plain dark suit. In the words of journalist Thompson Westcott, this figure of extreme fashion was “not what political economists call a producer, unless the labor he bestows upon cultivating his moustache may entitle him to a place among the ‘sons of toil.’”

Deviating dramatically from what defined true manhood, the dandy straddled the border

Figure 22.1 Anonymous, Four New American Pictures, wood engraving. Harper’s Weekly Magazine, April 18, 1857, p. 256.
between masculinity and femininity, if he did not in fact cross over it altogether. So toxic was any suggestion of effeminacy that in the 1840 presidential race, the Whigs’ branding of Martin Van Buren as a dandified snob who “wore corsets” and “put cologne on his whiskers” contributed in some measure to his defeat by William Henry Harrison of log cabin fame.8

Although artists may have been less preoccupied with fashion than dandies, the media typecast them along similar lines as effeminate Romantics. The main character in the dime novel The Artist’s Bride (1856) has a pale face, dreamy eyes, a graceful form swathed in Byronic black, and masses of glossy black hair. Another, in an Atlantic Monthly story, has soft skin and a womanly mouth commensurate with his generally feminine traits. Theodore Winthrop’s novel, Cecil Dreeme, included cameos of various artist types, notably the “painter of the frowzy class, with a velvet coat, mop of hair and mile of beard, pendulous pipe and a figurante on the bowl, and with a Düsseldorf, not to say Bohemian, demeanor.” This frowzy Bohemian acts as foil to the “true Artist, a refined and spiritualized being … a man in force, but with feminine insight,” less a grotesque extreme but hardly in the mold of the aggressively manly all-American capitalist.9

In a new entrepreneurial society that valorized self-control and regularity, the work performed by the artist posed something of a problem as well. Artists did indeed work hard, even incessantly at times, but they did so not in mercantile establishments or law courts or counting houses but in the studio, where as much time might go by in reflection as in actual production. For such reasons, artists were classed with dandies as underachievers the nature of whose work was a mystery to the uninitiated. Another cartoon in Harper’s Weekly (Figure 22.3) encapsulated this view in the figure of a painter lounging with pipe in mouth and feet on the hob of his stove. Behind him is an unfinished canvas, along with a couple of funny hats and other accouterments.
Introducing “Young Dawdlemore,” the caption insists that, appearances to the contrary, he is not idle, “O dear, no; ‘but he is obliged to think a great deal before he begins to work.’ N.B. It is 6 p.m., and he has been thinking ever since he got up at 11 a.m., and now thinks he should dress for dinner.”

Dawdlemore and the dandy alike personified idleness, one of the supreme vices in the modern lexicon. Popular advice writer William Alcott summed up the case:

An indolent person is scarcely human; he is half quadruped, and of the most stupid species, too … He is absolutely good for nothing … [He] sleeps as long as it is possible for him to sleep, dresses slowly, amuses himself in conversation with the first person that calls upon him, and loiters about till dinner. And is not such a wretch, for it is improper to call him a man—good for nothing?10

Young Dawdlemore appears to be doing exactly that—nothing. Like the idle dandy, he is less than a man.

One might wonder to what extent such assumptions colored perception of real artists and their work. While it is difficult to generalize, it is probably safe to say that many lay people did not bother to question the truth or otherwise of the stereotype. The case of New York lawyer and diarist George Templeton Strong is instructive here. Actively interested in cultural affairs, he knew a number of prominent local artists, including renowned genre painter William Sidney Mount, who had in Strong’s view failed to realize his potential because he simply did not work hard enough. Once, when vacationing in the Catskills, Strong returned to his hotel to find “some visitors, among the rest that great loafer, Mount the artist.” After Mount’s death, Strong commented sadly that the painter, at the height of his career “among our most promising artists,” had languished in eastern Long Island, “that paradise of loafers … amusing himself and his friends with his music and his pencil sketches.”11 Instead of working hard and turning out masterpieces, Mount—a real-life Dawdlemore—had fiddled his time away.

Mount himself fretted continually in his own diary about his failure to produce more work as a consequence of procrastination and chronic ill health. He was morbidly sensitive about his reputation, writing on one occasion, “If I should have a studio in New York I must rise early—before sunrise—and take a walk before breakfast. I must not fail in doing so—for health. I understand that some of the artists have reported that I am intemperate. I cannot believe it … Also that I am idle.”12 Mount’s weaknesses, indeed, amounted to a laundry list of the negative behaviors against which advice writers constantly warned. In the view of others, and to a large degree his own, he slept too late, drank too much, and let time slip too easily through his fingers.

In the face of such preconceptions, how, then, might the American artist style himself along acceptably manly lines? Landscape painter Thomas Cole paved the way, although at the same time his was an ambiguous and conflicted model. Born in industrializing Yorkshire in 1801, Cole at 18 moved to the United States with his family. By the mid-1820s, he had embarked on what would be a highly influential career celebrating the beauty of American wilderness and pastoral scenery. The construction of Cole as an introspective Romantic began with William Dunlap and reached its apogee in the reminiscences of Louis Legrand Noble, Cole’s friend and first biographer. Noble described the young Cole as painfully timid and nervous, with large, light
blue eyes “in which it would have been difficult to say whether there was more of eloquent brightness or feminine mildness.” In maturity, Cole remained the earnest, thoughtful, and sensitive soul, pale of face, his blue-gray orbs “ever filling with tears at the pathetic.”

Hardly so delicate as portrayed by Noble, Cole had a much earthier side. On more than one occasion, for example, the artist fumed angrily about his detractors, calling them “Lie Mongers” and—more colorfully—“Dunghill Critics.” Noble, however, carefully expunged everything he deemed too coarse for the printed record.

The purportedly timid and dreamy Cole was also a surprisingly hardy and apparently tireless hiker capable of enduring the roughest conditions in search of the most spectacular mountain vista or the wildest torrent. One night, he and a friend were waiting for the stagecoach to the Catskill Mountain House. When it failed to arrive, the two set out to walk there instead, tramping the first 7 miles “right merrily” and seeking water some 3 miles further on. They finally reached the Mountain House at one in the morning, having toiled mostly uphill, in the dark, for the better part of four hours. On another occasion, Cole hiked the White Mountains of New Hampshire with Henry Pratt. The itinerary took them through the Notch, a rugged pass descending along the Saco River, a distance of 12 miles. Undaunted, the pair set forward “with our luggage strapped on our backs … and footed it through.” Cole even nursed a bit of scorn for the next generation, asking, “Why do not the younger landscape painters walk—walk alone, and endlessly?”

Cole straddled more than one border, often awkwardly. He was both English and American. He longingly identified with the old-school landed gentry yet had to make his way in an increasingly commercial society that for success demanded a competitive spirit that Cole deplored. In his persona (as others saw him) he combined the feminized traits of the stereotypical Romantic artist with a robust outdoor spirit. He never quite managed to reconcile the contradictions.

It remained for Cole’s friend and colleague Asher B. Durand to strike a successful new balance between the worlds of art, masculinity, and business. Durand cultivated a dogged work ethic and a pristine character. His commercial success legitimated landscape painting as a viable and respected profession. He promulgated moral and spiritual values through his landscapes, which revealed God’s presence in nature. Unlike his mentor Cole, he did not wrestle with the conflict between painting for money versus painting in the cause of high ideals; his popular landscapes seamlessly incorporated both. No studio loiterer, Durand—like the capitalist—vigorously acted in the world. He established a routine of winters in the city, the base for shows, sales, and networking, and summers in the country, where rugged landscapes furnished not only subject matter but also, importantly, the chance to reinvigorate manly health. Finally, he catered to an entrepreneurial clientele: city merchants and capitalists who needed the soothing and restorative influence of nature as antidote to the stress and discord of modern life.

In Daniel Huntington’s 1857 portrait (Figure 22.4), Durand sits before his easel, palette and brushes at the ready, overlooking a dramatic view of the White Mountains under a stormy sky. On the canvas is the painter’s product, a faithful (if artfully arranged) version of the scene. No effete dandy, let alone frowzy Bohemian, Durand wears a sober black frock coat and white linen, a modest cravat just visible beneath the well-trimmed beard. In Durand, the “capitalist aesthetic” meshes seamlessly with that of the landscape artist.
Huntington’s portrait also alludes to the physical and material aspects of the landscape painter’s undertaking. It no longer sufficed to carry only drawing materials into the field when open-air oil sketching would yield a truer and more vibrant record. To accomplish this was no easy task: the artist had to pack tubes of paint, a sketch box filled with papers and boards, a collapsible easel, folding stool, and large camp umbrella. The equipment, which could weigh as much as 30 pounds, bore witness to the strength, fortitude, and adventurous boldness that modern painting demanded. It went without saying that no indolent artist-dandy could make such an arduous and comfortless trek.19

While artists did not necessarily carry all that baggage over hill and dale on their own, the actual process of setting up and painting in the open was by no means easy or comfortable, especially in hot or stormy weather. One painter described a “search for the beautiful” when it was 100 degrees in the shade: “The long tramp, laden with paint-box and sketching-seat, while a boy carried the umbrella, easel, canvas, and traps, to the site of study. The assistant dismissed ... the labor of the day begins with intense delight ....” After a pleasant hour or two, “How the mosquitoes are beginning to bite; the cool morning breeze has died away ... There go the ants and ticks up the inviting opening of the pantaloons.” Soon, flying insects begin to get stuck to

Figure 22.4  Daniel Huntington, Asher B. Durand, 1857, oil on canvas, 56⅛ × 44 in. Source: Courtesy of the Century Association, New York.
the fresh paint on the canvas. The painter has some lunch and takes a nap, only to wake “with a clap of thunder, to find his easel capsized, his umbrella sailing away before the gust … bugs meandering over his palette, toads in possession of his paint-box … the river lashed into a fury … no shelter … and the nearest house a mile over the bogs.” Light in tone, this piece nonetheless conveys something of the challenges that faced the intrepid artist-explorer.20

Painters like Worthington Whittredge and Sanford Gifford gladly confronted difficulties far more challenging. A native of Ohio (and, like a proper pioneer, born in a log cabin), Whittredge was a farm boy well versed in the ways of the frontier trapper. Although he spent several years in Europe, he was better remembered for his trip to the Rocky Mountains with General John Pope in 1865–66. Pope’s party marched some 30 or more exhausting miles each day, but once in camp, Whittredge would snatch up his sketch box and sally forth to seek the “wildest mountain views.” Once, he met the famed scout Kit Carson. For several nights (to the painter’s intense pleasure) the two slept in the same room, Carson with a revolver under his pillow. Whittredge looked the part of rugged adventurer as well. A friend described him as “a tall, dark-complexioned man … straight, dignified, and more striking than handsome,” and resembling “a middle-aged cavalier of Spain or Portugal.”21

Gifford, somewhat younger, served in the Civil War with the New York Seventh. A journalist reported observing the artist “working right lustily under a broiling sun, with a pickaxe, in the trenches at Long Bridge … I always thought there was a soldierly bearing about Gifford, and the artists who saw him off to the wars say that in his appearance he was their beau ideal of a soldier.” Another correspondent described him as “tall, dark, silent,” needing “but the cavalier hat and cloak to realize to us the stately and thoughtful masters of Europe in the fifteenth century.” This was no cartoon of a shaggy artist in a cape and pointy hat but the image of an imposing and powerful figure. Gifford, like Whittredge, was tough and self-reliant. Out west in the Rockies he could sleep on a board and ride off on a horse, not to be seen again for months. When he was in town, though, he was the thorough urbanite, throwing dinner parties in his flower-filled Tenth Street Studio rooms and attracting numerous lady friends.22 In the mold of the painter Rothermel, whom Thomas English would have typed as a lawyer or western real-estate speculator, Gifford represented a new and dynamic artistic persona.

Gifford’s double existence as hardy adventurer and suave city host exemplifies the pattern of masculine artistic life that had settled into place by mid-century. In the city, artists, like other groups of middle-class and elite men, belonged to clubs such as the Century, where they exhibited, dined, partied, fraternized, and strengthened their professional networks. They began to take up residence in places tailor-made for their needs, the first of these the Tenth Street Studio Building designed by Richard Morris Hunt in 1857. They also launched the “Artists’ Receptions” organization, which held periodic open studios for the exhibition and sale of work. These events, highly successful for a number of years, attracted socialites by the hundreds and enabled a discriminating public to meet the artists as men of the world in an elegant milieu. So socially acceptable did they become that George Templeton Strong (despite his disparagement of Mount) noted in his diary that it was “not only creditable but aesthetic and refined to have [artists] at one’s parties.”23

Affluent tourists could also take in the spectacle of artists working (though not necessarily roughing it) during the summer months around the increasingly popular
resorts in the Catskills, the White Mountains, and elsewhere, made more accessible by
the railroads and an infrastructure of hotels and various other amenities. Artistic outdoor
men seemed to be everywhere, in fact: at times it was difficult to find an untrod-
den place to set up one’s portable easel. Writing from North Conway, New Hampshire,
Asher Durand complained that “along these streams at all reasonable times, you are
sure to see the white umbrella staring amidst the foliage. I meet these signals of the
toiling artist every day.” Overcrowded or not, this new status quo was good for busi-
ness: by such means artists could display themselves working, actively producing the
goods central to their business.\textsuperscript{24} The landscape painter had achieved full American manhood.

To what extent Durand, Whittredge, and their peers self-consciously crafted manly
personas to distance themselves from the stigma of the effeminate artist can only be
guessed. But it is revealing that they succumbed to the allure of the “beard move-
ment” that was in full sway by the 1850s. Historian Adam Goodheart notes that men
of the 1850s and 1860s expressed their ideals of masculinity through physical appear-
ance, which now featured the “astonishing profusion” of beards, moustaches, and
mutton-chop whiskers that lasted through and beyond the Civil War years. Carrying
connotations of nationalism, revolution, and military ardor, beards sprouted in
response to the imperative for manly resolve in an era of political turmoil and impend-
ing war. There were other compelling factors as well. Art historian Charles Colbert
suggests that the emergence of beards could hardly be coincidence “at a time of grow-
ing feminism and increased professionalism among female artists.” Smooth cheeks
were for women and dreamy Romantic artists; real men had hair on their faces. In that
regard, it is significant that Cole, sensitive Romantic, was always clean-shaven, while
the manly Durand grew a beard that only became longer and bushier over time. And
in 1848, the year of Cole’s death (and of the first women’s rights convention, in
Seneca Falls, New York), the painter Charles Loring Elliot insisted that William Sidney
Mount grow a beard before sitting for his portrait.\textsuperscript{25}

If so much was at stake in asserting modern manliness, how then did male artists
stand in relation to their beardless female counterparts? With few exceptions, and
until quite recently, antebellum American women artists were not to be found in any
mainstream histories beyond at best some brief mention. Thanks to new scholarship
(discussed below), it is now well known that there were substantial numbers of women
working professionally as painters, graphic artists, sculptors, and photographers. Yet
while some exhibited at the same venues as did their male counterparts, their social
and professional spheres were largely separate. Whether they posed a serious threat is
open to debate, but there is ample evidence that the masculine art world and its deni-
zens wanted to keep women at arm’s length.

Male artists defended their turf in print and in practice. Art historian April Masten
argues that \textit{The Crayon}, launched in 1855 by landscape painters William Stillman and
Asher’s son John Durand, established itself in opposition to the \textit{Cosmopolitan Art
Journal}, which vigorously promoted women artists. \textit{The Crayon} touted lofty intel-
lectual ideals (presumably masculine), while the \textit{Cosmopolitan} maintained “a more
chatty, popular style” that appealed especially to a female readership. Out in the field,
Worthington Whittredge no doubt spoke for many when he declared that women
should not venture into open-air landscape painting because their sex posed an insur-
mountable barrier. Their dress got “in the way of climbing about rocks and over
precipices,” he wrote. Worse, and proof positive of their incompetence, “they do not
know how to stick an umbrella spike into the ground.” Women were expected to carry parasols and to decorate the landscape; the white umbrella was a professional accessory for men only.26

Whereas the model for the male artist was the entrepreneurial man of action whose work ethic and self-control underlay his success, there was no female equivalent. Historian Laura Prieto maintains that through the 1850s and 1860s, domesticity became the most viable strategy available for women to establish their distinct artistic identities. As domestic professionals, they could hold sway and wield power in the sphere deemed their proper and natural habitat. However, their segregation cut them off from the opportunities, institutions, and networks that gave their masculine peers the edge in the public art world. Many women nonetheless sought training, formed their own networks, and in some cases established all-female households that preserved proper domestic appearances even while fostering (in certain cases) radically alternative lifestyles. As Prieto notes, such living arrangements excited very little comment at the time. Ostensibly confined to the home, women flew under the patriarchal radar.27

How did women’s artistic labor measure up? A great many women artists, especially if married, had in essence two jobs, which imposed an often intolerable strain on the tricky process of balancing one against the other. Tellingly, William Dunlap, Henry Tuckerman, and other historians of the time seldom included details of male artists’ home life or domestic cares. But Elizabeth Ellet in her pioneering history of women artists often alluded to the burdens of matrimony and motherhood. Cameo cutter Mrs. Cornelius Dubois, for example, soldiered on with unflagging energy despite “the care of a large family, the superintendence of the education of her daughters, and the sad drawback of ill health.” Landscape painter Mary Swinton Legaré settled in Iowa only to find that the “Western housekeeper” usually found “little time for the pleasures of the imagination.” Herminie Dassel emigrated from Vienna and exhibited her first paintings at the American Art-Union in New York. Five months after her arrival, she married and lived a “happy life, with cares and sorrows incidental to the care of a family, and to an arduous profession.” Domestic duties shadowed nearly every woman artist, forcing her to work double time.28

Better documented than many others, Lilly Martin Spencer’s life and career epitomize the struggle of the talented woman balancing full-time professional work and a full-time job as wife and mother. Although her otherwise unemployed husband Benjamin helped with child care and studio chores, Spencer seems to have shouldered much of the domestic burden while struggling to support an ever-growing family through the sale of her prints and paintings (the couple had thirteen children, seven surviving to adulthood). Although she had hoped to establish herself as a painter of exalted literary and historical subjects, such works failed to attract much interest. Of necessity, Spencer sought a more reliably profitable niche in the production of sentimental or humorous scenes of maternal love and childish mischief. As Elizabeth Ellet put it, once married and especially “after she became a mother, her taste was more for bits of domestic life, and she found matter-of-fact pictures more salable than her cherished ideals.”29

Significantly, Spencer found her strongest support in the female-oriented *Cosmopolitan Art Journal*, which warmly praised her work, sold engravings after her paintings, and championed her common touch. “No person,” boasted the editor, “is doing more than Mrs. Spencer to popularize art, and for that the people owe her a
debt of gratitude.” Her art was popular because it was warm, accessible, and often funny. In the same column, the writer praised *Shake Hands* (Ohio Historical Society), noting that the face of the housemaid extending a doughy hand eloquently expressed “the rich vein of humor and relish of a joke that is in her nature.” Such broad humor was anathema to the artists and critics who wrote for the manly, high-minded *Crayon*, which castigated Spencer’s “grinning house-maids” while deploring her failure to produce something deeper and more serious. Ironically, Spencer wished that she had “studied landscape more … for they sell quicker than any other kind of painting. I am extremely backward in it—principaly [sic] from not being able to afford time to make studies from nature.”

In an early self-portrait (Figure 22.5), Spencer represented herself reposing on a grassy bank. She gazes upward, or inward, her hair loose, a jet-black ringlet dangling over one dark eye. Even without props such as palette, brushes, or easel, the image hints that this woman is an artistic dreamer, rather than a conventional girl destined for the matrimonial altar and the domestic hearth. The portrait may be unique for its time and place in fashioning the woman artist as an inspired and poetic soul. Yet as Laura Prieto has pointed out, Spencer soon found herself “circumscribed by middle-class definitions of respectable womanhood.” When she later used herself as model for the women in her home scenes, she adopted a conventional maternal role. Whereas

![Figure 22.5](image_url)  
*Lilly Martin Spencer, Self-Portrait*, oil on canvas, ca. 1842, 25½ × 30 in.  
*Source*: Courtesy of the Ohio Historical Society.
her masculine contemporaries were outdoor men, Spencer remained very much the indoor woman in her private and professional life alike.\textsuperscript{31}

Frederic Edwin Church and Lilly Martin Spencer were nearly exact contemporaries, but the arcs of their respective careers make for a revealing comparison. While he spent the latter decades of his life in eclipse as newer styles of painting gained favor, Church at his height was stupendously successful. Henry Tuckerman sang his praises in \textit{Book of the Artists}, noting that few had contributed more toward making landscapes popular. This was in large measure due to the artist’s “practical intelligence, perseverance, cleverness and aptitude,” combined with the entrepreneurial spirit that was his most prominent characteristic.\textsuperscript{32}

Nowhere did that spirit shine so brightly as with the painter’s gigantic \textit{Heart of the Andes} (1859; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), which achieved true blockbuster status. Church managed its public display like a consummate showman, engineering the publicity, staging the painting dramatically in his studio, and presenting it as a grand and irresistible spectacle to behold, for which many thousands gladly paid the 25 cent price of admission. So captivating was Church’s masterpiece that on June 6, 1859, New York businessman William T. Blodgett bought it for the staggering sum of $10,000. Church’s commercial and artistic triumph was complete. Bold adventurer in the wilds, meticulous naturalist in the mold of his idol, Alexander von Humboldt, and businessman-showman \textit{par excellence} like P.T. Barnum (who after a long if checkered career published \textit{The Art of Money Getting} in 1880), Church was the quintessentially manly, successful American landscape painter, the true artistic equivalent of the consummate American capitalist.

Spencer, on the other hand, faced crushing difficulties, even though for about a decade she enjoyed considerable success and renown through the support of the Cosmopolitan Art Association and other institutions. She also made money through the sale of her popular prints, published in New York by William Schaus. But her sex and the burden of family cares, among other handicaps, told against her. Having moved from Cincinnati to New York with Benjamin and their first two children in 1848, she soon realized what a formidable challenge lay ahead. She wrote to her mother that she had “found it required twenty times the labor and time to accomplish anything” that could measure up to other artists’ work; the competition for notice and sales was “dreadful.” The market through the 1850s was flat (for her, if not for Church), and while she found work painting portraits, she did not know if she would ever “get payed [\textit{sic}], I have lost so much these two years that way by rogues not paying me.” By 1860, she had resorted to something “I thought I never would stoop to do, but I have been glad at last to do, it is coloring photographs, but I have to stick to it so close, and to do so many in order to make any profit by it, for they give a mere pittance.”\textsuperscript{33} Where Church’s gender along with his connections and business sense buoyed his career, Spencer’s gender—and failure to compete successfully—sank hers.

Of course, it was not \textit{only} because of her gender that Spencer never achieved even a fraction of Church’s success, nor was it \textit{only} because the latter was a man that he rose to the pinnacle of artistic fame. And yet the institutional, economic, and social structures in place during their lifetimes upheld the entrepreneurial values and work ethic that defined manliness just as those same structures hobbled even the most determined woman artist in her quest for fame and fortune. It is true that the lines between
what constituted manliness and womanliness were often not so sharply drawn. Celebrated landscape painter John Frederick Kensett, for example, was of a more “feminine” mold: amiable, soft, sweet, and mild. But he too worked the right networks, belonged to the right clubs, had a studio in the right place, traveled in the right circles.34 His business flourished, while Spencer’s faltered. Despite the fact that she was far less conventionally womanly than most, she—like her peers—was of the wrong sex, in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

As Spencer’s story suggests, the study of antebellum women artists must unavoidably engage with issues of gender. Such has not so often been the case with their masculine contemporaries. As with the category of whiteness (until recent years), their gender has remained a given—inherent and “natural”—that has by and large eluded critical scrutiny. While scholarship on the Gilded Age has been considerably more attentive to the role played by prescriptive gender norms in shaping and reshaping artistic identity both male and female, much along those lines remains to be done for the antebellum decades. In this chapter I have made an exploratory venture into territory ripe for further investigation.

Notes

1 English, 1852, p. 13.
7 Westcott, 1852, pp. 468, 469, 122.
8 Cited in Pessen, 1985, p. 177.
9 Emerson Bennett, The Artist’s Bride; or, The Pawnbroker’s Heir (New York: Garrett, Dick & Fitzgerald, 1856), p. 163; “Clarian’s Picture: A Legend of Nassau Hall,” Atlantic Monthly 5 (June 1860): 709, both cited in Harris, 1970, pp. 224–226; Winthrop, 1861, p. 58. Harris, 1970, ch. 9, “Artist Images: Types and Tensions” (pp. 218–251), offers an informative and still extremely useful survey and analysis of artists as they were represented and typed in mid-century American literature. Harris discerns the same general shift from the Romantic to a more businesslike artistic persona as I do here, but he does not consider the operations of the gender dynamic in this metamorphosis.
10 Alcott, 1834, pp. 37–38. Alcott’s book was tremendously popular: by 1836 it was already in its tenth printing.
12 William Sidney Mount, diary, November 26, 1848, cited in Frankenstein, 1975, p. 188.


15 Noble and Vesell, 1964, pp. 147, 66, 53.


18 Before he turned to painting, Durand was a highly respected engraver who quite literally made money by engraving banknotes; see Roberts 2012.

19 For more information on artists’ equipment and painting practices see Harvey, 1998. Thomas Cole himself made some oil sketches in the field but also based many of his finished compositions on pencil sketches rendered on site and liberally inscribed with notes on color, atmosphere, and geological features.

20 “Gleanings and Items,” The Crayon 6 (11), (November 1859), pp. 350–351.

21 Baur, 1969, pp. 7–8, 45, 47; Tuckerman, 1867, pp. 517–518.


26 Masten, 2008, pp. 36–37; Worthington Whittredge, manuscript of unpublished autobiography, ca. 1905, box 1, folder 9, p. 184, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. See Krieger, 2010 and Siegel, 2011. Women artists who ventured too far into male territory were castigated as females who had unsexed themselves, that is, willfully abandoned conventional femininity to become troublingly androgynous figures. Such was the case with expatriate sculptor Harriet Hosmer, whose purportedly mannish ways and short skirts aroused male anxiety and hostility. Nonetheless, expatriation did grant American women artists a measure of freedom not available to those who stayed home. See Dabakis, 2014.


28 Ellet, 1859, pp. 298, 311, 314. In Iowa, Legaré also established a women’s college, which—too “advanced” for its time—eventually failed.

29 Ellet, 1859, p. 328.


32 Tuckerman, 1867, pp. 370, 373, 375.
Gender and antebellum artistic identity

33 Lilly Martin Spencer, letters to Angélique Martin, March 29, 1850, 1855, October 14, 1860, Lilly Martin Spencer Papers, microfilm roll no. 131, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Representative Spencer letters describing her struggles are reproduced in Burns and Davis, 2009, pp. 322–328.

34 On Kensett’s sexuality see Manthorne, 2006, pp. 138–139.

References


Male or Man?  
The Politics of Emancipation in the Neoclassical Imaginary  
Charmaine A. Nelson

John Quincy Adams Ward’s *Freedman* (1863), Thomas Ball’s *Lincoln Memorial* (ca. 1866), and Mary Edmonia Lewis’s *Morning of Liberty/Forever Free* (1867) are three sculptures that depict enslaved black males gaining their freedom (Figures 23.1, 23.2, 23.3). But could these subjects be considered black men? Slavery notoriously denied manhood to adult male slaves who, as chattel, were considered to lack the necessary physical, moral, and intellectual qualities. Psychoanalysis is, perhaps ironically, a useful tool for a critical analysis of the exclusion of black males from the category of manhood. A postcolonial and black feminist psychoanalytical reading (in concert with discursive analysis) will expose the unconscious underpinnings governing the sculptural representation of black male subjects.¹

Freud’s concept of castration is both problematic and useful in this regard—problematic in its limited notion of human completeness and useful as an example of how Western thought produces difference as dangerous and fearful. According to Elisabeth Bronfen, castration is the “linchpin of psychoanalytic theory,” derived from paternal laws and prohibitions, which rely upon the “primacy of the phallus.”² Through it Freud figured the male body as normative by defining the female sex organ as a wound from castration. Castration explains male fear of/desire for the female body as a confrontation with female sexual difference that can only be perceived as lack. Freud’s theories implied that the normative body was not only male but also white; the father (as Freud’s idealized, organizing subject) who imposed his law upon his son was a white patriarch. As such, the black body—in its racial difference from whiteness—replicated the female body’s sexual difference as a trigger of fear. For Freud, castration played out within the Oedipus complex, which concerns the father–son relationship and the incest taboo (Oedipus’s patricide of Laius and his incestuous relationship with his mother Jocasta).³
But if the father in Freud’s Oedipal drama is always already white, are there fruitful ways to critique the ramifications of the exclusion forced upon the abject black son? To figure the son as black opens up a critical re-reading of the son’s sexual challenge to and hoped for displacement of the father in the context of slavery.

Slavery’s clash of cultures resulted in the forced Westernization of Africans. Although resistance was ubiquitous, such creolization also produced a desire to participate in Eurocentric cultural forms as exemplified by Frederick Douglass’s experience of slavery, recounted in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. According to Gwen Bergner, “Since Douglass writes within and even aspires to the norms of the Euro-American social order from which psychoanalysis arose, his account usefully anticipates the Freudian/Lacanian paradigm of subjectivity.” However, Douglass also critiqued how whites used slavery to pervert the natural order of the family (black and white) by imposing a matrilineal order upon slaves, which incentivized rape and placed white men in the “double relation of master and father.” But females are not the only subjects displaced through sex/gender difference. Indeed, one could argue that the production of black males as racial “other” also produced them as sexual
Figure 23.2  Thomas Ball, *Emancipation or Lincoln Memorial*, ca. 1866, bronze. Washington, DC. Source: © North Wind Picture Archives / Alamy.
“others.” Freud’s idealization of the white male is precisely what produces the abjection of the female and the non-white subject. One way to expose the biases of the Oedipal narrative is to insist upon a cross-racial family drama, the likes of which slavery produced across the Americas. Could not the son within the Oedipal drama—as “other” to the white father and disciple of patriarchal law—be the black male, infantilized within slavery, forcibly acculturated, and strategically denied the body of the (white) mother?6

Compared to women, the sexual exploitation of enslaved black males is less frequently analyzed through the intersecting lenses of race, sex, and gender. However, both women and men were subjected to practices (whipping, branding, renaming, etc.) designed to animalize and strip them of their individuality, humanity, and dignity.7 The animalization of enslaved African women also served to reformulate them for their role as “breeders.” However, this sexual burden also extended to black males. Historical calculations of male slave fertility were made through the visual scrutiny of

stature, musculature, and genital size—supposed corporeal signs of health, strength, and virility. Both female and male slaves were often publicly stripped and inspected at slave auctions.

Sexual exploitation and the extraction of offspring were seen as legitimate within the context of slavery. But the sexual violation of black male slaves was not limited to white male slave owners. Indeed, Hilary Beckles has found evidence of white female slave owners inspecting the genitalia of black males at Barbadian auctions. Suggesting that such behavior was not a breach of their roles as good mothers and wives but rather a sign of the extent to which white women’s socio-economic interests had become linked to “the reproduction of slavery,” Beckles argues that “white women were acting fully within the epistemological framework of slavery.”

Such inspections were not merely practical but also provided a sexual outlet for elite white females, who were defined as the sexual possessions of their white male husbands and thus had little control of their “legitimate” sexuality within the confines of patriarchal marriage. Moreover, white women were further sexually alienated by pervasive white male sexual desire for black women. Across the Caribbean and the American South, white men often took black or mixed race women as concubines. Their sexual access was gained through absolute terror and extreme forms of violence. Douglass witnessed his white master (presumably his father) vengefully whipping his Aunt Hester (his surrogate mother) for the “crime” of daring to assert her sexual preference for a male slave. “[T]he Narrative’s triangulated scene,” Bergner argues, “partly implies a homoerotic structure that requires enslaved African-American men first to identify with, then to desire, and always to fear, white men.”

Given the colonial character of the psychoanalytical theory of castration (meaning the unstated and thereby normative position of the white male as father and ideal subject), the black male body becomes a site of sexual excess. Indeed, black men have been historically, and are still too often today, reduced to their genitalia, a sign of sexual prowess and/or deviance.

Given the racialized sexual history of slavery, I wish to examine Ward’s **Freedman** (Figure 23.1), Ball’s **Lincoln Memorial** (Figure 23.2), and Lewis’s **Morning of Liberty/Forever Free** (Figure 23.3) in order to question the symbolic, social, and material castration of their black male subjects. All three artists sculpted newly liberated males. However, since all three sculptors fell short of representing black men, I will ask how the black phallus/penis went missing either materially (Lewis), or symbolically (Ball and Ward).

**Precarious Freedom: John Quincy Adams Ward’s **

**The Freedman**

I have argued elsewhere that the “white Negro” type (a light-skinned or mixed race black subject) came to stand for black females within nineteenth-century American neoclassical sculpture. Not so the black male subject. Ward’s **Freedman** articulates a so-called full-blooded Negro physiognomy registered in the full lips, line of the nose, and tightly coiled hair on the head and face. The manacle on his left wrist with several chain links hanging down suggests his recent emancipation. The 90-degree angle of the flexed bicep and forearm in tandem with the position of his right foot at the
base of the tree stump indicate his physical exertion in the contemplation of standing—
he appears poised to rise from his seated position.

Created in the middle of the Civil War, this sculpture questions the status of
emancipated black males and their shift from chattel to citizen. Indeed, the pose
symbolizes the black male’s political, social, and spiritual transition into manhood.
Slavery literally stripped manhood from black males. If men were defined by their
ability to provide for and protect their families and themselves, as well as to partici-
pate in public and civic life, enslaved Africans were blocked from accomplishing
these goals. For the most part, whites who were invested in slavery as a “benevo-
lucent civilizing mission” felt justified in enslaving an inferior “pagan” race, incapable
of self-care. The sculpture poses a critical question to the mainly white art-viewing
public about their own expectations and fears in light of emancipation and a soon
to be post-Civil War nation.

Ward’s sculpture remained a small-scale work. As Kirk Savage noted, “[a]lthough
it received critical praise, The Freedman was never commissioned at full scale
and nothing like it was ever erected in public, the one possible exception being
Thomas Ball’s freed slave crouching like Mary Magdalene at the feet of the American
Christ, Abraham Lincoln.” Savage’s characterization of the black male figure in
Ball’s work (Figure 23.2) as “Mary Magdalene” astutely recognizes the subject’s
inferiority and feminization in relation to the presidential patriarch. Ward’s former
slave strikes a somewhat related pose, but with a difference as he contemplates stand-
ing up into manhood. His faraway gaze with uplifted chin conveys quiet and intense
reflection. In a sense it is fitting that a work produced midway through the traumatic
Civil War does not yet represent the black male as standing and fully a “man,” since
the success of the North and an end to slavery were not yet achieved. But Ward’s
black male is also not kneeling as is Ball’s figure, nor is he asking whites to allow him
to stand, as the figure does in the famous British abolitionist Josiah Wedgwood’s
Am I not a Man and Brother? (Figure 23.4). While the absence of a shackle on the
right wrist of Ward’s black male subject indicates a legitimate if precarious freedom,
the prominent placement of the two long parallel strands of chains that still bind the
wrists and the ankles of the black male subject in the Wedgwood alert viewers to his
continuing status as slave, acting as a call to whites for assistance. While the shackled
black male is cast in a servile pose in Ward’s sculpture, the figure is self-contained,
self-liberated, and introspective, with his muscles flexed in anticipation. The freed-
man is not in a position of gratitude, but sits contemplating an uncertain future,
prepared for action.

Ward’s black male subject is both powerful and beautiful. The Freedman is a
black Apollo, the beauty of his muscled form accentuated by the dark bronze
medium. Savage has described the figure as a “superb male nude [with] torso
pressed forward like the ancient and ennobling prototype the Torso Belvedere, his
arms and legs locked in one easy circuit of force as they push down against the
stump which has metaphorically held him.” But black beauty was for many whites
an aesthetic impossibility (as dictated by centuries of Western science and racist
“common sense”) and their confrontation with a free, powerful, and exquisite
black man would have been a source of both titillation and anxiety. Whites were
accustomed to exploiting blacks as chattel. But the broken manacle on the black
man’s wrist in Ward’s sculpture, together with the title, boldly announce that he
was no possession.
The Cult of Lincoln and Anonymized Slaves: Thomas Ball’s *Lincoln Memorial*

Ward’s *Freedman* and Ball’s *Lincoln Memorial* have much in common. However, while Ward’s small-scale, single-figure work was intended for galleries and upper-class homes, Ball’s two-figure composition became a large-scale public monument.
Abraham Lincoln came to symbolize America’s self-sacrificing struggle to end slavery, the heroic contributions of white abolitionists, and the birth of a true democracy. As with the Northern Civil War hero Robert Gould Shaw, Lincoln’s premature death propelled his lionization. Lincoln’s whiteness also fueled the surge in sculptural tributes and public monuments created in the latter half of the nineteenth century, while many unsung black abolitionists were not publicly commemorated. As Savage has argued, “Black Americans did not have their own monuments, despite the critical role they had played in swinging the balance of power—both moral and military—to the North.” While the anonymous black subject entered public tributes to emancipation by virtue of a pairing with Lincoln, the comparable dearth of individualizing monuments to Douglass and other blacks is indicative of the desire of white Americans to take sole credit for the end of slavery. It also reveals the concentration of cultural, economic, and political capital needed to publicly impose a vision of collective memory.

The Reverend William G. Elliot (a member of the Freedman’s Memorial Society) encouraged Ball to submit a photo to the memorial committee after seeing the original model during his Florentine studio visit in autumn 1869. While the government contributed $3,000 for the foundation and pedestal, Ball was offered the sum of $17,000 by the committee for a bronze cast. The monument was erected and dedicated on April 14, 1876, the eleventh anniversary of Lincoln’s assassination. After the initial donation of $5 from former Virginian slave, Charlotte Scott, the remainder was donated by “colored soldiers, under the command of General J.W. Davidson, headquarters at Natchez, Miss., amounting in all to $12,150. This was subsequently increased from other sources to $16,242.”

Besides individual portraits of Lincoln, the most popular sculptural mode of representing him was within a two-figure composition, which included a black male slave. Lincoln, always elegantly clad, usually in contemporary nineteenth-century clothing, was rendered an individual revered for his accomplishments. Although based on Elliot’s servant and former Missouri slave, Archer Alexander, the black male figure in Ball’s sculpture is allegorical and not named in the commemorative inscriptions, a kneeling male wearing only a loincloth.

Ball’s Lincoln Memorial exemplifies this dichotomous racialized pattern. The contrast of clothing, pose, expression, and action is dramatic. Lincoln symbolizes “civilization,” while the kneeling, scantily clothed black male stands for the “primitive” African race. Lincoln’s outstretched left arm, which seems to beckon the black subject to arise from the prison of slavery, conveys the president’s power and god-like authority over him. Yet, although the chain links are severed at each of his wrists, the manacles themselves are still in place, and the black male is still crouched with the knuckles of his left hand clearly on the ground. This gesture evokes knuckle-walking and may have served to liken the black subject to simians.

In contrast, Lincoln’s benevolent gesture seems a mystical source of energy, which is compelling the black subject to rise. Ball signals that this process is under way by positioning the black ex-slave’s right arm in a flexed pose, lifted above the ground as the man’s gaze is raised to look into the distance. Much like Ward’s Freedman, the expression is introspective. Although Ball imagines him contemplating his newfound freedom, the narrative gives Lincoln credit for his liberation. Because the literate, scroll-carrying Lincoln looms above the kneeling black male like Freud’s benevolent father in the Oedipal drama, the power of the black male’s exquisitely muscled
physique seems contained by the overwhelming presence of Lincoln. Within the context at the heart of the Oedipal drama, the erect, literate, sophisticated white father as Lincoln towers above the crouching, unclad, presumably “uncivilized” black “boy,” an anonymized ex-slave. Thus the black male, despite the evidence of his maturity, is infantilized by the superior authority of the white father.27

Compared to the sculptures by Ward and Lewis, Ball’s black male has arguably taken a step backwards, or downwards. Although also only partially clad, Ward’s Freedman is elevated above the ground, not kneeling at the feet of the white man/father/master. His moment of introspection is his own and not a display for a white patriarch. In contrast, Ball’s stooping black male figure wears two shackles instead of one, with a severed chain visible under foot. This racially paternalistic and hierarchical composition would have appeased white viewers’ fears of a black manhood and a renewed black masculinity unleashed by emancipation.28

Ironically, at the unveiling of Ball’s monument it was Frederick Douglass who was called upon to act as the principal orator. Douglass needed to walk the line between honoring the man now seen as a martyr and speaking truthfully about Lincoln’s political antipathy to black Americans. The speech was audacious in its honesty. Addressing the large multi-racial crowd, Douglass stated, “It must be admitted … Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man.”29 Douglass presented a brutal tally of Lincoln’s political shortcomings in terms of his lethal neglect of black Americans.30 He positioned blacks as peaceful, patient, and tolerant in the face of white racial hatred. However, Douglass explained that the seed of Lincoln’s social and political transformation was his dedication to the prevention of the spread of the evil of slavery within the United States, finally characterizing him as a “great man” and the first US “martyr president.”31

Douglass also diverted attention away from Lincoln in his speech, asserting that the occasion for the commemoration was the newly emancipated African Americans and their “blood-bought” freedom.32 Douglass claimed that Lincoln’s “wise and beneficent rule” allowed for blacks to see themselves “gradually lifted from the depths of slavery to the heights of liberty and manhood” (italics mine).33 However, Douglass—like the black art historian Freeman H.M. Murray thirty years later—no doubt noticed the unfulfilled black manhood figured in Ball’s monument. As Murray noted, the sculpture “showed the Negro on his knees, when a more manly attitude would have been more indicative of freedom.”34

Institutional Exclusion and Material Castration:
Edmonia Lewis’s Forever Free

Edmonia Lewis’s Morning of Liberty/Forever Free (Figure 23.3) is a striking example of the representational possibilities, limits, and differences between the black male and female subject.35 The sculpture was one of two ideal works that Lewis completed very early after establishing her Roman studio in 1866.36 The other work, now lost, The Freedwoman on First Hearing of Her Liberty (1866), represented a boy with his prayerful mother, whose clasped hands, broken shackles, and kneeling pose were undoubtedly informed by the figure featured in the Wedgwood mentioned above (Figure 23.4). Forever Free was another complex double-figure composition.
Lewis couples a kneeling female figure with a proud male standing with his arm raised jubilantly while his foot tramples a metal ball still attached to the links of a broken shackle. The remnants of the broken chains alert us, much as in the works of Ward and Ball, that the liberation of this couple has just occurred. Together the pair symbolize the faith, struggle, and resistance of those who had triumphed over the tyranny of slavery.

Whereas the kneeling pose had previously evoked the black man’s request to enter humanity through white benevolence, Lewis’s female, from 1867, after the end of the Civil War, could no longer be read as beseeching. Rather, her pose signals gratitude for a liberty already received. The gratitude is not to white men; it is to God. Unlike Ward’s seated male and Ball’s kneeling male, Lewis’s male figure has arisen. His triumphant and exhilarated pose symbolizes their freedom and his manhood.

Lewis demonstrates consciousness of the ways in which enslaved black males sought, in Bergner’s words, to “appropriate normative masculinity.” The figure’s gesture toward the woman—his protective hand on her shoulder—is a demonstration of what his manhood entails both for himself and his loved ones. The work proclaims his desire, through his freedom, to access patriarchal social benefits, like the right and ability to protect his wife/woman from assault and harm at the hands of white men. Slaves could not “provide” in any reliable economic sense for their families since, as chattel, they were denied access to the economic pathways of wealth accumulation, despite their centrality to wealth production. This simple touch signals the potential for a legitimate familial bond through the patriarchal ideals of citizen, father, and husband. Lewis represented race differently for each subject in this sculpture. The standing male’s facial features and hair signify a blackness that is less present in the kneeling woman, who has decidedly European facial features and relatively straight hair. Indeed, these features have led art historians to erroneously misread her as white. However, Lewis’s subjects fit precisely within the racial limits of the neoclassical style as a so-called full-blooded Negro male and a white-Negro female. Despite the assertiveness of the male’s pose, his sexual difference from the kneeling black woman whom he guards is not secured. His manhood is challenged not, as in Ward’s and Ball’s sculptures, by their black subjects’ hesitant countenances or poses, but by the literal lack of a phallus/penis. An examination of the V-shaped folds of the cuffed shorts that culminate in his groin indicates a lack of genitalia. From the right side, his lack of genitalia is arguably even more pronounced due to his pose, which highlights the empty space of the missing genital “bulge.” There is a similar lack of anatomical veracity in the representation of the lower portion of the male subject’s left leg. In an art form based largely upon the credible representation of the human body, an elision of this type was significant. While the line of the gastrocnemius, the larger, bulging calf muscle, appears undifferentiated, the medial malleolus, or ankle bone, which sticks out at the base of the tibia, disappears within the fleshiness of his foot. Whereas the upper body demonstrated Lewis’s skill at a more accurate rendering of the pectoral muscles, biceps, ribcage, and stomach muscles, the flatness of the front of the emancipated slave’s pants announces the conspicuous absence of a male sex organ.

Lewis, as a black/Native woman, surely would not have had a conscious desire to represent a socially castrated black man; her material castration was not intended to signify social and political disenfranchisement in the terms I have been discussing. Rather, the dramatic absence of accurately sculpted genitalia indicates Lewis’s
exclusion from the study of human anatomy, a standard of nineteenth-century art education for men. Human subjects dominated the themes of nineteenth-century neoclassical sculpture. The mastery of the human body was attained through rigorous study in two domains: (1) life-drawing classes from unclothed models through art education, and (2) human anatomy lessons through the study of skeletons and cadavers at medical schools. As one critic maintained, “Few medical men are so capable of pronouncing upon certain points and shades of anatomical precision so surely as a deeply accomplished sculptor.” However, the combination of male-only institutions and the racial segregation of nineteenth-century American education left both pathways closed to Lewis, a woman of African and Native ancestry. Lewis’s intellectual and aesthetic ambitions did not align with the low expectations in which a dominant white society sought to confine her.

While elite white males gained unimpeded access to both domains, patriarchal ideals prevented female access. White male sculptors were particularly outraged when their fellow white female peers sculpted the male body. For instance, Thomas Crawford condemned Harriet Hosmer as follows: “Miss [Hosmer]’s want of modesty is enough to disgust a dog. She has had casts for the entire female model made and exhibited them in a shockingly indecent manner to all the young artists who called upon her. This is going it rather strong.” In another case of prejudice against women sculptors, a panel of male judges stripped Anne Whitney’s first-place award for the national competition for a memorial dedicated to the Northern senator and abolitionist Charles Sumner when they discovered that she was a woman. At issue was Whitney’s knowledge of the male body, which was revealed in her sculpting of Sumner’s legs.

For Lewis, even more than for her fellow white female contemporaries—all of whom were summarily dismissed under the unflattering moniker “the white marimorean flock” by the novelist Henry James—access to anatomical study took circuitous routes. Whitney and Hosmer, both from upper-class backgrounds, used their race and class privilege, as well as family connections, to circumvent the patriarchal institutional exclusion of white women with private tutoring. In comparison, Lewis’s highest level of formal education was a short period at the racially integrated, coeducational Oberlin College. But Lewis’s time at Oberlin ended disastrously when in the winter of 1862 she was accused of poisoning two fellow female students. There is no indication that Lewis studied sculpture or anatomy while enrolled at the college, although she did produce a noteworthy drawing, *The Muse Urania* (1862), a gift for a friend. Lewis regrouped and moved to Boston where she was able to realize her dream of becoming an artist, before earning the funds to sail to Europe. But extended formal training was again inaccessible there.

The anatomical shortcomings of Lewis’s human subjects in her early work became a bone of contention with her (conditional) supporter Lydia Maria Child. Child ridiculed the anatomical failures of Lewis’s *Freedmen’s Group* (ca. 1866) by critiquing Elizabeth Peabody’s write-up of the sculpture in the *Christian Register*, which had stated of the figures that “every muscle is swelling with emotion.” In response Child quipped, “Now the fact is, the figure had no muscles to swell. The limbs were like sausages.”

Lewis took to working by herself, completing all aspects of the sculptures without studio assistants. The move was no doubt an effort of self-preservation since, two years before her arrival in Rome, the white sculptor Hosmer had been accused of fraud in the creation of her work *Zenobia* (1859). Instead of the standard neoclassical practice of
having studio assistants prepare large clay maquettes (modelli), transforming them into plaster, and then roughing them out in marble, Lewis dismissed (or never hired) studio hands and regularly completed all three phases of production by herself.50 Thus, while the labors of her fellow sculptors were mainly absorbed with the conceptualization of the work and the production of small-scale clay maquettes (bosetti), Lewis dispersed her energies across the four stages of production.

It is unclear if Lewis gained any intimate knowledge of male anatomy from her personal relationships or sexual experiences. Unlike many of her fellow female artists, the details of Lewis’s personal life and sexual orientation remain unknown. Although several authors have assumed that she was homosexual based on her association with white female members of the Roman art colony, such as Hosmer and Charlotte Cushman, who lived in open same-sex relationships, other sculptors, such as Vinnie Ream Hoxie and Louisa Lander, were heterosexual (or lived their public lives as such) and no evidence has come to light connecting Lewis to a male or female love interest.51 It is highly unlikely that Lewis would have breached the social expectations of polite society to engage in extramarital sex given her devout Catholicism and her consciousness of being stereotyped as a black/Native woman. Furthermore, no records of a marriage have been found. Lewis undoubtedly would have heard of the (hetero)sexual scandal that had ruined Louisa Lander’s career a few years before her arrival in the Roman colony.52 Without a male lover or husband, Lewis’s personal life probably did not allow for exposure to the adult male body.

The absence of genitalia in Lewis’s black male subject in Forever Free strikingly contrasts with the over-emphasized genitalia of Jean-Baptiste Belley, a Senegalese-born former slave, Dominguian landlord, and businessman, in Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson’s earlier painting, Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley (1797).53 Leaning casually against the prominent marble bust of the recently deceased abolitionist Guillaume-Thomas Raynal (1713–96), Belley’s hand and fingers direct the viewer’s gaze to a large bulge on the right side of his breeches. The contrast between the immovable white bust and the animated, colorful body of the black male emphasizes the presence of Belley’s anatomy. Although the portrait grants Belley a level of dignity through his individuation and the specificity of his formal attire, the prominence of his genitalia may have served a reductive purpose. In the eyes of white viewers, accustomed to theories and visual representations of African racial inferiority and sexual deviance, Belley’s exaggerated genitalia served to primitivize him, reducing him to his phallus/penis, especially through his juxtaposition with the white male symbolized by a head/brain. Paradoxically, the reduction of the black male to the (overdetermined) phallus/penis coexisted with an infantilization; the excessive black male sexuality resided in a childlike form that required the guidance and discipline of the white father. As such, a “normal” black manhood, which was neither hypersexualized nor neutered, remained out of reach in sculpture and painting. Both Lewis’s emasculated black male and Girodet’s spectacularly endowed one fell short of a full black manhood.

**Conclusion**

Nineteenth-century neoclassical sculpture was deeply invested in the racial differencing of the body. I have introduced a postcolonial and black feminist reading of the psychoanalytical concept of castration and the Oedipal moment to address
the missing phallus/penis in the works of Ward, Ball, and Lewis in order to open a conversation about the social, material, and symbolic emasculation of black male subjects. The concept of castration derives from the fear that is triggered by the potential for loss. But it also speaks to the anxiety that actualizes within the moments of subject formation. As I have argued above, it is a concept that refuses the acknowledgment of sexual and racial difference as normal, instead insisting upon the normative body—the body of the father—as white only. But the black man within slavery can be read (and quite literally at that) as the illegitimate son of the white father, a son who does not pose any genuine threat to the father’s authority and a son who can never inherit his father’s paternal law, since, as Bergner argues, both “citizenship and property depend on paternal recognition.”

While, in the Freudian sense, this black son is not worthy to take his father’s name and is disempowered by the denial of “paternal sanction” within the material dimensions of transatlantic slavery, it was the white father’s imposition of his family name against the “child’s” will that resulted in the black subject’s traumatic submission to slave status. As Bergner has argued, “The white master is overdetermined as the oedipal father; he is the agent of a racist social order,” prohibiting black males “not only from satisfying sexual desire, but from achieving basic autonomy, normative masculinity, self-determination, and access to language (literacy).” While blacks were central subjects in neoclassical sculpture due to the importance of the urgent political topic of slavery, these three works were not about slavery specifically but about emancipation, and as such they had to navigate the anxiety and fear that black liberation inspired in white, former slave-holding populations.

But all black male subjects were not created equal. The works of the white male sculptors Ward and Ball, in their handling of pose, expression, countenance, and action, and even in the depiction and placement of shackles, speak to their symbolic and social struggle with how to represent the newly liberated adult black male. No longer a slave, but not fully a citizen, the male figure in the sculptures of Ward and Ball navigates the line between commemorating and celebrating emancipation without instilling fear in a white population. On the other hand, Lewis, as a black/Native female, was far more cognizant of and sympathetic to the racial oppression of black males. Like Ward’s work, her composition does not represent or imply an internalized white gaze. Her black couple celebrates their freedom and expresses gratitude to God. Her inclusion of a female figure allowed her to represent a harmonious, supportive black heterosexual relationship that was beyond the reach of white interference. Her male subject was potentially a husband, and by implication, he was (or could become) a father. The sculptural narrative implies that both roles, importantly, have been determined by choice and not through the manipulation of white slave-owning policies of “breeding.”

Of the three sculptures, Lewis’s black male is farthest along the road to inhabiting black manhood and the subject that most unequivocally celebrates black emancipation. His emasculation, in the absence of the representation of his penis and testicles, occurs at a material level and is undoubtedly the result of Lewis’s racist and sexist exclusion from the standard sculptural education of which her white male peers readily partook. But once noted, the phallic absence haunts the sculpture, recalling the terrorist practices like lynching that whites employed to hold blacks in bondage. As such, the genital absence symbolizes the black male’s submission to the absent white father. In Freudian terms, the challenge to the father’s
superior sexuality as centered in the phallus/penis could not be realized, not because the black male is a boy and his genitalia are less developed, but because the black man is unmanned by his castrated body. Quite dramatically, the V-shaped folds of his shorts and the flatness of the pelvis announce, in the Freudian sense, a vagina/wound. Yet although the educated and fastidious nineteenth-century viewers who consumed neoclassical sculptures could not have failed to miss such an oversight (even if politeness prohibited them from commenting on it), the symbolism of Lewis’s powerful, joyful, standing black male still delivered the manliness that Douglass had observed was absent from Ball’s monument. However, it would take sculptors working in the wake of the advances of Ward, Ball, and Lewis to fulfill the promise of representing black male subjects that were fully three-dimensional, not only in their sculptural materiality, but in their full mental and physical complexity as men.

Notes

1 Lane, 1998, offers a model of such analysis.
6 Slaves were also customarily denied access to their own black mothers and, in Douglass’s case, also to his black grandmother from whom he was separated as a child. See Bergner, 1998, p. 250.
8 Beckles, 2000, p. 661.
9 Beckles, 2000, p. 661.
10 See Kriz, 2008, p. 52.
14 Slave owners across the Americas developed creative and detailed nomenclatures of race mixing. Names like Negro, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon mustee, and mustiphino became ways of supposedly tracking degrees of blackness, demonstrating an anxiety over the potential invisibility of Africanness. “So-called” refers to this mainstream white, unscientific discourse. See Cooper, 1824, p. 111.
16 Savage, 1994, p. 128.
17 Savage, 1994, p. 128.
18 Western racial hierarchies and theories of white supremacy rendered white expression of sexual desire for blacks taboo. The ubiquitous sexualized torture of black males across the Americas (during and after slavery) through the white mob practice of lynching, and its centerpiece of castration, indicates an incessant white preoccupation with black male sexuality and genitalia and the strategic vilification of black males as a threat to white females. This intersection of white fear/desire of the black (male) body as sexually deviant and aesthetically lacking is evidenced in Frances
H. Green’s story “The Slave-Wife” in which the physical attributes (complexion and physiognomy) of her black male hero, Laco Ray, had to be managed in order to render him aesthetically pleasing to a white audience. See Green, 1845, pp. 81–107, and also Kriz, 2008, pp. 70–115.

19 The same type of heroization was accorded to William Wilberforce (1759–1833) in Britain.

20 Savage, 1994, p. 135. The first noteworthy Civil War monument to acknowledge black soldiers was Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s Robert Gould Shaw Memorial (1897), sponsored by Boston’s white elite. Although the art historian Freeman H.M. Murray praised the work as the “greatest of American military memorials … inspired primarily by the valor and the devotion of Negro-American soldiery,” others, like the art critic Charles Caffin, reimposed racial hierarchies, describing the black soldiers as possessing a “doglike trustfulness” in contrast to the “serene elevation” of Shaw. See Murray, 1916, p. 172, and Shackel, 2003, p. 138.


22 Holzer, 2006, p. 131; Douglass, 1940, p. 30.

23 Douglass, 1940, p. 31; Holzer, 2006, p. 132. Congress declared a holiday, and thousands gathered for the unveiling.

24 Douglass, 1940, p. 29. The pedestal featured the closing words of the proclamation and a plaque on the front acknowledged the Western Sanitary Commission of St. Louis, the monument’s builders, and the first donor and originator of the idea for the monument as Charlotte Scott, a freedwoman from Virginia.


26 Knuckle walking is a form of quadrupedal walking (as opposed to bipedalism) associated with gorillas and chimpanzees. See Inouye, 2003, p. 222.

27 For more on the racial infantilization of non-white subjects in nineteenth-century American sculpture see Green Fryd, 1992.

28 For a related formulation that casts the slave as a woman, see Randolph Rogers’s Lincoln and the Emancipated Slave (ca. 1866), which represents an erect, fully clad Lincoln, standing over a tophless, kneeling, adult black female. Lincoln’s grasp on the black woman’s wrist is crude and objectifying, symbolically mirroring the missing shackle and signaling her alienation from his social sphere.

29 Douglass, 1940, p. 12. In the speech, Douglass also acknowledged that “The race to which we belong were not special objects of [Lincoln’s] consideration,” and that while whites were Lincoln’s children, blacks could at best be seen as “his step-children; children by adoption, children by force of circumstances and necessity.” See p. 13.

30 Douglass recalled Lincoln blaming the war on blacks, advocating for black Americans to migrate to other lands, initially refusing black soldiers entry into the Union Army, then later refusing to retaliate for the murder and torture of black soldiers, declaring that if he could have saved the Union with slavery he would have done so. Douglass, 1940, pp. 14–15.

31 Douglass, 1940, pp. 12–14.

32 Douglass, 1940, p. 11.

33 Douglass, 1940, p. 16. Douglass also linked the birth of black manhood to their eventual enlistment as soldiers in the Union Army, the metamorphosis from slave to man visualized in their uniform-clad, musket-carrying bodies.
charmaine a. nelson

35 For an interesting interpretation of this sculpture see Buick, 2010, pp. 52–67.
38 While nineteenth-century patriarchy and its far-reaching negative implications for white women should not be overlooked, we must also acknowledge that the denial of manhood to black males within slavery allowed for the simultaneous racial and sexual exploitation of black women who were systematically denied the protection from black males who were also victims of exploitation, torture, and abuse.
42 Payne, 1971; Nelson, 2007, pp. 23, 194n69. The commission was reassigned to Thomas Crawford, and Whitney, like the other finalists, was given a token monetary prize of $500.
43 James wrote about many of the female sculptors in his biography of his friend, the sculptor William Wetmore Story, and in his own letters. Story referred to the women as Miss Cushman and her “little satellites,” and the art critic Henry Wreford could only see them as “lady-artists.” James’s anxiety centered on their independence from white male authority and their same-sex romantic partnerships. This prompted him to also dub the women a “strange sisterhood.” James, 1903, vol. 1, p. 257 and vol. 2, p. 127; Wreford, 1866, p. 177; Nelson, 2007, pp. 6, 8, 10, 11, 41, 44, 190n10, 191nn21, 23.
44 Although Boston medical schools banned women, Hosmer received private tutoring in anatomy from Dr. J.N. McDowell (head of the Missouri Medical College) through the influence of Wayman Crow, the father of her classmate Cornelia Crow (later Carr through marriage). Anne Whitney received private tutoring in anatomy from a doctor at a hospital in Brooklyn and then later studied privately again for two years under the sculptor Dr. William Rimmer. Hosmer, 1913, pp. 8–9; Payne, 1971, pp. 247–248; Rubinstein, 1990, p. 47; Nelson, 2007, p. 24.
45 Nelson, 2007, p. 17. In the wake of the accusation, Lewis was savagely attacked, beaten, stripped (and possibly raped), and left for dead by a white mob. Formally charged, Lewis was defended by the black lawyer John Mercer Langston and eventually exonerated. However, shortly thereafter, she was accused of stealing art supplies and effectively barred from graduating.
46 Edmonia Lewis, The Muse Urania (1862) pencil on paper, 36.8 × 30.5 cm, Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio.
47 Lewis established an art studio in Boston at the Studio Building on Tremont Street. She purportedly received some training from Edward Brackett after an introduction from the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. She sailed for Europe in August 1865 and arrived in Rome in early 1866. See Nelson, 2007, pp. 8, 19, 24, 192n50; Child, 1864.
48 Letter, Lydia Maria Child to Francis George and Sarah Blake (Sturgis) Shaw, November 13, 1870, Houghton Library, Harvard University Library, Boston,


51 Considered particularly beautiful, Vinnie Ream Hoxie fell prey to malicious accusations that she used her “saucy curls” on “susceptible senators” to exhort commissions. She married Richard L. Hoxie in 1878. Gardner, 1945, p. 50; Nelson, 2007, p. 44.

52 Louisa Lander was accused of (hetero)sexual indecency and shunned by her peers. See Nelson, 2007, p. 35.

53 Zhang, 2013, p. 304. Prior to the end of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), the western portion of the island of Hispaniola was known as Saint-Domingue.


55 In many cases, this process entailed a reconfiguration of a subjectivity that had already been constituted within another African familial, cultural, and social setting. As such, the practices of “breaking” slaves through torture like whipping, commodification, and branding and de-individualization like renaming is a secondary Oedipal scene of the Africans’ submission to the white father/overseer/slave owner.


References


Trespassing seems to exert a strange fascination over most animated beings. …
The very existence of a boundary seems to create a desire to pass it.

John George Wood, British natural historian

Good fences make good neighbors.

Traditional proverb

The dialectic created by these juxtaposed epigraphs encapsulates the ambivalent, 
contradictory relationship that we have with boundaries, both in the abstract and 
the concrete. On the one hand, as Wood implies, we resist, even resent, bounda-
ries that we perceive and encounter, understanding them to be confining impedi-
ments that obstruct access to objects of desire that we imagine to exist on the 
other side of the divide. On the other hand, as the proverb that Robert Frost 
helped to popularize in his 1914 poem “Mending Wall” asserts, boundaries can 
themselves be desirable as means of maintenance and protection of not only 
property, but also identity, culture, and even life itself.

However, the narrator of Frost’s “Mending Wall” begins to question the function 
and necessity of boundaries, particularly the specific border that he and his rural 
neighbor share: the old, effectively obsolete stone fence demarcating their adjoining 
properties. Every year, he and his neighbor repair and rebuild this wall, an annual rite 
that he realizes they perpetuate thoughtlessly, without really questioning either the 
purpose of their seasonal ritual or, even more fundamentally, the presumed benefit the 
wall provides them. As Frost’s speaker explains in one of the poem’s most provocative 
and studied passages:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

Despite the fact that the wall serves little, if any, useful purpose, the men continue to repair and to maintain it simply because they take its ongoing presence for granted. Somewhat paradoxically, it binds them as “neighbors” even as it divides them physically and psychologically. Left to the elements, the wall would, without the perpetual human intervention the men provide, simply erode and disappear over time.3

Like the narrator of Frost’s “Mending Wall,” I contemplated boundaries—the roles they play, the contradictory responses they produce, their contingencies, and the consequences of their disruption—as I toured American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life, 1765–1915, the sweeping exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in 2009. Filled with canonical paintings by long-recognized, mostly white, male artists, the exhibition provided an exceptional opportunity to examine, under one roof, dozens of the most fascinating and beloved works of art in American history, including John Singleton Copley’s Watson and the Shark (1778; National Gallery of Art), George Caleb Bingham’s The Jolly Flatboatmen (1846; Manoogian Collection), Richard Caton Woodville’s War News from Mexico (1848; see Figure 10.2 in this volume), Winslow Homer’s Veteran in a New Field (1865; Metropolitan Museum of Art), and Thomas Eakins’s Swimming (1885; see Figure 9.5 in this volume). Conceptually, the exhibition extended the scholarly concern for narrative in American art far beyond the traditional parameters of genre painting, although the show’s categorical omission of sculpture foreclosed enticing and enriching possibilities offered by the work of John Rogers and Hiram Powers, among the most prominent nineteenth-century artists concerned with narrative. Sticking strictly to two dimensions, the show’s curators and catalogue authors teased out a broad range of recurring narratives—“Stories for the Public,” “Stories of War and Reconciliation,” and “Cosmopolitan and Candid Stories”—themes that structured both the installation and the accompanying publication.

Touring the galleries, I was struck by the number of compositions that featured figures crossing into different kinds of spaces—geographical, temporal, psychological, gendered—over which they held no certain dominion and where they often faced consequences for their transgressions. One gallery, showcasing works from the mid-nineteenth century, was filled with narratives of trespassing. On one wall, a hunter paid a frightful price for trespassing into a grizzly bear’s territory in Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait’s The Life of a Hunter: A Tight Fix (1856; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art), in which the unfortunate hunter appears to confront his base fears in animalistic form. Farther down the same wall, William Tylee Ranney’s Advice on the Prairie (1853; Buffalo Bill Historical Center) showed members of an encamped pioneer caravan listening attentively to cautionary tales of an animated frontiersman, who describes in vivid detail the exotic, maybe even dangerous experiences they may encounter as they move deeper into the unknown. Nearby, Lilly Martin Spencer’s Young Husband: First Marketing (1854; private collection), a scene inspired by a passage in Frances Trollope’s popular travelogue Domestic Manners of the Americans (1832), depicted a newlywed’s fumbling attempts to cross gender lines by shopping for groceries—“women’s work” that inspires gentle ridicule from an onlooker. Spencer herself crossed a significant
gender boundary by pursuing a career as an artist in the mid-nineteenth century, years before the practice (and consumption) of art became constructed culturally as “feminine” throughout the Gilded Age. The crown jewel of this remarkable room—and, indeed, one of the highlights of American Stories overall—Eastman Johnson’s renowned Negro Life at the South (Figure 24.3), contains one of the most famous trespasses in American art: the dainty step taken by the white woman at the right-hand side of the composition as she crosses into a backyard populated by slaves.

American Stories reminded me that boundaries are useful and often fruitful starting points for intellectual inquiry, particularly if one conceives of them as contested nexuses of power, legitimacy, and agency, not merely as inert lines of demarcation. As the philosopher Martin Heidegger proclaimed in his essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” “a boundary is not that at which something stops … the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing” (Heidegger’s emphasis).4 Heidegger’s assertion engenders sustained consideration of the subject position of the one who encounters the boundary, often (but not always) “The Other,” the subordinate. In this formulation, the boundary is active, assertive, and potentially negotiable rather than passive, defensive, and fixed. More recent theorists, especially Homi Bhabha, have aspired to rethink both the presence and roles of boundaries in the constitution of identity and culture. In particular, Bhabha has challenged the fixed, rather limiting dichotomous identity construct of “The Self/The Other” by articulating the more fluid subject position of the migrant, a hybrid formation that is neither entirely the former nor the latter. The migrant negotiates its hybrid identity in what the theorist called “the Third Space” of the “in-between.”5

Due to the proliferation of postmodern and postcolonial theory throughout cultural studies, the words and concepts “trespass,” “transgress,” and “border crossing” have become commonplace in contemporary scholarly inquiry. These concepts have been critical hermeneutic tools and techniques that art historians, curators, and dealers have mobilized to interpret (and market and sell) art since, roughly, the 1970s. Throughout this decade, the proliferation of art made by socially and politically engaged painters, sculptors, and performers—many of them associated with the Black Power, feminist, Chico/a, and queer culture movements—challenged the primacy of post-painterly abstraction (in painting) and minimalism (in both painting and sculpture) in the United States. Consequently, prevailing notions of the character and appearance of avant-garde cultural productions changed dramatically: formal “purity” and self-referentiality at mid-century gave way to aesthetic hybridity and parody as signifiers of avant-garde art, a shift predicated on the (real and imagined) violation of traditional artistic, cultural, and material boundaries.

Border Crossing (Figure 24.1), a monumental figurative sculpture by Chicano sculptor Luis Jiménez, evokes Bhabha’s concept of migrant hybridity. Depicting a subject that remains as timely today as it was when the artist executed it in 1989, Jiménez’s sculpture features a heroic male figure carrying a mother and child, a Mexican family crossing the Rio Grande in pursuit of a better life in the United States. Like much art that customarily qualifies as “postmodern,” the sculpture is figurative and blurs “high” and “low” cultural references. Its columnar, totemic form recalls ritualistic sculpture of multiple ancient cultures, while its fiberglass construction leaves no doubt as to the work’s “modernity.” Jiménez’s large, swelling forms simultaneously evoke masterworks by Michelangelo and the expressive, even pantomimed gestures of comic book figures, thus conflating “high art” seamlessly with “kitsch.”
In a personal interview, Jiménez asserted *Border Crossing*’s humanistic and semi-autobiographical narrative. “I wanted to make a piece,” the artist confessed, that was dealing with the issue of the illegal alien. People talk about the aliens as if they landed from outer space, as if they weren’t really people. … I wanted to humanize them. … I went back to my experience in El Paso where this is a common sight. The men carry the women across the river so they don’t get wet. In this case, she’s carrying a child. It was a way of consolidating the family and the idea of the illegal alien.6
Crossing the southern US national border, Jiménez’s family enters an indeterminate space, one in which it moves from the known to the unknown, from presumed safety to possible danger—shifts that are symptomatic of its profound transformation in identity from resident to “alien” or “illegal.” The family’s unsettling, transitional predicament recalls the words of cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, who wrote in her ground-breaking study *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* in 1987:

> A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, themulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.”

Traversing a borderland that remakes its identity, the family undergoes an experience that is all the more poignant for the historical contingency of the boundary they cross. Prior to 1848, when the border was established following the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo at the conclusion of the Mexican–American War, the territory that the family prepares to enter had been claimed by Mexico. In this regard, *Border Crossing* serves as a meaningful foil to nineteenth-century depictions of Anglo-American families heading westward, including those appearing in Ranney’s *Advice on the Prairie*, but also, more famously, the pioneers in Emanuel Leutze’s triumphant *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1862; United States Capitol) and John Gast’s lithograph *American Progress* (1872). These families, in distinct contrast to Jiménez’s less fortunate group, reap the territorial benefits of Manifest Destiny.

The historical and cultural tissue that connects Jiménez’s *Border Crossing* to Gast’s *American Progress* illuminates the degree to which narratives of trespassing (and its consequences) are historically contingent and simultaneously extend across time, space, and culture. Additionally, the comparison underscores the fact that intellectual scrutiny of borders, liminality, and identity need not be confined to contemporary art; such lines of inquiry likewise benefit investigations of historical American visual culture. As numerous art historians in recent years have demonstrated—among them Wendy Bellion, Michele Bogart, and Jennifer Greenhill—American art has been engaged in rich, ongoing dialogue with popular culture, theater, commercial illustration, cartoons, comedy, political satire, and photography, among other arenas. These and other recent scholarly projects, including the expansive anthology *Seeing High and Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture* (2006), have made clear the fact that American art before the 1970s crossed the supposed high/low divide no less frequently than the conspicuously and self-consciously “postmodern” art of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Even so, much historical American art, typically biologically essentialist, compulsorily heteronormative, and moralizing, appears to reinscribe cultural boundaries more than subvert them. As Elizabeth Johns observed in her landmark study on American genre painting, scenes of everyday life served a particularly critical function as a means of ordering the body politic by reifying a taxonomy of social types and cultural constructions—the Yankee, the Westerner, and the Frontiersman, among others—as emblematic and “natural.” Even Lilly Martin Spencer’s *Young Husband: First Marketing*, a painting that may appear to be a proto-feminist critique of gender
(in that the new groom lacks the skill necessary for “woman’s work”), ultimately testi-
ifies to the “naturalness” of traditional gender roles and identities.

However, if one heeds Heidegger’s dictum that a boundary marks the point at
which a construction begins rather than terminates, social constructions pertaining to
gender, class, and sexuality are rendered more vulnerable to critique, opposition, and
even subversion, particularly as they are manifest in images. Indeed, many of the most
intriguing images in American art at least invoke the threat of transgression of social
norms, expectations, and boundaries. After his fumbling attempt, will Spencer’s groom
shop again and risk additional public scrutiny? Why is the woman (the artist’s wife) in
Eastman Johnson’s Not at Home (ca. 1873; Brooklyn Museum) seemingly shirking
her social duties as lady of the house by slipping away upstairs to avoid greeting her
visitor at the door? Will the black man (possibly a former slave) in William Sidney
Mount’s Power of Music (1847; Cleveland Museum of Art) dare to cross into the barn
from which emanates the sound of the fiddle he enjoys, the seemingly exclusive archi-
tectural and (racially) symbolic space of the three white men who inhabit it?

While, for the moment, the black man in Mount’s Power of Music dares not trespass,
many of the most compelling images of African Americans in the nineteenth century
depict slaves crossing many kinds of boundaries. The history of slavery in the United
States is, as it elsewhere, defined by geographic and cartographic borders and is rife
with harrowing stories of attempts to cross them. Most prominent among these are
the Mason–Dixon Line, the traditional dividing line between the North and the
South; the Canadian border, across which hundreds of slaves fled in search of freedom;
and the Ohio River, a crossing likened to the biblical story of the Israelites completing
their escape from slavery by making their way across the River Jordan. These areas and
sites commonly appear in abolitionist literature, poetry, and illustration as settings for
dramatic episodes of escape and transformation.

Although few American artists dared to address controversial issues such as slavery
directly—market and financial incentives were few and far between—a select number
of painters and sculptors did so to memorable effect. Eastman Johnson ranked highly
among the painters most engaged with slavery. A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves
(Figure 24.2), a subject he painted three times, shows a family fleeing desperately on
horseback behind Union lines. Traveling with the Union Army at Centerville, Virginia,
the painter based his composition on an eyewitness account. An inscription on one
version—“A veritable incident in the civil war seen by myself at Centerville on the
morning of McClellan’s advance towards Manassas, March 2nd, 1862”—imbues it
with documentary veracity, tying the picture to journalistic accounts of the war.

Depicting a minority family in a desperate search for a better life, Johnson’s paint-
ing recalls Jiménez’s Border Crossing. Despite this fundamental similarity, Ride for
Liberty provides a narrative somewhat the inverse of Jiménez’s sculpture: while the
family unit in Border Crossing leaves the relative safety of home for greater economic
opportunities in a new, different, but possibly inhospitable environment, the slave
family in Ride for Liberty flees hostile territory in hopes of increased safety behind
Union lines. Fleeing intact, the family is spared any number of injurious indignities,
including possible, if not certain, separation at the auction block, among the most
public demonstrations of the institution’s systematic reduction of human beings to
mere chattel. Johnson’s use of the word “Liberty,” rather than “Freedom,” in the
title is meaningful: their flight does not, in fact, guarantee their freedom, as these
“Fugitive” slaves, the title reminds us, might still be technically subject to the Fugitive
Slave Act, which, as part of the Compromise of 1850, survived until the Emancipation Proclamation effectively nullified it in January 1863.

Framed in terms of a specific type of “Liberty,” Johnson’s narrative invoked not only abolitionist but also more recently formed Republican ideology, which similarly called attention to slavery’s adverse effects on the family. As Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote in *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853), “The worst abuse of the system of slavery is its outrage upon the family; and … it is one which is more notorious and undeniable than any other.”9 Expanding the abolitionist critique of slavery, Republican ideology likewise located personal liberty—for both whites and blacks—in the context of the patriarchal, nuclear family. As Iowa Representative John A. Kasson proclaimed in a speech advocating for the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865: “There are three great fundamental natural rights of human society which you cannot take away without striking a vital blow at the rights of white men as well as black. They are the rights of a husband to his wife—the marital relation; the right of father to his child—the parental relation; and the right of a man to the personal liberty with which he is endowed by nature and by God.”10 Like Jiménez’s family, Johnson’s fugitive family

---

enters a liminal space that destabilizes its identity and in which nothing is certain, an ambiguous and shifting borderland that the painter rendered in broad, tonal strokes. The retention of biological and familial bonds in both of the scenarios that Jiménez and Johnson present justifies the risks.

As Johnson’s *Ride For Liberty* suggests, the lines marking the nexus of race and slavery pertained not only to geography and cartography, but also to family, biology, and procreation. And, like territorial boundaries of race and slavery, these too were (and remain) contested and permeable. Perhaps no single painting in American art highlights these contingencies more profoundly than Johnson’s renowned *Negro Life at the South* (Figure 24.3), which was known for years by the misnomer *Old Kentucky Home*, after the popular post-Civil War song by Stephen Foster. The painting takes the viewer inside a semi-private slave yard in Washington, DC, as John Davis has discussed in a seminal essay recovering the urban site-specificity of Johnson’s composition. Showing slaves of a range of ages passing time by courting, singing, and playing in their dilapidated enclosure, the painting appears to assert a philosophical point of view consistent with elements of pro-slavery propaganda, particularly the racist assertion that the institution of forced labor protected African descendants from their own lazy, unproductive natures. Focusing on moments of leisure, Johnson’s painting, like pro-slavery propaganda, obfuscates the physical and psychological agony of a life of servitude. Yet, at the same time, Johnson’s depiction of the men, women, and children in *Negro Life*
radiates with individuality, a quality that departs markedly from stereotyped images of blacks. Consequently, as most scholars who have written substantively on the painting—including not only Davis, but also Patricia Hills, Elizabeth Johns, and Albert Boime—have emphasized, critics who reviewed the work at its debut at the National Academy of Design in 1859 interpreted it as both an endorsement and a condemnation of slavery, an ambiguity that Johnson presumably desired.\textsuperscript{13}

While scholars have granted Johnson’s image its seeming ambiguity by the artist’s design vis-à-vis public debates both for and against slavery, they have also simultaneously (and contradictorily) tended to interpret it along a narrow trajectory of binary oppositions concerning identity and race: insider/outsider, black/white, and enslaved/free. Most accounts posit that these oppositional relations hinge on the memorable encounter between the refined white woman entering the yard and the slave girl on the right-hand side of the composition. In most instances, the female visitor has been constructed as the white “Other” encroaching on a foreign, black domain. As Davis has written, for example, “the beautifully gowned white woman hesitating on the threshold … has entered an unusual and particular space. She has crossed into the ‘secret city’ of black life in the interior of a Washington city block.”\textsuperscript{14} He continues:

\begin{quote}
[s]he can be seen as a stand-in for Johnson’s presumably all white audience, a self-conscious reminder of their alterity in this slave space and an embodiment of the shared vicarious titillation of peering into a forbidden area. Her visual intrusion into the yard, like that experienced by Johnson’s spectators before his canvas, is both privileged and unexpected. … [F]ormal cues direct the viewer’s attention to this curious trespasser: the pointed roof beams and the banjo neck point to her head … One girl in particular matches the woman’s pose exactly; turning to lean around the partition, she locks eyes with the intruder, functioning visually as her mirror image.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

In constructing the white woman as “Other,” scholars commonly credit Johnson with radically inverting the more typical compositional formula wherein black figures occupy the margins, positions metaphoric of their marginal status in society, as seen in Woodville’s \textit{War News from Mexico} and Mount’s \textit{Power of Music}, among other notable examples.\textsuperscript{16}

Davis’s vivid description of Johnson’s painting invites a series of questions that provokes an even more nuanced understanding of this complex image: How, one might ask, can the white trespasser simultaneously personify otherness and still meet the slave girl’s gaze as “her mirror image”? By juxtaposing and paralleling the two figures so conspicuously, might Johnson be suggesting that they have more in common than meets the eye and historians have commonly assumed? The slave girl’s brown skin seems particularly relevant in this regard. Johnson modeled her face with strong highlights that not only articulate her lovely mulatto features but also appear like reflections of the female intruder’s radiant whiteness. The relationship that the artist established between these two figures suggests that the woman and girl represent points along a spectrum of race, and, moreover, that their relationship is predicated by a projection of whiteness onto blackness, an exchange that blurs any racial boundary separating them.

In addition to the engaging, even charming vignettes that populate Johnson’s painting, \textit{Negro Life} is animated by a profound tension between containment and
permeability. On one level, this tension is spatial: the enclosed yard contains all but three of the figures present, but the small open gate on the right-hand side of the composition—and, less so, a window out of which a black mother and child (with lighter skin) look—suggest the possibility of flow in and out. Nevertheless, an undeniable authoritarian presence pervades the scene, thanks to the luminous townhouse in the canvas’s right-hand corner. This structure likely represents the Johnson family home, headed by the artist’s father, Phillip C. Johnson, an operative of the Democratic Party who became a slave owner by virtue of his marriage to the Virginia-born Mary Washington James Johnson, who brought slaves with her into their union. Consequently, the looming townhouse in Johnson’s painting not only represents an impressive bourgeois dwelling, it stands in as a kind of panopticon from which the slave owner can surveil human property, a metonymic signifier of a master’s power.

The animating tension between containment and permeability evident in the painting’s spatial and architectural elements extends to the figures themselves, which exhibit a wide range of skin color, from the radiant white of the female visitor to the rich, dark appearance of the banjo-playing elder. _Negro Life_ is, in fact, saturated with signs of miscegenation, or, to use the term more historically appropriate for the 1850s, amalgamation, an issue that calls for more examination than it has received. The binary model with which scholars have typically interpreted _Negro Life at the South_ belies the complexity and fluidity of race and identity in nineteenth-century American life. In recent years, American historians have explored this topic with increasing intensity, an interest fueled in part by ongoing fascination with American history’s most scandalous interracial relationship, the one between President Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings. Moreover, the presidency of Barack Obama, who is commonly referred to as the first “black” president, although his mother was a white woman (from Kansas) and his father was African (from Kenya), has provided the public numerous opportunities to reflect anew on the permeability of race and identity. Even more surprising has been the disclosure of the distant white ancestry of First Lady Michelle Obama, whose maternal great-great-grandfather Dolphus T. Shields was the product of a (likely forced) sexual encounter between Melvinia Shields, a slave, and Charles Marion Shields, one of her master’s sons. The revelation concerning Michelle Obama’s family history raises the issue of the historical phenomenon of interracial sex, about which concerns ran wide and deep throughout the nineteenth century. Particularly prevalent were births of mixed-race children to slave women who had been sexually violated by their white owners, as the Obama–Shields story suggests.

Historians have addressed the sexual politics between masters and their bonds-women with particular zeal, especially the ambiguities of race resulting from their offspring. As Ann S. Holder has observed, “the institution of slavery managed the racial divide through the slave status, restricting the citizenship rights for all Americans of African descent, and ultimately for all Americans. Meanwhile, the foundational role of sexual exploitation under slavery created a landscape that reflected racial indeterminacy.” The indeterminacy that Holder describes was facilitated by the particularly complex cultural and economic conditions underlying sexual relations between slave women and their masters. As Fay A. Yarbrough has discussed, white masters were motivated to exploit their female slaves not only for sexual gratification, but also because the offspring from these encounters could serve as additional slaves or be sold off for profit. Painter Thomas Satterwhite Noble rendered this remarkable historical
phenomenon of familial asset liquidation in *The Price of Blood: A Planter Selling His Son* (1868; Morris Museum of Art), a scene that illuminates the hapless young man’s border identity as both white and black, both blood and chattel. In some instances, slave women sought out intimate relationships with their masters in the (often unfulfilled) hope of improving their families’ lives. More rarely, masters and their female slaves developed authentic, mutually affectionate relationships, although as property, the women nevertheless lived under constant threat of rape without legal protections or recourse. Consequently, the mixed-race, or “mulatto” slave population increased nearly 67 percent over the course of the 1850s.23

Painted at the end of the decade during which this dramatic rise in the mulatto population occurred, Johnson’s *Negro Life at the South* should be viewed with an eye toward the sexual politics of slavery. The fact that the slave children appearing in Johnson’s painting generally exhibit lighter complexions than those of their elders serves as an indexical sign of shifting racial demographics throughout the 1850s. Moreover, the conspicuous absence of adult males, save the suitor at the left-hand side, who could represent the fathers of the many children present, further supports this interpretation, although this gender disparity must be attributed partly to the domestic orientation of urban slavery, for which female slaves were in greater demand. Nevertheless, the lighter skin of the more youthful figures suggests that the painter intended his composition to invoke amalgamation stemming from the sexual desires and prerogatives of slave masters. In this regard, the townhouse, which glows in sunlight in the background, assumes an even more ominous phallic presence, signifying the sexual power that masters exerted over their bondswomen.

Signifiers of amalgamation in *Negro Life* extend discreetly beyond the painting’s human occupants to the scruffy dog commanding center stage. Crouching down playfully and ready to pounce, the dog serves compositionally as an implied line leading the viewer’s eye toward the painting’s right-hand side, where the fraught encounter between the visiting woman and young slave girl takes place. More than a mere charming anecdotal detail, this black and white mutt—possibly a Portuguese water dog mix—assumes considerable emblematic significance in light of ongoing public debates concerning race mixing.

As Elise Lemire has discussed, the language and imagery of animal breeding figured prominently in public debates regarding amalgamation.24 References along these lines played especially prominent roles in the textual and visual propaganda against it, as seen in a series of racist, anti-abolitionist lithographs that the caricaturist Edward W. Clay published in 1839. *The Fruits of Amalgamation* (Figure 24.4), the final print in this series, imagines a household headed by an ostentatiously dressed black patriarch who, with nose upturned, reads *The Emancipation*, while a portrait print of William Lloyd Garrison at the far right presides over the scene, thus enabling and endorsing these circumstances. At the far left, the patriarch’s prim white wife suckles the couple’s youngest child, while an older child in the center of the composition stares admiringly back at his father. This gesture throws into stark relief the boy’s odd facial and cranial features, so different from the phrenological ideals of the day. The restless black and white cat that the child holds likewise manifests physical deficiencies and a maladjusted nature apparently symptomatic of an internal, biological conflict between its seemingly incompatible black and white selves. A white dog (possibly a wheaten terrier) and a black dog (maybe a pug mix) cuddle intimately and casually together atop Thomas Paine’s Deist tome *The Age of Reason* (1794–1807). Like the larger scene of
which this duo is a critical part, the canine commingling represents the lamentable loss of traditional values, an inversion of the “natural” social order, which the presence of a white servant on the far right margin unsubtly punctuates.25

The black and white mutt in Johnson’s *Negro Life at the South* should be understood, like the animals appearing in Clay’s propagandistic prints, to have been a participant in mid-nineteenth-century debates about race mixing, aspects of which assumed the form of animal symbolism. In the painting, the dog is comfortably “at home” among the slaves in the yard. Like the contained yet permeable space they share, these mongrels invoke and embody cultural anxieties surrounding the mixing of white and black, even as Johnson’s painting discreetly avoids revealing the primary means by which the races were mixing.

Finally, Johnson’s scruffy mutt draws the viewer’s gaze back to the encounter between the young woman and the girl at the right side of the composition and solicits a new, more nuanced reading of it. In light of the permeability of race in the antebellum United States and the aesthetic variables that Johnson employed, might this meeting be better conceived of as a manifestation of a continuum of race rather than a confrontation of mutual otherness? Could these figures be sisters by the same father? Might the “white” woman actually be “black” but passing as otherwise, a possibility that served as the premise of many sensational stories, both true and fictional, throughout the period?26 Just as Johnson orchestrated the painting to avoid coming down clearly on either side of the issue of slavery, so, too, he left open a range of possible readings of the racial identities of the figures in *Negro Life at the South*.

---

Not only have artists represented instances of trespassing in their imagery; they have also trespassed in the course of creating their work. Arguably the best-known trespassing artist was photographer and social activist Jacob Riis, the Danish immigrant who gained tremendous fame for his sensationalist reformist lectures and publications, chief among them *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890). A quasi-photojournalistic account of the grim living conditions of tenement life, *How the Other Half Lives* exposed masses of middle- and upper-class citizens to the plight of newly arrived immigrants. In this regard, Riis’s book played a critical role in the creation and popularization of Progressive Era policies and regulations to reduce crime, poverty, and illness. The appeal of Riis’s work, both in print and in public presentations, also lay in the permission it gave audiences to trespass by proxy and under the auspices of (sometimes merely armchair) humanitarianism.

Among Riis’s most arresting images from *How the Other Half Lives* is *5 Cents a Spot* (Figure 24.5), a stark scene of a crowded apartment on Bayard Street strewn with bodies and domestic objects. The photograph’s title refers to the price each occupant presumably paid to sleep on the floor for the night. As Christopher Carter has

---

**Figure 24.5** Jacob Riis (1849–1914), *5 Cents a Spot*, lodgers in a crowded Bayard Street tenement, ca. 1890, black and white photograph. Museum of the City of New York. *Source*: © Museum of the City of New York, USA / Bridgeman Images.
explained, *5 Cents a Spot* not only captures the photographer’s signature subject but also exemplifies Riis’s ethically complex means of taking his pictures:

*Five Cents a Spot* stresses the confusion of activities in a tightly confined space: boots, hats, and traveling sacks coexist with pots, bowls, and other kitchen implements, many of which hang just above the lodgers’ bunks. To be certain that he caught the tenements at their worst, Riis typically photographed his subjects late at night. Often accompanied by police (at least in the early stages of his research), he entered the buildings after 2 a.m. and set off small flash powder explosives wherever he expected a revealing tableau. [Remarked Riis:] “It is not too much to say that our party carried terror wherever it went.”

Riis’s imagery retains much of its power as a result of the uneasy conflation of the compounded terror experienced by his subjects (who have left their families and homelands and endured strenuous travel, only to live in abject poverty and then be terrorized by Riis’s camera) and his photographs’ emphatically humanitarian function.

Given the secrecy and surprise that fueled much of Riis’s work, historians have ruminated on the topic of his empathy for or identification with his subjects as a fellow immigrant. Indeed, his tendency to burst in on his human subjects, often with the aid of a police escort, suggests, at the very least, a disregard for their privacy. Moreover, Riis’s actions call into question his regard for their humanity. Generally, his photographs, including *5 Cents a Spot*, present his subjects as pitiable specimens clinging to life. The dehumanizing effects of Riis’s images are accentuated by the absence of individual names in the titles of the photographs; rather, his photographs tend to be identified by location, situation, or cultural type, for example, *Jewtown*. Riis’s lapses into ethnic stereotypes throughout his prose further complicate his identity as either advocate for or enemy of those he photographed.

While Jiménez asserts the heroic humanity of his Mexican subjects in *Border Crossing*, a feeling that flows directly from the artist’s empathy for the family’s plight, Riis’s personal and cultural position relative to the immigrants he depicted in his photographs is, by contrast, more difficult to discern. Whatever empathy Riis may have felt for his fellow immigrant subjects was likely mitigated by the fact that his own Danish ethnicity had, by the turn of the twentieth century, been fully assimilated into American “whiteness,” which, to many observers, appeared to be under siege by the very same shifts in immigration demographics that Riis’s images so graphically captured. Among those raising concerns regarding recent immigration’s adverse effects on America’s racial outlook was Dr. Alfred C. Reed of the US Public Health Service at Ellis Island. Writing in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1913, Reed exclaimed: “The character of … immigration has changed markedly in the past thirty years. Previous to 1883, western and northern Europe sent a stalwart stock, 95 percent of all who came. They sought new homes and were settlers. Scandinavians, Danes, Dutch, Germans, French, Swiss, and the English islanders, they were the best of Europe’s blood.” To observers like Reed, the days of “good” immigration were regrettably past. And to them, Riis’s photographs of scores of impoverished, often dark-skinned immigrants from eastern and southern Europe could confirm their worst fears that America’s gene pool was being infested with undesirables.
Indeed, even the viewers of Riis’s photographs and attendees of his theatrical public lectures—many of whom would have arrived in the United States, like the photographer, during the presumed halcyon days of immigration—would have likely experienced mixed feelings as they trespassed virtually into the exotic world that he revealed.

The presumed remedy for the perceived diminution in the quality of the nation’s gene pool was eugenics, the pseudoscience developed by the British statistician Francis Galton, the rise of which in the United States coincided exactly with Riis’s photographic exposés and lectures. Like the institution of slavery, eugenics policed race (and ethnicity), and it did so through both “positive” methods (Better Baby and Fitter Family contests, as examples) and “negative” procedures (including state-sponsored sterilization and increasingly restrictive immigration policies, culminating in the National Origins Act of 1924).

Scholars have observed fundamental similarities between Riis’s work and eugenics, particularly their mutual focus on poverty, a condition, among others, that eugenics ideologues associated with genetic inferiority, whereas the photographer tended to emphasize environmental causes for poverty, illness, and crime.20 Even so, Riis’s photographs, predicated on invasive trespassing, should be considered at the intersection of Progressive Era reforms and the contemporaneous proliferation of eugenics, enterprises that were mutually compatible, even inseparable. As economic historian Thomas C. Leonard has explained, “What drew progressives to eugenics was the same set of intellectual commitments that drew them to labor and other reform legislation. … Just as labor and goods markets could no longer be left unregulated, so too must the state take over from ‘nature’ the project of selecting the fittest human beings.”23

Illuminating the human signs and symptoms of the ills that plagued society, Riis’s invasive photographic project found a profound cultural analogue with eugenic interventions to stave off inevitable “race suicide” if northern European strains of the American gene pool went unprotected.

Riis’s connections to the eugenics movement were more than merely conceptual or coincidental in character. Intriguingly, the photographer was a featured speaker at the First National Conference on Race Betterment in Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1914, where “the honorable” photographer-reformist delivered a talk on the topic of “The Bad Boy.” In his presentation, Riis voiced strong, even courageous opposition to the hereditary basis to which eugenics devotees ascribed poverty, crime, and sickness. “We have heard friends here talk about heredity,” Riis exclaimed before his audience. “The word has rung in my ears until I am sick of it. Heredity, heredity. There is just one heredity in all the world that is ours—we are children of God, and there is nothing in the whole big world we cannot do in His service with it.”22 In a testament to the high regard in which even his ideological opponents held him, eugenicists Paul Popenoe and Roswell Hill Johnson excerpted this part of Riis’s 1914 speech in their popular textbook *Applied Eugenics* (1920), a book that manifests the heightened dysgenic paranoia that followed massive casualties incurred in World War I. Despite their admitted respect for Riis, “a man for whom every American must feel a profound admiration,” Popenoe and Johnson isolated two assumptions that underpinned the photographer’s reformist platform: one, that changes in a man’s surroundings (nurture) will affect the genes he has inherited, and two, that such changes would be passed on to progeny (becoming nature).23 Admitting to short-term benefits that an individual may gain by improved conditions, the authors rejected the
second assumption, based in the hereditary theories of French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. As they intersected with dominant contemporaneous debates concerning heredity, then, Riis’s photographs of immigrant suffering and squalor failed to provide undeniable evidence that acquired traits would become intrinsic and then be passed on for racial betterment, thus, potentially (and inadvertently) underscoring the necessity of eugenic intervention. Just as Eastman Johnson’s *Negro Life at the South* refused to take a legible stance in favor of or in opposition to slavery in the antebellum period, so, too, Riis’s photographs maintained an ambivalent relationship with the emergent and increasingly mainstream discourse of eugenics throughout (and beyond) the Progressive Era.

The images of and about trespassing that this chapter has addressed constitute only the beginning of much longer and even more expansive possible line of inquiry rather than a conclusion. On the topic of boundaries, one recalls also Charles Deas’s *The Death Struggle* (1845; Shelburne Museum), another esteemed painting featured in *American Stories*, a frightful and fateful narrative based on circumstances of *double* trespass, as Carol Clark has astutely observed.34 A century later, the popular American illustrator Norman Rockwell was especially drawn to themes of boundaries and trespassing, as witnessed in three of his most beloved and intriguing compositions, *No Swimming* (1921), *The Problem We All Live With* (1963), and *New Kids in the Neighborhood* (1967; all Norman Rockwell Museum). More recently, photographer and conceptual artist Nikki S. Lee’s attempts to deconstruct the “naturalness” of individual and group identities by assuming chameleon-like guises in her well-known *Projects* (1997–2001) comprise rich counterpoints to Jacob Riis’s far more conspicuous photographic interventions into culturally circumscribed spaces and groups.

Due to their ubiquity in art as in life, boundaries, regardless if they are drawn, crossed, maintained, negotiated, or deconstructed, should be approached and attended to with considerable care. Whether scholars contend with them in the course of their work with the traditional tools and techniques of formal analysis, historical inquiry and interpretation, iconology, semiotics, or other recent concepts drawn from postmodern critical theory (or a combination thereof), they might do well to consider and to follow the example of the narrator of “Mending Wall.” Reflecting on his experience with his neighbor and their shared boundary, Frost’s protagonist admits near the poem’s conclusion:

Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.

Because they are fraught with consequences both explicit and subtle, boundaries are, as our narrator realizes, perhaps most powerful when they are thoughtlessly maintained and assumed to be necessary, impermeable, and natural.

**Acknowledgments**

The author extends special thanks to Teresa A. Carbone, Carol Clark, Lauren Lessing, Murray McClelland, Douglas Steward, and Andrea Stone.
Notes

1 The first quotation is from Wood, 1875, p. 1. On the proverb, see Mieder, 2003.
2 “Mending Wall” first appeared in Frost, 1915.
3 “Mending Wall” has prompted considerable study among literary critics and historians. My summary draws from excerpts of key studies indexed online at Modern American Poetry, maintained by the Department of English at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Online: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/wall.htm.
5 Bhabha, 1994, p. 36.
6 Jiménez, quoted in Anaya, 1994, p. 146.
7 Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3.
9 Stowe, 1853, p. 133.
10 Kasson, 1865, p. 193.
11 My thoughts on *Negro Life at the South* have been enriched by discussions with Eleanor Jones Harvey and Bruce Robertson, to whom I extend my gratitude. For a related interpretation of *Negro Life*, see Harvey, 2012, pp. 186–192.
13 See Hills, 1972, p. 34.
16 On this pattern, see Johns, 1991, pp. 100–136.
18 On the history and lexicon of race mixing, see Lemire, 2002.
19 Among recent studies on this topic, see Walker, 2009.
22 Yarbrough, 2005.
23 Grossberg, 1985, p. 137.
24 Lemire, 2002.
25 Another print in Clay’s series, *Practical Amalgamation*, elaborates on the themes of race mixing with similar animal symbolism.
26 See Brown, 1853. Brown’s story includes several black characters who could or did “pass” as white. The possibility of racial “passing” should also be extended to the viewers of Johnson’s painting at the National Academy of Design in 1859 (and subsequent exhibitions).
28 O’Donnell, 2004. See also Chapter 33 in this volume.
29 Reed, 1913, p. 7.
30 Cuddy and Roche, 2003, p. 15: “Riis’s photographs … were populated by poor people to whom eugenicists would likely apply the label ‘feebleminded.’”
32 Riis, 1914, p. 243.
34 Clark et al., 2009, pp. 98–104.
References


Mobilizing Desire

A slender string connects six black cardboard arrows. Each arrow is inscribed with two words—one on either side of its face—printed in white block letters. When hung from the ceiling, the object functions as a mobile with its arrows rotating, at different speeds and in alternate directions, around the central spine of string. As each arrow turns, it reveals first one side (or word) and then the other and so changes the larger configuration of words and directional markings. Like a roulette wheel, it is impossible to determine in advance how the mobile will read when it stops rotating. The twelve words printed on the mobile are as follows: HETEROSEXUALS/SATYRS; HOMOSEXUALS/HERMAPHRODITES; APHRODISIACS/BISEXUALS; INFORMATION/TRANSEXUALS; VIRGINS/UPTIGHTS; CURIOUS/UNDECIDED (Figure 25.1). Although each arrow bears two different terms, none of these “pairs” constitute familiar opposites (for example, HETEROSEXUALS shares its arrow not with HOMOSEXUALS but with SATYRS). The mobile enacts a kind of exchangeability (rather than a clinical demarcation) of its various sexual terms. Homo-, hetero-, bi-, and trans-sexuality (not to mention undecided and curious) are situated as potentially complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, categories.

I first encountered the Sex Terms Mobile in an exhibition titled Queer and Kinky Danger: Art of San Francisco’s LEATHER/SM/Kink Worlds at the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California (now the GLBT Historical Society) in San Francisco in 1998.¹ The mobile was exhibited alongside paintings, photographs, flyers, and plaster sculptures that once decorated the walls of local bars, nightclubs, and bathhouses, as well as enamel buttons, greeting cards, matchbooks, t-shirts, and banners created for gay and lesbian clubs, parades, parties, contests, auctions, and
orgies. The show’s curator, Willie Walker, offered the following description of the mobile in the exhibition brochure:

Originally owned by Phyllis Lyon & Del Martin [longtime lesbian activists based in San Francisco], this mobile came out of the budding effort to increase people’s knowledge of sexuality, and develop sex education classes for youth. … The mobile itself reflects the idea that sexuality is variegated and complex, challenging the monolithic model then in place that heterosexuality was the normal and ideal form of sex and the resultant labeling of all other sexual interest as perverse and degenerate. This was, in effect, an early expression of queerness.2

The mobile does indeed express queerness as that term has come to be used today—namely, as a repudiation of normative gender roles and sexual binaries and an insistence on shifting pleasures and identifications. Writing in 1993, literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick described “queer” in terms of the “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”3 Like the Sex Terms Mobile, Sedgwick’s formulation of queer resists the stability of single categories (homo or hetero, male or female) in favor of multiplicity and non-alignment.
The *Sex Terms Mobile* dates not from the early 1990s and the emergence of “queer theory” in the American academy but from the mid-1960s, at which time it was used by Lyon and Martin playfully to trouble the distinction between normal and deviant sexual identities. It is worth noting in this context that Lyon and Martin were founding members of the first lesbian activist group in the United States, the Daughters of Bilitis. “Bilitis” referred to an ancient Greek female philosopher who was the lover of Sappho and the author of a series of erotic love poems (*The Songs of Bilitis*). As Lyon and Martin were well aware, Bilitis was an entirely fictive person; her “songs” were the handiwork of a late nineteenth-century French poet Pierre Louys. The Daughters of Bilitis (or DOB for short) was useful as a name in the 1950s both because it honored the Sapphic past and because it eluded the stigma of modern words such as “homosexual,” “sex variant,” and “lesbian.” “Daughters of Bilitis” was flexible enough to serve as both sexual code and strategic closet. As Martin and Lyon put it, “If anyone asked us, we could always say we belonged to a poetry club.”

As this example suggests, attempts to undo the conventional codes of gender and sexuality, to highlight the performative aspects of identity, and to oppose the tyranny of “the normal” are woven into the historical fabric of homosexuality and its representation. However, it is worth noting that “QUEER” is not among the twelve terms that the sex mobile variously presents. In the mid-1960s, “queer” would likely have signaled a violent denigration of homosexuality rather than a radical critique of normative sexuality. We should not be too quick, then, to project queerness into the historical past. Or, perhaps better put, we should not imagine that historical examples of queer American culture are going to echo or predict current understandings of sexuality.

In what follows, I use the term “queer” to name a history of non-normative sexual relations and representations. But I also contend with the difficulty of addressing historical moments prior to Stonewall (the 1969 riots that gave rise to the modern gay liberation movement) in which alternative forms of sexual life were quite differently organized, named, and depicted than they are today. I argue that a commitment to archival research—to the specificity and texture of the past—counters the tendency to construct queerness as a master category of contemporary anti-normativity. Far from transcending the constraints under which individual artists lived and labored, I try to describe and delineate those constraints with as much precision as possible.

The history of queer art is one in which absence matters as much as presence, in which the expression of sexual desire and experience cannot be understood apart from its suppression and censorship. Writing in the introduction to the first anthology devoted to lesbian and gay studies within art history, Whitney Davis argued in 1993,

At the most basic levels of research, the history of representations connected with non-dominant social groups and practices can sometimes only be written, in principle, as an interpretation of what cannot be found. The history of the destruction of the visual records of homosociality, homoeroticism, and homosexuality—whether through casual neglect or systematic suppression—is such that some of the most mundane questions (Was such and such an artist homosexual? Who owned such and such an image?) cannot be definitively answered. At best, a comprehensive interpretation could only be, in many domains, a comprehensive admission that the record is partial and distorted—a fact, of course, that has historical and cultural meaning in itself.”

5
Given this play of presence and absence, of visibility and disappearance, how are we to chart the queer art-historical past? I offer the following three examples, themselves linked by sexual and professional association, as responses to this question.

The Missing Picture

In 1996, I guest-curated an exhibition titled *Paul Cadmus: The Sailor Trilogy* at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The show featured Cadmus’s paintings, prints, and drawings of New York life in the 1930s, with particular attention to his trio of major paintings on the theme of sailors on shore leave in the city. In reuniting these works, the exhibition sought to place them within the larger context of Cadmus’s early career. It did so by focusing on three specific issues: the artist’s devotion to classicism, his interest in social satire, and his frank depiction of sexuality, including but not limited to homosexuality.

To examine Cadmus’s approach to classicism and satire, the exhibition occasionally called upon Italian Renaissance and eighteenth-century English prints as points of comparison. The aim of these comparisons was not to claim a precise source for Cadmus’s art (“So that’s what he was looking at when he painted this”) but rather to suggest a dialogue between the artist’s early work and the larger pictorial traditions from which it sprang. In one of my favorite juxtapositions in the show (Figures 25.2, 25.3), Cadmus’s 1935 print of male bathers enjoying “horseplay” in a Long Island locker room was coupled with Agostino Veneziano’s engraving, *Soldier Attaching His Breeches to His Breastplate* of 1517.

In organizing the exhibition, I was determined to show Cadmus’s art in the strongest possible light. Among the factors motivating this desire were the fact that the Whitney, though a strong supporter of the artist in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, had largely dissociated itself from Cadmus in the decades since. In addition, Cadmus was still alive in 1996 (he was 91 years old at the time) and was keen to have his early work shown in depth at the museum. Finally, Cadmus’s paintings, prints, and drawings had often been dismissed as homoerotic versions of Norman Rockwell Americana, which is to say, as kitsch. Cadmus’s insistent, muscular realism, wedded as it was to a satirical vision of contemporary American life, rejected modernist sensibilities every bit as exuberantly as did Rockwell. It was, therefore, the object of similar critical disdain.

Working with the museum’s in-house curatorial staff, I sought to emphasize the aesthetic value of Cadmus’s paintings, prints, and drawings. The pictures were hung in simple, often symmetrical groupings on all four walls of a larger gallery; archival materials (the artist’s scrapbook, period magazines) were confined to a vitrine in the corner of the room; no photographic blow-ups or other contextual images competed with the art on display. The only comparative materials, as mentioned above, were Old Master prints brought in to amplify the classicizing force and form (or, in the single case of a Hogarth print, the satirical vigor) of Cadmus’s work.

What I did not acknowledge at the time was the defensive nature of such comparisons. The European art on view was meant to bolster the aesthetic value and museum effect of Cadmus’s work and to secure for the twentieth-century artist a relation to the history of art that extended beyond questions of contemporary American social and sexual life. The exhibition of European art, even as comparative or subsidiary
material, had almost never been permitted at the Whitney Museum, given its mission to preserve, study, and showcase the history of American art.

Among the most salient contradictions to inhere in Cadmus’s early painting is a marked asymmetry of approach to the male and female figures and a related tendency to sweep the female body out of the visual field altogether. If, in the memorable phrase of Lewis Mumford, the painter’s “hand lingers too lovingly on the flesh he would chastise,” that tendency surfaces only when the flesh in question is male. An opposite problem, an excess of chastising, occurs when the figure is female or otherwise feminized.⁶
In retrospect, I believe that the Whitney exhibition might have attended more closely to the homoeroticism of Cadmus’s work and world of the 1930s. The show might, for example, have included one or more of the photographs that the portrait photographer George Platt Lynes shot of Cadmus and his lover, the painter Jared French, in 1938.

From the mid-1930s through the early 1950s, Lynes shot several thousand photographs of the male nude, including couples and threesomes, and approximately one hundred photographs of the female nude, including some in pairs or trios. The men and women who posed for these pictures were some of the same models, dancers, and artists who appeared fully clothed in the formal portraits Lynes displayed in galleries and published in magazines such as *Vanity Fair*. Although Lynes never exhibited the nudes and destroyed many of them shortly before his death, he did agree to sell over a thousand prints to one collector—Dr. Alfred Kinsey. Where Lynes understood his nudes as a private form of artistic production, Kinsey valued them as scientific evidence of sexuality.
Throughout Lynes’s series of French and Cadmus, both men are shown naked from the waist down. While French often and openly displays his genitals, Cadmus sometimes covers his or turns away from the camera so as to obstruct visual access to them. The pictures construct a complex dialogue between sexual exposure and concealment, between display and discretion, with Cadmus often, but not always, taking up the latter, less expressly phallic role and French the former, more exhibitionist one. Within this series of same-sex encounters, no easy symmetries (least of all those of sex) obtain. The photographs thus suggest not only the intimacy but also the imbalance and partial erasures of the self that a sustained sexual relationship entails.

I had borrowed two of the Lynes photographs for the Whitney exhibition but ultimately decided, in part through consultation with the museum’s staff, that they didn’t work in this curatorial context. There were no other photographs in the exhibition, after all, and the private relationships these pictures suggested seemed worlds away from the public satire of the paintings on display.

But that is precisely the point the photographs might have made had they been included in the exhibition. As Cadmus’s large-scale sailor paintings shift between the erasure and elaboration of sexual content so too did the larger culture (of published criticism and commentary, of public and private display, of photographic practice) in which they were embedded. What is more, Cadmus actively partook in, even exploited, this back-and-forth dynamic, sometimes choosing to deny or erase (in words) the very content he had earlier elaborated (in paint).

Lynes never exhibited or reproduced his photographs of Cadmus and French. They were intended to be seen—and shared—with only a small circle of intimates. The portraits stand in, then, for the visual representations of male homosexuality that existed but went largely unseen in the 1930s, for the compulsory exclusions and obstructions that removed those images from visibility, and, most especially, for the severely restricted field of representation within which Cadmus and his contemporaries had to maneuver. Like Lynes’s 1938 portrait of the artist, Cadmus’s early works are best understood as a dialogue between that which has been depicted within the frame and that which has been excluded from it. And the frame in question is not merely the physical border of the artworks but the larger frame that governed their production and reception in the 1930s. It is the frame through which viewers made sense—or refused to make sense—of Cadmus’s queer vision of American life.

**Riding History**

In March 1937, French and Cadmus were awarded linked commissions by the Treasury Section of Fine Arts to paint murals for the Parcel Post Building of Richmond, Virginia. As mentioned above, the men were lovers at the time. They would remain involved, both romantically and creatively, throughout the next decade or so. This occurred with both the knowledge and consent of Margaret Hoenig French, the painter whom Jared French married in June 1937. The unconventional relationship worked out by Cadmus and the Frenches (the three often spent summers together on Fire Island and took photographs under the acronym PaJaMa for Paul, Jared, and Margaret) suggests the insufficiency of the homo/hetero binary to account for either domestic or sexual arrangements in the historical past.
For his mural on the west wall of the Parcel Post Building, Cadmus selected the theme of Pocahontas saving the life of Captain John Smith. In the artist’s characteristically skewed version of a nominally heterosexual narrative, both Pocahontas and Captain Smith are displaced from center stage by two muscular, tomahawk-wielding Indians in mohawks. Cadmus was forced by the Treasury Section to retouch the pelt of one of the Indians so as to render it less obviously phallic.

For his mural on the east wall of the building, French selected the theme of Stuart’s Raiders at the Swollen Ford, an episode from the American Civil War in which a regiment of Confederate cavalymen led by General J.E.B. Stuart had to hurriedly cross a rain-engorged stream to elude the Union soldiers and rendezvous with additional Southern troops. Here is a first-hand account of this moment by cavalryman W.T. Robins:

Marching all night, we arrived at the ford between daybreak and sunrise; and here our real troubles began. To my chagrin, we found the stream swollen by recent rains almost out of its banks, and running like a torrent. No man or horse could get over without swimming … diving to the mud and mire, it was not practicable for any number of horses to approach the river at any point except by the road leading to the ford. We therefore tried it there for two long hours. The 9th cavalry made the trail. After repeated efforts to swim the horses over we gave up, for we had crossed over only seventy-five men and horses in two hours. While we were trying to reach the opposite bank, Stuart came up and, finding crossing at this point impracticable, rode off to find another farther down the river at a point about one mile below … he succeeded in throwing across a bridge strong enough to bear the artillery and upon which the men, having been dismounted, could walk.7

Consider the gap between Robins’s recollection of physical duress and logistical difficulty with French’s first sketch for the mural. In French’s sketch, the men on the shore seem less engaged in crossing the river than posing beside it. The original drawing for the mural presents a group of twelve men, five of whom stand tightly packed to the mid-right of the composition, six of whom, all nude, are seen swimming in the swollen stream. On either side of the central grouping, the leader of the cavalymen, J.E.B. Stuart, and his second-in-command, John Pelham, kneel or lean into the scene. In contrast to the men in the central panel, both Stuart and Pelham are fully garbed in Confederate uniform and armed with sabers. All of the figures, whether in the narrative center of the mural or in its framing panels, are marked by a static and overtly gestural quality that seems to strand them in their own tracks.

After finishing this sketch, Jared French sent a copy of it to Edward Rowan, Superintendent for the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture. In an accompanying note, the artist specified,

I am enclosing the source material for the Richmond sketch in this letter. Stuart’s ride around McClellan was an important one from the Southern standpoint—it gave them needed horses and morale. The title “Stuart’s Raiders at Swollen Ford” indicates the event that was the climax of the daring raid, where they were confronted by an almost impassible ford, while sensing danger from the rear. I have tried to give the sense of danger, suspense, and courage that must have attended the event. I believe there is nothing in the sketch to offend either northern or southern sentiment.8
In a letter dated April 13, 1938, which is to say immediately upon receipt of French’s April 10 letter, Rowan fired off the following response:

The source material as you say may be entirely authentic but you must realize that the design which you have submitted could not be considered for the decoration of a federal building. There would be no offense to either the north or the south as to sentiment but there unquestionably would be offense to the emphasis of the nudes. It is necessary for me to ask you in case you wish to use the subject matter of Stuart’s Raiders to have them clothed. While this presentation is wholly suited for an easel we cannot endorse it for a mural in one of the Federal Buildings under this program. You have painted enough nudes in your life so that the painting of several more or less should not matter in your artistic career. It is too obviously flying in the face of the public.9

At the Section’s insistence, French’s intended design for the mural was substantively revised so as to downplay (and partially cover over) the male nude (Figure 25.4). In reworking his original design, French introduced at least two recognizable portraits into the composition: the figure in suspenders emerges as a self-portrait of the artist, and the blond man pointing to the far shore carries a close resemblance to the photographer (and friend of the artist) George Platt Lynes. The art historian Mark Cole has further suggested that the figure leading his horse through the water on the far left margin is a portrait of Paul Cadmus.10

A tension between narrating a Civil War scene and portraying contemporary colleagues and companions—between, we might say, history and homosexuality—was thus introduced, however covertly, into the composition. The tension was later drawn out, perhaps even thematized, in a series of photographs that Lynes took of French standing shirtless before the mural, one of which appeared in the
February 27, 1939, *Life* magazine beneath the headline “WPA muralist Gets into Trouble by Copying from Photographs.”

The nature of the “trouble” French “got into” did not concern the Richmond commission but rather a series of WPA murals the artist had completed for a public school in West Coxsackie, New York, on the theme of young men in natural surrounds (and little clothing) representing the “Origins of Food.” According to *Life*, the public school murals were closely copied, indeed too closely copied, from an early twentieth-century French anatomy textbook. French answered *Life*’s charge of “plagiarism” rather casually, noting that he copied “not only from photographs but from statues, travel posters, and pictures of movie stars.” French further insisted that “source material to an artist is of secondary importance,” thereby implying that it was the creative transformation of the source image that should be of primary concern. *Life* remained unconvinced and organized its layout of French’s murals and source material as “evidence in the case” against French, with the “defendant” (the artist himself) supplying most of the visual “evidence” to the magazine. For all its concern over “plagiarism,” the issue never posed by *Life* magazine (or similar articles about the controversy published in *Art Digest* and the *New York Herald Tribune*) was French’s attraction to the muscular nude male body and his insistence on finding models—medical, art-historical, popular, or otherwise—through which that attraction could be routed and rearticulated.

When the Richmond mural was shown at Amherst College (where French was an alumnus), the local newspaper noted that “A large mural, Jared French’s ‘Calvarymen Crossing a River,’ concerning which there has been considerable dispute in the press, led by the magazine *Time*, is now on exhibition in the galleries of Morgan hall, Amherst College. … The dispute involved the ethics of the method employed by Mr. French in making use of photographs, sculptures, and anatomical studies in place of posed models in sketching his figures.”

One unhappy viewer who saw the mural at Amherst, a Virginia resident named Mrs. H. Von Buren Magonigle, said that the work was “a direct insult to all Southern Cavalrymen” because it presented “a group of forlorn looking men, not one of whom looks as if he had ever ridden a horse.” In responding to the mural, Mrs. Magonigle touched upon a significant problem with French’s scene of cavalrymen: namely the relative lack of attention to horses, none of which are on the foreground shore. Mrs. Magonigle’s accusation that none of the men “looks as if he had ever ridden a horse” brings up the issue of imposture, the failure (at least in her eyes) of the painting to convey a convincing sense of authentic horsemanship—and perhaps, of authentic manliness more broadly conceived.

A similar displacement occurred when *Cavalrymen Crossing a River* premiered in Richmond. Local members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy criticized the composition for the fact that “some of the soldiers look like Yankees.” As Mark Cole, the author of an excellent dissertation on Jared French has pointed out, “This was an unwittingly perceptive observation” given that at least two of the figures had been based on contemporaneous New Yorkers, Jared French and George Platt Lynes, rather than on Civil War combatants.

Why did French paint the cavalry if he was not really interested in horses? What imaginative and illustrative aims did this subject matter permit him to pursue? The answer to this question—or one answer, at least—may be found in another image.
Several months prior to receiving the Richmond commission by the Treasury Section, French composed a drawing of nude male bathers, most of whom are shown standing on a dock (Figure 25.5). This drawing, entitled *Boys on a Dock*, was shown in the Whitney Annual of March 1938 and dismissed by critic Emily Genauer of the *New York World Telegram* as an “unpleasant subject.” The obvious source image for French’s later mural, the drawing reveals that the artist routed a prior pictorial interest in collective male bathing—or, more precisely, in collective male posing—into a largely unpersuasive account of Jeb Brown’s Raiders at Swollen Ford. A rendering of contemporary male nudes may thus be seen to organize—but also to disorient and disorganize—French’s subsequent rendering of Confederate cavalrmen. If Cadmus called upon the codes of satire and the Italian Renaissance to both generate and justify his pictorial interest in the eroticized male body, French utilized, of all things, an episode of Civil War history, which could be applied over a pre-existing composition of same-sex male exposure and display.

Mrs. Magonigle and the Daughters of the Confederacy could not have known of French’s earlier drawing when they viewed the finished painting, but they were nevertheless quite right to describe the mural as somehow inauthentic and askew. French was not simply a Yankee painter but one whose pictorial and libidinal desires would never conform to a dominant vision of either Southern or more broadly American history.

*  

In a description that nicely mirrors the mission of queer art history, Linda Nochlin has described the task of the social history of art in the following terms: “A social history of art cannot be constructed out of what is visible, nor can it be created merely by adding additional objects—items of popular culture or other assorted documentation—to the space in which art works are shown. The function of a social
history of art is precisely to reveal what is invisible—repressed, deleted, unrepresentable, scandalous, forgotten.” Following Nochlin’s logic, we might say that a queer history of American art cannot be confined to the lives and works of self-identified homosexual artists in the United States. It must contend with the wider range of possibility and constraints through which sexuality was imagined—and imaginable—at particular moments in the historical past.

Returning one last time to the moment of 1937, I introduce another private photograph by Lynes in which a nude male figure is mirrored by a frontal reflection on the surface of a pane of glass (Figure 25.6). The figure, arms outstretched in a mime of classical statuary, has been smoothed and silhouetted by studio lighting. A closer inspection of the photograph, however, or a glance at its title, Charles Nielson with J. Ogle (behind glass), reveals that the male subject is doubled not by his own image but by a second man standing behind the glass. The mirroring of the self is thus unveiled as an act of studio mimicry in which two models impersonate a single, reflected figure. The visual codes of self-absorption transfigure, as if before the viewer’s eyes, into those of homoeroticism as the seeming identity between the subject and his reflection.
shades into a subtle difference. *Charles Nielson with J. Ogle (behind glass)* obscures the distinction between self and other to such a degree that similitude appears as the threshold and very mirror of same-sex desire.

The examples of Paul Cadmus’s early work, Jared French’s mural of *Cavalrymen Crossing a River*, and George Platt Lynes’s photographs of nude and partially nude men remind us that American art and photography have often functioned less as a mirror of history than as an alternative to it. Rather than understanding these representations as visual documents of social and sexual life in the 1930s, we might better see them as highly crafted responses to both lived conditions and constraints that governed their historical moment. Cadmus, French, and Lynes provide us, then, not with authentic transcriptions of the homosexual past but with pictures of queer possibility that, but for the efforts of these artists, might never have been visible at all.

**Notes**

1. The Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California has since been renamed the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) Historical Society, a shift in name characteristic of gay and lesbian institutions throughout the country in the 1990s and 2000s.
5. Davis, 1994, p. 3.
7. Transcribed in French’s hand, this excerpt is from Robins, 1888. The transcribed note, along with the other documentation related to this double commission, is housed in record group 121, entry 133, box 110; Records of the Public Buildings Service, National Archives, Washington, DC.
8. Letter from Jared French to Edward B. Rowan, April 10, 1938, record group 121, entry 133, box 110; Records of the Public Buildings Service, National Archives, Washington, DC.
9. Letter from Edward B. Rowan to Jared French, April 13, 1938, record group 121, entry 133, box 110; Records of the Public Buildings Service, National Archives, Washington, DC.
References


From Nature to Ecology
The Emergence of Ecocritical Art History

Alan C. Braddock

For decades, historians of American art and culture have critically engaged the legacy of the United States as “nature’s nation”—a nation supposedly exceptional for its environmental providence and sublimity but also haunted by forces of modernity and change. *Nature’s Nation* was the title of a posthumous 1967 book of essays by the Harvard literary and intellectual historian Perry Miller, who viewed “the American character” as fundamentally shaped by “an irreconcilable opposition between Nature and civilization—which is to say, between forest and town, spontaneity and calculation, heart and head, the unconscious and the self-conscious, the innocent and the debauched.” Miller articulated his mythic binary scheme most starkly in an essay on “The Romantic Dilemma in American Nationalism and the Concept of Nature,” exploring what he saw as a defining tension in classic early nineteenth-century literature between “wilderness” and inevitable domestication by “civilization.” A similar framework informed other influential studies of American cultural history during the Cold War period, including R.W.B. Lewis’s *The American Adam* (1955), Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), and Henry Nash Smith’s *The Virgin Land* (1970).

Taking cues from such scholarship, art historians—Barbara Novak, Nancy Anderson, Angela Miller, and others—subsequently examined pictorial versions of the “Romantic Dilemma” in nineteenth-century American landscape painting. These art-historical inquiries largely reaffirmed Perry Miller’s ideas by locating the same formative national dilemma, along with “nature” itself, mainly *out there*, in mythic visions of “wilderness” and “the frontier” upon which “civilization” symbolically encroached. Despite its eastern setting, Thomas Cole’s *View from Mount Holyoke After a Thunderstorm* (*The Oxbow*) (Figure 26.1) of 1836 functioned paradigmatically in this regard, with scholars noting its structural oppositions of left and right, wilderness and domestication, past and future, Sublime and Picturesque, underscoring the nature/culture dichotomy institutionalized in previous scholarship. Like the earlier work in American studies,
these art-historical analyses of the “Romantic Dilemma” referred in passing to environmental realities but their primary concerns were the broad contours of intellectual history, politics, aesthetics, and national character. A different critical perspective originating outside art history recently has argued for an interdisciplinary approach to interpretation more thoroughly informed by ecology and environmental history. Known as ecocriticism, this approach became a self-conscious movement in the 1990s, when scholars elsewhere in the humanities established new environmentally oriented programs, journals, and organizations. One such organization is the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE, founded 1992), which holds a large biennial conference and publishes the quarterly peer-reviewed journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)* with Oxford University Press. According to the journal’s mission statement, “The existence of ISLE reflects the rapid growth of ecological literary criticism and environmental scholarship in related disciplines in the United States and around the world in recent years.” Echoing the premise of that statement, Harvard literature scholar Lawrence Buell acknowledged an “ecocritical insurgency” in 1999. By 2013, ASLE had approximately 1,300 members in thirty countries.

Briefly defined, ecocriticism emphasizes ecological interconnectedness, sustainability, and environmental justice in cultural interpretation. It asserts the imbrication of all beings, artifacts, and matter—including humans and their creative works—within a dynamic mesh of relations, agents, and historical forces. Motivated by mounting

![Figure 26.1](image-url)
concern about ecological problems as well as revisionist desire to make scholarly work more relevant and sustainable in an era of crisis, ecocriticism examines the neglected environmental implications of art, literature, and other creative products. Unlike traditional scholarship that frames environmental issues narrowly in terms of “landscape” aesthetics or “nature” idealized as pristinely non-human and ex-urban, ecocriticism considers any environment and artifact to be potentially worthy of consideration, regardless of location, medium, or constituents. Although “ecology” as an idea emerged in the modern era (coined by German naturalist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 and rooted, like “economy,” in the Greek oikos, meaning home, household, or family), ecocriticism inquires about the environmental significance of creative work in any moment, past or present, by attending to historically specific frames of reference, whether it’s Shakespeare, film, African oral traditions, or Asian fiction. Consistent with the ecological principle of interconnectedness, ecocritical interpretation views human beings and their work as part of a larger biotic community to which we have an ethical obligation to live as sustainably as possible, even though many artists, writers, and other figures of study were not environmentalists. Thus ecocriticism does not limit itself to explicitly “green” creators and works, but insists that all have some sort of ecological meaning, for better or worse. Ecocriticism also regards environmental justice—affecting humans and non-humans—as a central concern. By expanding interpretation beyond traditional humanist, anthropocentric issues without ignoring human beings (since doing so would contradict ecology’s emphasis on interconnectedness), ecocriticism seeks to enrich understanding while fostering sustainability and responsibility.4

Among Americanists, the scholarship of environmental historian William Cronon has played an especially important role in the emergence of ecocriticism, particularly his widely read essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” published in the interdisciplinary anthology Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature (1995). Building on earlier arguments by British literary critic Raymond Williams and more recent work in environmental studies, Cronon argues that Western—including American—ideas about “nature” developed historically in ways that emphasized its otherness, exteriority, and difference from human “culture” or “civilization.” As Cronon observes,

The work of literary scholars, anthropologists, cultural historians, and critical theorists over the past several decades has yielded abundant evidence that “nature” is not nearly so natural as it seems. Instead, it is a profoundly human construction. This is not to say that the nonhuman world is somehow unreal or a mere figment of our imaginations—far from it. But the way we describe and understand that world is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated. What we mean when we use the word “nature” says as much about ourselves as about the things we label with that word.5

Cronon also traces the centuries-long evolution in meanings of “wilderness” from medieval notions of evil and waste to its Romantic re-coding in terms of purity, sublimity, and divinity. While that semantic transformation facilitated conservationism and the establishment of national parks, it also reified “nature” as an aesthetic construct distinct from humanity. Despite efforts of scientists since Charles Darwin to challenge such notions, humanism has tended to reinforce them.
Cronon’s analysis recalls the critical perspective of Robert Smithson, who framed “nature” in terms of a social-ecological dialectic that art could usefully engage through earthworks. In a 1972 letter to the editor of *Progressive Architecture*, Smithson proposed the following topics for discussion at a Boston event: “Art and ecology viewed in terms of social rather than esthetic problems. ... Changing views of nature. Nature as a physical dialectic rather than a representational condition. The end of landscape painting and the limits of idealism.” In a 1971 statement, Smithson wrote, “The world needs coal and highways, but we do not need the results of strip-mining or highway trusts. Economics, when abstracted from the world, is blind to natural resources. Art can become a resource, that mediates between the ecologist and the industrialist. ... Art can help to provide the needed dialectic between them.” Such a vision, articulated amid the rise of modern environmentalism, dispensed with the “Romantic Dilemma” even as it reprised the founding articulation of the cultural avant-garde, in Henri de Saint-Simon’s *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles* of 1825, referring to the artist as a mediator between scientist and industrialist.6

Today the currency of such “changing views”—from Smithson’s dialectic to Cronon’s entanglement—has led some scholars to call for the abandonment of “nature” as a concept. For example, in *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2009), literary philosopher Timothy Morton asserts, “the very idea of ‘nature’ which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society,” because it “is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art.” For Morton, “nature” keeps the environment at arm’s length, in the background, like a framed Romantic landscape painting. Using a sculptural analogy, Morton argues that “Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration.” Instead, he argues, ecology demands interpretation that resists and estranges subject–object dualisms by emphasizing inescapable intimacy, flux, and “nonidentity.”7

Despite his critique of “nature” on a “pedestal,” Morton still finds utility in a concept of art. As he observes in a more recent book, all art—“not just explicitly ecological art—hardwires the environment into its form.” Moreover, art “isn’t just about something (trees, mountains, animals, pollution, and so forth),” it “is something” and “does something.” According to Morton, “Art is ecological insofar as it is made from materials and exists in the world. It exists, for instance, as a poem on a page made of paper from trees, which you hold in your hand while sitting in a chair in a certain room of a house that rests on a hill in the suburbs of a polluted city.” Furthermore, “The shape of the stanzas and the length of the lines determine the way you appreciate the blank paper around them. Reading the poem aloud makes you aware of the shape and size of the space around you.” That is, “The poem organizes space. Seen like this, all texts—all artworks, indeed—have an irreducibly ecological form.” Morton concludes, “Nowadays we’re used to wondering what a poem says about race or gender, even if the poem makes no explicit mention of race or gender. We will soon be accustomed to wondering what any text says about the environment even if no animals or trees or mountains appear in it.”8

Morton is not an art historian, but his ecological theory of art merits consideration, especially now in a period scientists call the “Anthropocene,” when human environmental impacts are rapidly dissolving the idea of a separate “nature,” apart from us.
As ecological issues become more visible and palpable, we may have no choice but to accustom ourselves to wondering what art says about such concerns.  

**Ecocritical Art History**

To test Morton’s assertions in art history, I will offer an ecocritical reading of a picture familiar to most Americanists—one that is not “explicitly ecological art” and represents “no animals or trees or mountains.” In 1876–77 Thomas Eakins painted *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River* (Figure 26.2), commemorating an early national Philadelphia artisan-sculptor and civic leader. Steeped in Centennial-era historicism and academic realism, it represents Rush at work in his studio carving the 1809 wooden statue *Water Nymph with Bittern*, personifying Philadelphia’s signature river and public water supply. Rush had produced that sculpture for a fountain at the city’s Centre Square pumping station, the heart of a new steam-powered waterworks system designed by Benjamin Latrobe. Statue and waterworks together provided a source of civic pride, symbolizing Philadelphia’s modern progress in alleviating water shortages and yellow fever epidemics. Standing

*Figure 26.2* Thomas Eakins, *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River*, 1876–77, oil on canvas (mounted on masonite), 20⅜ × 26⅜ in. (51.1 × 66.4 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Mary Adeline Williams, 1929. *Source*: Philadelphia Museum of Art.
in the background of Eakins’s picture, Rush’s female figure holds a river bird (the bittern) on her shoulder, signifying the Schuylkill’s role as a resource sustaining all forms of life.\(^{10}\)

Looking closely at Eakins’s picture, we see Rush in the shadows at left, with mallet and chisel, carving the allegory. Around him appear various signs of his profession, including assorted designs, wooden fragments, and other sculptures. While no “trees” appear here, the raw material into which they have been transformed saturates the scene. A nude model even stands on a wooden stump-pedestal in the foreground, steadying a large book on her shoulder to simulate anatomical effects of holding a heavy bittern. Her chaperone sits nearby, quietly knitting. The model’s bright clothing, draped over a chair, cascades toward us like foamy water from the personified river, producing a dramatic contrast with the penumbral background imagery.

Eakins marshaled many resources in conceiving *William Rush*, including extensive preparatory designs and historical research. To demonstrate his knowledge, he wrote an exhibition label for the painting, explaining the iconography of Rush’s allegory. One passage reads, “The woman holds aloft a bittern, a bird loving and much frequenting the quiet dark wooded river of those days.” As a native Philadelphian who loved to row, swim, and hunt on the Schuylkill, Eakins knew the river’s wildlife well. His written statement discloses a striking fact about local history: the bittern, Rush’s emblematic bird, apparently no longer was “loving and much frequenting” the river by the 1870s. The bittern belonged to Philadelphia’s past, which Eakins needed to reconstruct since the Schuylkill had lost its “quiet dark wooded” aspect of old.\(^ {11}\)

Eakins expressed no clear value judgment, but his research—and probably his personal recollections—revealed environmental change in Philadelphia over time as a fact of modernity. His painting silently encoded that change by locating Rush and the allegorical figure with bittern in the background shadows, creating a complex visual metaphor for “Schuylkill,” meaning “hidden river” in Dutch. Occupying a “quiet dark wooded” place at the rear of the studio, they seem to recede into Philadelphia history, replaced by “cultural” surrogates (the Nude, the book) in the foreground. What had produced the environmental change noticed by Eakins and subtly articulated by his picture? And how do we comprehend this in a work ostensibly celebrating Rush as avatar of the city’s progress in controlling its natural resources?\(^ {12}\)

To answer these questions, which previous scholarship on Eakins has not explored, requires critical reconsideration of *William Rush* in relation to Philadelphia’s environmental history. During the late nineteenth century, newspapers and public health reports repeatedly rang alarm bells about the effects of industry and population growth on the sanitary condition of the city’s water supply, especially the Schuylkill River. Natural histories of the period also noted the disappearance of wildlife, including birds, from that riparian zone. Despite Philadelphia’s historic reputation for good government, scientific progress, and clean water, by the time Eakins painted *William Rush* the city had become infamous for pollution.\(^ {13}\)

During the 1870s the Schuylkill was so badly tainted by untreated industrial waste and domestic sewage that disease reached scandalous proportions, with hundreds of residents dying annually from typhoid. According to official reports, the human death toll from typhoid for the 1860s was 4,357. That figure rose to 6,394 in the 1880s. In December 1882 Eakins’s beloved sister Margaret was among those who died of the disease.\(^ {14}\)
Eakins did not “represent” Philadelphia’s worsening environmental conditions in *William Rush* or any of his celebrated outdoor pictures of the period. And yet knowing something about environmental history lets us see Eakins’s art anew for what it was, at least during these early years of his career: a celebratory civic vision, neither strictly empirical nor overtly critical in its realism. Scholars have interrogated Eakins’s realism before in various ways, but his pictures of Rush, rowing, and other water-related subjects retain an aura of heroic, unvarnished truth for most observers today because they still look “natural.” Viewed ecocritically, they performed a kind of realist aesthetic filtration—selective artistic omission—while retaining an illusion of truth. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, his suburban *Swimming* picture (1885; Figure 9.5 in this volume) modeled early “white flight” from downtown Philadelphia, a phenomenon partly driven by the city’s worsening ecological conditions during the late nineteenth century. Whereas Eakins represented notoriously polluted south Philadelphia neighborhoods like The Neck as racially and economically diverse, he rendered more refined areas around Fairmount Park and the Main Line in terms of communal whiteness. The differences between these visions of Philadelphia have had enduring implications for environmental justice and inequality.15

More could be done with this ecocritical interpretation of Eakins’s *William Rush*. Following Morton’s observation that all art “is made from materials,” we might inquire about the chemical properties and environmental sources of the artist’s paints, canvas, and other technical tools, just as some scholarship has explored the origins of his anatomical “material.” With Cronon in mind, we could consider *William Rush* to have envisioned “nature” as “profoundly a human construction,” thoroughly “entangled with our own values and assumptions,” even as the painting (like Eakins’s comment about the bittern) treated the nonhuman world as more than simply “unreal or a mere figment of our imaginations.” Eakins’s reverence for the human figure as primary artistic focus invites ecocritical scrutiny in light of broader Darwinian period interest in “animal locomotion,” or comparative physiological analysis of multiple species.16

By no means do these reflections on Eakins constitute the only available example of ecocritical art history. Since around 1990, scholars have regularly addressed the environmental significance of contemporary art. Rare, however, are ecocritical studies investigating art before the 1960s—before modern environmentalism made ecology a cause célèbre. The first major monograph to address historical material in this regard was Greg Thomas’s *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France* (2000), focusing on the Barbizon landscapes and conservationism of Théodore Rousseau. Another important study, Finis Dunaway’s *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (2005), examined photography and film from the Progressive Era through the first Earth Day celebration in 1970. An anthology of essays I co-edited with Christoph Irmscher, *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* (2009), addressed topics spanning four centuries, from the colonial Carolina corpus of John White and Theodor de Bry to early twenty-first-century photographs of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) by Subhankar Banerjee. Recent work by Stephen Eisenman, Robin Kelsey, Maura Lyons, and others signals the arrival of ecocriticism as a vital force in art history.17

Like any interpretive discourse, ecocritical art history undoubtedly will evolve over time in unpredictable ways. Morton’s insistence on “nonidentity” cautions against reification of concepts and interpretive strategies into a singular method. Unsurprisingly,
competing currents within and adjoining ecocritical art history are already raising questions. One question concerns how to reconcile a national—even hemispheric—framework of American art history with the intrinsic global transnationalism of ecology. Another pertains to the growing interest among art historians in thing theory, object-oriented ontology, and nonhuman animals. The remainder of this chapter addresses each of these topics.

Ecology and Transnationalism

Americanists increasingly wonder about the usefulness of national boundaries for understanding art history, especially in an era of instantaneous global connectivity and cultural diffusion. The last “state of the field” essay on American art history in *Art Bulletin*, written by John Davis in 2003 and entitled “The End of the American Century,” identified transnational impulses as important new directions in scholarship. Recent textbooks—notably Frances Pohl’s *Framing America* and Angela Miller et al.’s *American Encounters*—extend the scope of American art beyond the United States into Canada, Mexico, and Central America while accentuating transatlantic and transpacific connections (though only Pohl deals with ecological issues). Other recent publications, conferences, and museum installations have taken a hemispheric approach in an effort to redefine the field as encompassing North and South America.18

Consistent with such concerns, *A Keener Perception* included work on a diverse range of artists and topics, most with transnational reach in one way or another. One example is the Calcutta-born immigrant photographer Banerjee. An essay by Finis Dunaway discusses how Banerjee’s photographs of ANWR since 2002 reveal that politically charged place to be neither a barren “wasteland” that might as well be drilled (the view of corporate oil interests) nor a pristine wilderness and “last frontier” needing preservation in an edenic state (the view of romantic environmentalists). Rather, Dunaway argues, ANWR is a global village inhabited by many species, including Native Inupiat and Gwich’ in people as well as a host of nonhumans, such as polar bears, snow geese, and buff-breasted sandpipers, the latter migrating annually from as far away as Argentina. Their and our reliance on and relation to the refuge, however remote, demonstrates ecological interconnectedness. Banerjee’s photograph of pregnant caribou migrating across ice at ANWR’s Coleen River Valley interprets such conditions formally in its distant aerial perspective, cropped composition, and intermingling of realism with abstraction (Figure 26.3). When we discover what we’re looking at and recognize that the migrating herd extends far beyond the photograph’s cropped borders, ecological understanding intertwines with aesthetic experience. This picture (by an Indian immigrant) compels the viewer to think self-critically about her relation to and responsibility for those caribou and their habitat—not with pity or condescension (despite the aerial perspective) but rather with the recognition that they are neighbors in a way, fellow planetary inhabitants deserving respect. The question of what constitutes “American” here seems unimportant, even as ANWR remains a political battleground over energy policies of the nation most responsible for generating greenhouse gases during the past century. The United States produces more such emissions per capita than any other large industrialized nation, but Earth’s atmosphere hardly heeds legal-political boundaries.19
Adopting a transnational perspective could be considered broadly ecological insofar as it extends—like global warming or a migratory bird—beyond such boundaries. The fact that some “modernist” scholars have long viewed art history transnationally raises interesting questions about the eco-theoretical legacy of modernism. Integrating its transnational lens with ecocritical art history might help drive a stake into the vampire heart of American exceptionalism, which has long privileged the United States as “Nature’s nation.” Thomas Cole, an English immigrant, expressed misgivings about American exceptionalism nearly two centuries ago in *The Course of Empire* (1833–36), so its persistence today amid anthropogenic climate change seems sadly ironic.²⁰

Figure 26.3 Subhankar Banerjee, *Caribou Migration I* (Oil and the Caribou, Coleen River Valley, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge), 2002, 86 × 68 in. Source: Courtesy of the artist.
Disciplinary structures die hard, though. Many of us, including myself, will probably continue to teach courses and publish texts on “American” art, even as global warming, ecocriticism, and other forces complicate that category. If I were to redo *A Keener Perception*, I might dispense with the “American” framework and go even more *all over*, resisting national boundaries and figure–ground relationships, like a Banerjee photograph, or a Jackson Pollock painting, or a mixed-media work by Ghanaian artist El Anatsui such as *Earth’s Skin* (Figure 26.4), composed of transnational corporate commodity detritus reclaimed from the artist’s environment (he lives in Nsukka, Nigeria) and transformed into a large, colorful tapestry exploring the meaning of African tradition amid globalization.

Contrary to its stereotypical association with hermetic, Cold War, Greenbergian, optico-formalism, modernism harbored an important transnational outlook conducive to ecological thinking. Indeed, some of modernism’s less familiar moments—Lewis Mumford’s critical urbanism, Georges Bataille’s formless squashed bug, or Pollock’s declaration “I am nature”—registered a biocentric political ecology that defied national boundaries. Considerations like these motivate several recent scholarly studies and projects, including Oliver Botar and Isabel Wünsche’s collection *Biocentrism and Modernism* (2011) and Barry Bergdoll’s *Rising Currents: Projects for New York’s Waterfront* (2011), an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art on architectural visions for adapting the city and harbor of New York to sea-level rise caused by climate change. In Bergdoll’s fascinating show, designers from various firms imagined a “new aqueous city” with “adaptive, soft infrastructures”—a dynamic, amphibious urban environment with porous streets instead of floodwalls, abandoned petroleum tanks reclaimed as recycling centers, revived “oyster-itecture” for food production and water purification, and other ecological innovations (Figure 26.5).
Another set of concerns facing art historians, including Americanists, pertains to the agency and vitality of nonhuman matter, things, and being(s). These ontological issues emanate less from ecocriticism than recent scholarship on subject–object relations in philosophy and political theory. Grasping the relevance of such scholarship in this context requires some background. Classical Western philosophy and science, exemplified in the writings of René Descartes and Isaac Newton, established ingrained habits of viewing nonhuman phenomena objectively or mechanistically as inert, passive matter—a mere resource of stuff set in motion by human agents and used for our survival or pleasure. According to that view, which broadly affirmed the biblical account of human divinity and dominion enshrined in Genesis, a qualitative, hierarchical boundary separated subjects (human beings) from objects (everything else). Since the nineteenth century, however, a number of scientific and intellectual developments have destabilized such thinking, including Darwinian evolutionary theory, particle physics, and various philosophical discourses about vital materiality, distributed agency, the withdrawal of objects from human understanding, and the subjectivity of nonhuman animals. Consequently, some philosophers and political theorists have argued lately for a dramatic realignment of our conventional perceptions of matter, things,
and being(s) by critiquing anthropocentrism. I have in mind here something different from the still largely humanistic, socio-economic discourse of “thing theory” articulated by sociologists, anthropologists, and literary critics such as Arjun Appadurai, Alfred Gell, and Bill Brown at the end of the last century. Falling into three broad categories—new materialism, object-oriented ontology, and critical animal studies—the new arguments in question are still evolving, but I will highlight examples that seem most pertinent to ecocritical art history.

A key text in new materialism is Jane Bennett’s book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), which traces alternatives to the classical tradition outlined above within Western philosophy. In the writings of Lucretius, Spinoza, Darwin, Nietzsche, Thoreau, Bergson, and others, Bennett finds considerable regard for earthly matter and inanimate things as having vital agency and force, contrary to the dominant Cartesian/Newtonian view. Beyond simply recognizing the existence and power of “vital materiality,” Bennett contends that the lingering classical “image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.” Moreover, she argues, “The figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption.” Eschewing both the anti-humanism of deep ecology and the anthropocentrism of Marxist historical materialism (including “thing theory”), Bennett emphasizes “the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces” in order “to dissipate the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic” and thereby “induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality.”

With Bennett, we’ve come a long way from Newton and Descartes, not to mention Perry Miller. Bennett’s critique of classical binaries and inducement of “aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality” broadly aligns with Morton, who similarly saw art as valuable for rethinking human ecological imagination. How their arguments will impact ecocritical art history remains to be seen, but *Vibrant Matter* has already become an important touchstone in several scholarly contexts, including a special issue of *ISLE* devoted to “Material Ecocriticism” and a session at the 2013 College Art Association conference.

Born from the same philosophical stew that spawned Bennett’s new materialist treatise, object-oriented ontology also challenges the classical humanist view of subject–object relations but with an emphasis that makes its potential usefulness for ecocritical art history less clear. Founded by American philosopher Graham Harman around 2000, object-oriented ontology critiques post-Kantian idealist philosophies that describe being—existence, reality, the world of objects—as solely the province of human understanding. Harman’s critique begins by acknowledging one post-Kantian philosopher, Martin Heidegger, who recognized that the world of objects actually does exist outside human consciousness. In an influential essay on “The Thing,” Heidegger conceded that objects resist human understanding by always withdrawing from our perception. This withdrawal is evident, for example, when a tool, such as a hammer, breaks and becomes abstracted from human use, making its thingness palpable. For Heidegger, art constitutes another dense thing irreducible to instrumental uses and interpretations. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger eschewed conventional understandings of art as transparent representation or decipherable symbol by privileging its power to embody, rather than merely reflect,
The emergence of ecocritical art history

His vivid example is an ancient Greek temple, which “structures and simultaneously gathers around itself … the world of this historical people.” As Heidegger’s examples reveal, though, he sees the world constructed by art as only having significance for human beings, not for other species or things themselves. An epitome of his anthropocentric view appears in *The Fundamental Theses of Metaphysics*, where he says “the stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world, man is world-forming.” In recent scholarship in American art history, Heidegger’s impact is most visible in the work of Alexander Nemerov, notably *Acting in the Night: Macbeth and the Places of the Civil War* (2010) and his guest-curated Smithsonian exhibition *To Make a World: George Ault and 1940s America* (2011).

Object-oriented ontology builds on Heidegger’s insights about the resistant withdrawal of things from human perception in order to dismantle this persistent Western anthropocentrism. Harman argues an “object” is “that which has a unified and autonomous life apart from its relations, accidents, qualities, and moments.” In other words, objects exist for themselves, regardless of their usefulness or relation to humans. Accordingly, object-oriented ontology puts objects, not humans, at the center of being, with nothing enjoying special status or existential privilege. Everything exists equally; as Harman says, “all relations are on the same footing.” Using a lucid and engaging style of writing, Harman observes in *Towards Speculative Realism* (2010) that “the arena of the world is packed with diverse objects, their forces unleashed and mostly unloved. Red billiard ball smacks green billiard ball. Snowflakes glitter in the light that cruelly annihilates them, while damaged submarines rust along the ocean floor. As flour emerges from mills and blocks of limestone are compressed by earthquakes, gigantic mushrooms spread in the Michigan forest. While human philosophers bludgeon each other over the very possibility of ‘access’ to the world, sharks bludgeon tuna fish and icebergs smash into coastlines.”

Harman’s bracing prose—reminiscent of Hemingway or Hammett—helps explain why he has attracted a number of followers. His philosophical critique of anthropocentrism broadly resonates with ecocritical art history. Indeed, Timothy Morton, whose defense of art in the name of ecology we encountered earlier, aligns himself with Harman’s arguments. Yet the ecological implications of object-oriented ontology become complicated in the work of another Harman follower, Ian Bogost, a digital media theorist.

In *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (2012), Bogost embraces and extends Harman’s arguments by underscoring not only the inaccessibility of all objects and beings to each other but also the fundamental indifference of being as such. Sharing Harman’s desire to undo anthropocentrism, Bogost radically flattens the ontological status of all things. Emphasizing object autonomy in the extreme, he completely elides politics and ethics, preferring to see things as randomly coexisting and essentially alien from one another, with no meaningful interaction, mutual understanding, shared responsibility, or historical relations except through “caricatures” of metaphor. Dismissing the ethical concerns of environmentalists and vegans, Bogost touts a vision of ontology that “makes no distinction between the types of things that exist but treats them all equally,” from the “secret universe” of a computer to “the disappearing worlds of the African elephant or the Acropora coral.” Bogost never really ponders the endangered being of elephants or coral, but he lavishes attention on the ontology of computers, video games, Foveon camera sensors, Shimano bicycle gear hubs, burritos, and other objects of (human) consumption. His cynical vision has
no room for ecological thought, understanding, or action. No wonder Bogost praises Stephen Shore’s 1970s photographic series addressing banalities of American road travel for capturing a sense of undifferentiated alienation, saying such imagery “simply catalogs, like the monk’s bestiary, exemplifying the ways that human intervention can never entirely contain the mysterious alien worlds of objects” (Figure 26.6). Bogost prefers cataloging to historical understanding or ethical judgment, which he condemns as always already fraught with anthropocentrism.  

As an antidote to such cynicism, I turn to another relevant emerging line of interpretation—critical animal studies—because it engages an ecological issue largely ignored by new materialists and object-oriented ontologists: species relations. Cary Wolfe, a key theorist, introduces his interdisciplinary anthology, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (2003), saying, “Those nonhuman beings called animals pose philosophical and ethical questions that go to the root not just of what we think but of who we are. Their presence asks: what happens when the Other can no longer safely be assumed to be human?” Wolfe detects a “crisis of humanism” in recent critical theory coinciding with “a radical revaluation of the status of nonhuman animals that has taken place in society at large.” He cites the “veritable explosion of work in areas such as cognitive ethology and field ecology,” which “has called into question our ability to use the old saws of anthropocentrism (language, tool use, the inheritance of cultural behaviors, and so on) to separate ourselves once and for all from animals.” The resulting erosion of “tidy divisions between human and nonhuman,” he observes, “has led to a broad reopening of the question of the ethical status of animals in relation to the human.”
Darwin basically understood all of that a century and a half ago, but cultural studies scholars are still absorbing the decentering implications of his work. In *The Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin recognized the “mutual relations of the innumerable inhabitants of the world,” viewing them not as belonging to “immutable” or “independently created” species but rather as “plastic” forms subject to infinite “variation” through “natural selection” and “bound together by a web of complex relations.” In *The Descent of Man* (1871), he noted, “man bears in his bodily structure clear traces of his descent from some lower form,” yet “there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties.” Furthermore, Darwin observed, “The lower animals, like man, manifestly feel pleasure and pain, happiness and misery. … The fact that the lower animals are excited by the same emotions as ourselves is so well established, that it will not be necessary to weary the reader by many details. … Most of the more complex emotions are common to the higher animals and ourselves.”

In an age scientists have dubbed the Anthropocene, marked by the Sixth Mass Extinction (an extinction rate not seen since dinosaurs disappeared, 65 million years ago), ecocritical art history ought to address the significance of nonhuman lives, especially since so much recent art has engaged and used them in various ways. Exploring such art in *The Postmodern Animal* (2000), Steve Baker puts it this way: “the animal is a reminder of the limits of human understanding and influence, but also the value of working at those limits.”

To underscore the significance of animal studies for an expanded “American” ecocritical art history, I conclude this chapter—with help from Baker—by briefly considering Joseph Beuys’s *I Like America and America Likes Me* (Figure 26.7), a work that refused ontological indifference in its interrogation of national and species boundaries. In this 1974 performance, the German artist spent several days at New York’s René Block Gallery, sharing a fenced space with a live coyote named Little John. Wielding a shepherd’s crook and felt blanket, Beuys reanimated myths about American “wilderness” and his own personal history. As a Luftwaffe pilot whose fighter plane was shot down over the Crimea during World War II, he was supposedly rescued by Tartar nomads (with dogs) who nursed him back to health by wrapping his injured body in felt and animal fat. Beyond self-mythologizing, though, Beuys’s performance posed questions about human–nonhuman interaction and shared animal being, testing the limits of otherness, isolation, and indifference. Eventually, as coyote and man became acquainted, Beuys dropped his protective blanket, approached the (other) animal, and presented his gloves in a symbolic interspecies hand-off.

Commenting later on this encounter, Beuys said “the roles were exchanged immediately” because the coyote became “an important cooperator in the production of freedom,” helping the artist approach what “the human being cannot understand.” Beuys also observed,

The brown gloves represent my hands, and the freedom of movement that human beings possess with their hands. They have the freedom to do the widest range of things, to utilize any number of tools and instruments. They can wield a hammer or cut with a knife. They can write or mould forms. Hands are universal, and this is the significance of the human hand. … They are not restricted to one specific use like the talons of an eagle or the mole’s diggers. So the throwing of the gloves to Little John meant giving him my hands to play with.
Following Bogost, who says that “things [are] at the center of being” and “nothing has special status,” we might interpret everything in that 1974 performance—Beuys, coyote, gloves—as existing “equally” apart. Such an interpretation would see no meaningful distinction between the ontology of the glove and that of Little John, Beuys, an endangered African elephant, or the “secret universe” of a computer. Aside from seeming ethically evasive, this feels like an interpretive dead end. It also ignores important interaction and access, however incomplete, between the animals in question.

Astutely analyzing *I Like America and America Likes Me*, Baker contends, “it is the manner in which Beuys established his humanness that is especially revealing,” for “[t]he artist gives something to the animal, and what he chooses to give is his hands. They carry associations of creativity … and they enable the animal to play. … They are just sufficient to gesture toward the other-than-animal: the human.” Citing Heidegger’s anthropocentric thesis about how “[t]he animal is poor in world” whereas “[m]an is world-forming,” Baker acknowledges the condescension of Beuys’s “gift” to Little John. Yet, in that gesture, Baker nevertheless sees the artist “slowly giving up preconceptions and learning something of what the animal has to offer him.” The “awkwardness” of this scenario, says Baker, demonstrates “Beuys’s role as a performer rather than a philosopher.” “Philosophy has all too often tried to settle matters (on the question of animals as much as on any other), whereas art has more often seen the scope for unsettling things.” Baker’s insight about art’s “unsettling” power to grapple with the question of the animal, together with Morton’s defense of art’s “irreducibly ecological form,” indicate what I see as the most pressing and promising directions of inquiry for ecocritical art history.35
Notes

12. For ecocritical analysis of Rush’s work, see Igoe, 2014.
13. On Schuylkill River pollution, see Philadelphia Inquirer, June 12, 1862, p. 3; February 6, 1865, p. 3; March 4, 1870, p. 2; November 16, 1871, p. 4; October 26, 1875, p. 2; February 2, 1877, p. 3.
16. On anatomical material, see Braddock, 2005.
20. On Cole and American exceptionalism, see A. Miller, 1993, pp. 21–64.
References


Art History as Collage
A Personal Approach
David M. Lubin

When the editors of this volume invited me to reflect on my interdisciplinary approach to art history, I accepted, glad for the occasion. Yet what I thought might be a walk in the woods proved more daunting. I have always been an aleatory writer, one who relies on chance encounters with an idea, a conversation with a colleague, an exchange with a student, or a stray piece of reading to move from points A to B to C. My scholarship, in both the research and writing phases, has been anything but systematic, and it’s hard therefore to delineate a strict methodological procedure that I have followed and would recommend to others. I do believe, however, that serious art history can be conducted in a playful and idiosyncratic manner, and the following remarks emphasize the value I place on play as a means of investigating the past and relating it to the present.

I think of the endeavor as a sort of bricolage or collage. The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss coined the term *bricolage* to describe a kind of intellectual improvisation, a patching together of bits and pieces of ideas from diffuse sources, a creative use of whatever happens to be at hand; the person who engages in such activities is a *bricoleur.* Collage is a French term meaning to paste or glue, and generally it implies pasting together an ill-assorted array of materials, ones that are essentially unlike in nature. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque invented and named collage in the early 1900s, playfully producing admixtures of paint, sand, wickerwork, oilcloth, art paper, wallpaper, and/or newspaper to amuse themselves and their viewers. The separate elements retained their separateness while simultaneously merging with the composite whole. In the 1930s, the Surrealists favored the arbitrariness of collage, with its unexpected juxtapositions, as a pathway to the unconscious; adapting a line from the nineteenth-century poet Comte de Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse), they praised “the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.” Their contemporary Walter Benjamin harbored hopes of writing a collage-like history of
nineteenth-century Paris that would consist entirely of pasted-together quotations from period sources. One wonders if he wouldn’t have been a blogger today.

Other modern and avant-garde artists of the twentieth century who explored the possibilities of collage include Kurt Schwitters, Hannah Höch, John Heartfield, Arthur Dove, Joseph Cornell, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg. I’ve often noticed there’s a comic element about their work, the surprising juxtapositions that bear a structural resemblance to jokes, gags, puns, and other vulgar forms of humor. Collage does not respect classical unities of time, place, and tone but rather introduces foreign entities, sometimes jarringly, assaulting the integrity of the well-made, homogeneous space. Collage is a messy, irregular, trial-and-error enterprise with no predetermined outcome. It is playful and disrespectful; it’s inherently fun.

But this is not to say I’ve ever found it easy. To the contrary, it is hard work, requiring considerable concentration and deliberation—like that on the face of a child in elementary school learning to scissor and paste. Hemingway said writing is really rewriting, and collage-making, whether on a two-dimensional surface or in the conceptual space of an article, similarly involves continual reassessment and rearrangement of individual elements. In my case, perhaps because I came to art history from the allied but very different field of American studies, I think of each composition, that is, piece of scholarly writing, as an artful arrangement of separate blocks of research and inquiry: among them, for example, cultural history, social history, economic and political history, linguistic and literary analysis, formal analysis, and, in my case at least, self-analysis. The personal is still political, just as it was in the 1960s, and art history that represses the personality of the art historian, the inquirer, is in danger of feigning objectivity and covering over the subjective drives, desires, and motivations that give rise to the writing in the first place. I’m not asking anyone else to write this way—no edicts here—but still, for me, the construction of an essay, a book chapter, or a book requires that I investigate, evaluate, and re-evaluate my own motivations while simultaneously examining those of the historical players, such as artists and their contemporaries, that I’m writing about.

Undergraduates are often flummoxed when I tell them it’s OK to write in the first person, because in high school they learned to avoid “I” at all costs. If you can’t own the claims you make, I ask, why should I or anyone else, other than your parents and friends, care what you have to say? You don’t have to hammer away at your subjectivity or make apologies for it, I advise them, but, still, it doesn’t hurt to acknowledge it and occasionally remind the reader of its unavoidable presence. In my own writing—including essays far more scholarly and detached than this one—I strive to be transparent about the personal needs and desires that motivated and sustained my research and yet do so without letting such disclosures overshadow the “non-me” parts of the project, which certainly deserve and receive more airtime than authorial revelations. The “me” parts are notes I use sparingly, sounding them only occasionally, but nonetheless they are important elements in the overall composition. They too are fragments of the collage, scraps of material that have a rightful place and need not be sequestered from sight.

What I am singling out as art-historical collage is not so much different, in the end, from what most writers do when they compose. All essays, when you stop to think about it, are forms of collage—a welding or gluing together of disparate elements—but generally, I would say, the author’s impetus is to make the join-lines invisible, or at least relatively smooth and unnoticed. As it happens, while writing this I’ve been
reading a brilliant exercise in historical collage, Stephen Greenblatt’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*. The book is a collage of philosophic analysis, intellectual history, literary biography, and autobiography, the separate domains flowing smoothly into one another as the author nimbly moves the reader backward and forward in time while telling how a fifteenth-century rare-book hunter in Italy discovered an early medieval manuscript in a German monastery that copied an earlier copy of a copy of an ancient Roman poem, Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*, which was itself an extended gloss on the teachings of Epicurus, a Greek philosopher of several centuries still earlier.2

Greenblatt interweaves this literary history, reaching back in time to the world of the ancient Greeks, with another that moves forward, into the worlds of Renaissance Rome, Montaigne’s France, Thomas Jefferson’s revolutionary America, and Greenblatt’s own youth as a Yale undergraduate—though not in a straightforward linear sequence. The modernist filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard famously said that every movie should have a beginning, middle, and end, but not necessarily in that order. *The Swerve* is not in any sense a modernist collage, so seamlessly elegant is its construction, yet a collage it is, and an exhilarating one at that.

Also as it happens, a few days before writing these words I encountered another exhilarating collage, *The Clock* (2010), by the installation and video artist Christian Marclay, who began his career making sound collages from vinyl albums spinning simultaneously on multiple turntables. In *The Clock*, Marclay has gathered thousands of short sequences from Hollywood and international cinema, each of which clearly shows a timepiece or mentions a particular time of the day, and arranges them in a real-time progression, such that the exact minute shown or mentioned on screen corresponds precisely to that in the time zone of the art gallery or museum in which the 24-hour-long composition is being projected. In an earlier, much shorter—17 minutes, on continuous loop—equally invigorating mixed-media installation, *Video Quartet* (2002), Marclay distributes brief, sometimes split-second musical sequences (i.e., those featuring musicians or musical instruments or para-musical gestures, such as toe-tapping or finger-drumming) from hundreds of Hollywood movies, projecting them in various rhythmic combinations on four side-by-side screens on a gallery wall. When, for example, three identical short sequences from a movie project simultaneously on three of the screens, a new one, from a different film, will suddenly appear on the fourth screen, and instants later the others wheel about and follow suit, like a school of fish abruptly changing direction in the sea. The mind bursts with kaleidoscopic visual and auditory effects.

Greenblatt and Marclay, then, are two current exemplars for me of the collage ethos and aesthetic. They are different from one another, and their respective procedures are vastly different from anything I, as a collage-minded art historian, have ever undertaken or hope to undertake. But each in his way excites me with possibilities for my own endeavors and those of younger art historians, to whom this chapter is directed. Academic art-historical writing is generally non-collagist or anti-collagist in spirit, perhaps because an inherently playful, personal, and experimental approach can, justifiably, seem arbitrary, frivolous, and unscientific, thus falling short of the rigorous standards that an insecure profession, already assailed for elitism and non-utility, must strive very hard to maintain.

I was told so early in my career, after the publication of *Picturing a Nation*, when I was introduced at a reception to a pair of distinguished senior art historians.3 They
complimented me on the book but worried that it set a bad example for their graduate students, because, apparently, it would “license them” to say anything they liked about a work of art. Around the same time, at a different reception, I was introduced to another prominent senior art historian, who eyed me suspiciously and said, “Oh, yes, you’re the man who makes up things about paintings.” On still another occasion, this time at a dinner party on the West Coast, an eminent and irascible art historian of central European origin who sat across the table reprimanded me and others of my generation for making ourselves too present in our writing. He said he was interested in learning what Rembrandt thought about his paintings, not in what I thought about them. There was a correct way of doing art history, he implied, and people like me were not doing it.

I must break up my own narrative here to admit that I am playing the old-fogey card as a rhetorical ploy, to position myself as the beleaguered outsider, chastised for bringing new methods, new approaches, and new ways of writing to an ossified, rearguard art history. This is ad hominem argumentation; it diverts attention away from the substance of a method or practice, turning instead to specific (if unnamed) individuals associated with it. That’s a poor way of arguing, and my only defense is to say that my purpose here is not to mount a critique of traditional art history, but rather to set the stage for my own emerging consciousness as a cultural art historian. The individuals I have in mind were in fact exemplars of various notable schools of art history from the 1940s through the 1980s, and I respected them for their work, and do so now. Then why not delete the preceding paragraph? I leave it in as part of the collage, and not simply for decorative or dramatic purposes. The more important point is to illustrate the resistance, justified or not, that an eclectic, ad hoc, self-disclosing approach to art-historical inquiry engendered in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I was starting out in the field.

I attended graduate school during the peak of the postmodern moment in academia, and clearly postmodern aesthetics and epistemologies bore heavily on the way I conceived of my role as an art historian. Christopher Lasch characterized the period as a “culture of narcissism,” while Tom Wolfe labeled it “the Me Decade.” My brazenly subjective brand of scholarship demonstrated the confessional, self-reflexive, self-absorptive tendencies of the era (a tendency still at play in my writing, as witness the present instance). Like most graduate students, I was profoundly influenced by my professors and their publications and countless academic books and scholarly articles that I pored over in library nooks, bookstore aisles, and dimly lit café corners. Graduate school itself was an intellectual and existential collage, often joyful but also painful because so unsettling to my pre-existing beliefs.4

Painful, too, because I was occasionally censured, both by my professors and by some of my peers, for overindulging in the vernacular. One of my favorite teachers, a Marxist literary critic and theorist of postmodernism, cautioned against easily digestible writing. It should be difficult to digest, he said, and make the reader pay a price.5 I internalized these injunctions yet also fought against them, trying to measure up to rigorous professional standards without abandoning my desire to communicate as lucidly as possible.

I am not opposed to hypercomplexity or density in language or art; indeed, as the following paragraph affirms, I have long been drawn to them. Still, for me, the excitement in writing and teaching comes from finding ways to be simultaneously complex and clear, and to use language in a fresh and generative manner, without relying on
prefabricated terms and phrases, be they academic jargon or clichés of everyday speech. Yes, it can be a noble thing to make readers sweat and stretch, as if in an exercise class; but maybe you can get them even more engaged in your ideas by initiating a friendly game of catch—throwing out ideas in a way that encourages them to toss them back at you. This amounts to a ludic, rather than labor-based, theory of productive writing and reading. It beckons participation and, as such, could be seen as art history’s version of “relational aesthetics,” a decentered style of art-making that invites viewers to be more than simply viewers and actually take part in the creative act. Going a step further, this art history summons not only readers’ active participation but also their principled disbelief, resistance, or dissent.

In retrospect, it seems to me that modern or contemporary music, fiction, and cinema—in short, the arts—exerted a stronger influence on my way of “doing” art history than did graduate seminars and assigned scholarly or theoretical readings. Before starting graduate study, I had already absorbed notions of self-reflexivity and collage, though I would not have called them that, through novels, such as John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* and John Fowles’s *French Lieutenant’s Woman*, the music of Gustav Mahler, John Cage, and the Beatles, the theater of Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, and Abbie Hoffman, and movies such as Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Red Desert* and *Blow-Up*, Federico Fellini’s *8½*, Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona*, François Truffaut’s *Day for Night*, and anything by Godard. Self-reflexivity, an attempt to acknowledge the observing self as an unavoidably distorting factor in what is being observed, seemed in those days a corrective to the hubris of scientific reason and empiricism. To the extent that our reactions to the world are habitual and automatic (that is, reflexive), self-reflexivity could mitigate our own mental and emotional complacency. I don’t suppose it ever actually did that, for devious are the ways of the mind, especially when it comes to self-deception, but this, at least, was the hope.

Later, I encountered J.D. Salinger’s teen-angst masterpiece *The Catcher in the Rye*. I first read it while preparing a college-level introductory course to American studies shortly after beginning my first academic post. Though well beyond my teenage years, I liked the book for several reasons, one of which was its colloquial, first-person voice, so refreshing to encounter after the depersonalized, disciplinary prose of graduate school. I was especially captivated by an incident that occurs in chapter 24. Holden Caulfield, the narrator, explains to a former teacher why he received an *F* in a course on oral expression:

“It’s this course where each boy in class has to get up in class and make a speech . . . . And if the boy digresses at all, you’re supposed to yell ‘Digression!’ at him as fast as you can. . . . The trouble with me is, I like it when somebody digresses. It’s more interesting and all.”

“You don’t care to have somebody stick to the point when he tells you something?”

“Oh, sure! I like somebody to stick to the point and all. But I don’t like them to stick too much to the point. . . . I guess I don’t like it when somebody sticks to the point all the time.”

*Catcher in the Rye* encouraged me to keep doing what I was already trying to do as a scholar, which was to enrich my subject of study, nineteenth-century American painting, by bringing to it my own personal interests and idiosyncrasies. I wrote about
Eakins and different types of gazing—artistic, erotic, scientific, and medical—in my first book because I was nostalgically drawn to the artist and the “innocent” period he portrayed but also because I sensed that his work would help me better understand my own era’s compulsive (in theoretical terms, scopophilic) attraction to the pleasures, fears, and lusts of the objectifying eye. I wrote about portraiture because my sister was married to a portrait painter, and I wanted to appreciate what happens visually, verbally, and psychologically when portraits click into life. Even though I wasn’t a father yet, I hoped to be one in the near future and found in Sargent’s magnificent but disquieting portrait of the four daughters of a friend of his, whose presence I sensed but could not see, an occasion to think long and hard about father–daughter relationships—and sister–sister relationships, too, my wife being one of four.8

Perhaps this approach is not appropriate for everyone, especially those whose subject area is at a great geographical or historical remove from the modern United States or its earlier colonial manifestations. Art historians who can’t rely on cultural proximity or abundant textual documentation to test their hypotheses about art of remote cultures might still, however, find the collage approach helpful, even liberating. Again, this chapter issues no edicts; it does not presume to tell you what to think or what style of art history might work best for you. Rather, it offers personal reflections on what I do, or have done, or wish to do, in this profession, with the hope that this will prod, sting, or otherwise discomfort you in a beneficial way.

That said, this is what I’ve found works best for me: to search out desires, subterranean or otherwise, my own as well as those of the artists, patrons, and viewers I’m writing about, as a means of grasping the inner mechanisms and cultural functions of the art in question. Sure, this method can be abused, just as more objective, impersonal, or scientific protocols can be; it’s all in how you pull it off. Subtlety works better than heavy-handedness, and it is more preferable, I tell my students, to allow room for alternative readings, including forceful disagreement with what you have to say, than to strong-arm readers with misplaced certainty that your interpretation is the only one that is good and true, simply because it happens to fit best with your own internal promptings. Locate your desire, which is to say your will to power, and frankly acknowledge the role it plays in how you construct and present your material, but don’t force it on the material—or the reader.

Staying attuned to current wishes, needs, and phenomenological perceptions while analyzing older cultural formations has been a way of allowing past and present to intersect and enliven one another in my writing, which aspires to be process-rather than product-driven, full of Caulfield-like side trips and digressions. Back in the day, as a junior in high school, I came across Selflessness, an album that featured a live recording from the 1963 Newport Jazz Festival in which John Coltrane and his group spun out an astonishing 17-minute rendition of “My Favorite Things” from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Sound of Music. Coltrane on tenor sax, along with McCoy Tyner on piano, Jimmy Garrison on bass, and Roy Haynes on drums, took a familiar, even banal, piece of music and “deconstructed” it (the word wasn’t in use at that time). You start in a place you think you know well and then, as if in a dream, are transported far afield, where the terrain looks strangely different, but with occasional glimpses and reminders of where you started, and suddenly you’re brought back home, where the familiar—the Broadway tune—now feels unfamiliar and new.

In my books Act of Portrayal, Picturing a Nation, Titanic, and Shooting Kennedy, I followed this model, not with Coltrane’s fierce brilliance, but with my own version
of taking a familiar artifact and putting it through theme-and-variation exercises. When this method works, it provides enjoyable and enlightening twists and turns for the reader; when it doesn’t work, it can seem tiresomely self-indulgent, too much about the author’s bravura and not enough about the nominal topic of the study, some “there, there” (Gertrude Stein) beyond the author’s commodious “in here.” The approach I have been describing tries to find a path between work and play; also between artwork and wordplay. It tries to say something serious without deadly seriousness. It says that the artistic or historical text under consideration is important, but so, too, is the performative reading of that text, and that this performance can be a way of enhancing rather than diminishing our appreciation of the text. All art-historical writing is a performance, even that which pretends it is not. In some ways, that pretense makes it even more of a performance!

In Shooting Kennedy I composed lengthy, multifaceted chapters around iconic photographs from the traumatic weekend in November 1963 when John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Iconic images are some of a culture’s “favorite things,” endlessly repeated as talismans to ward off anxiety or evil. A close reading of the famous Life photograph of the president and first lady being greeted at Love Field led to a discussion of triumphal portraiture, the art-historical symbolism of the roses clutched in Mrs. Kennedy’s arms, the political significance of the external design of the Boeing jet from which they had disembarked—digressions, all. The final chapter, revolving around a wire-service photo of the slain president’s 3-year-old son saluting his father’s coffin, interlocked discussions of ancient Roman bas-relief sculpture, neoclassical painting, Jackie Kennedy’s choreographing of her husband’s state funeral, Leonard Bernstein’s memorial performance of Mahler’s Second Symphony, and the Dionysian and Oedipal energies unleashed in the decade following that one son’s deferential salute to his father. In each of the chapters, a famous photograph was the familiar tune or home referent from which discussion rippled outward and to which it repeatedly returned.

I have described the procedure to students in the following way. Start with a visual artifact that attracts your attention. Study it from every possible angle. Break it down into elements of form and content and, without unduly privileging one over the other, figure out how they might be related. Try with close and repeated observation, free association, and scholarly research to understand the properties and significations of each element or strand of elements that has caught your attention. Finally, reassemble them in a coherent whole, but without suppressing ambiguities, paradoxes, or unresolved inner contradictions in a misguided effort to make your construction too coherent, too whole.

Besides pondering what’s in the image, consider what’s missing, and put that in your account as well. My current research on the visual culture of World War I takes absence as its primary consideration. War images “work,” that is, succeed in instilling values deemed culturally appropriate in wartime, as much, if not more, by what they screen from sight as by what they show. For example, military recruitment posters, circa 1917, portray handsome, healthy, and happy doughboys parading off to war with Old Glory fluttering overhead and sunlight glinting off bayonet blades (Figure 27.1). These posters scrupulously avoid any hint of the murder, mayhem, and disillusionment that would follow. It’s the job of the cultural analyst to detect and bring forward this missing dimension, the historical reality that the idealizing image elides. One way to do this is through historical research into the actualities of the war for the millions of American
men who served on the Western Front. Another is by looking around at analogous art and literature from the period and its aftermath, such as the anti-war fiction of Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos and the dissident prose essays of Randolph Bourne. But keep referring back to the image, scrutinizing it again and again, and keep reporting on what you see. What you see will change, and so will you.

While my students usually write about images that positively attract them, negative attraction can also be productive. I wrote about the popular mid-nineteenth-century
sentimental artist Lilly Martin Spencer because her honey-glazed home scenes made me queasy (Figure 27.2). I wondered if this was because: (1) I was living in a cynical, post-sentimental era, (2) as a man I was insensitive to matters of concern within this woman’s work, or (3) the work really was dreck and could not be redeemed in aesthetic terms.

To sort these matters out, I immersed myself in female-authored sentimental fiction, poetry, and polemics from Spencer’s era, while also reading recent historical scholarship on the antebellum period and feminist literary theory pertaining to sentimental culture. Microfilm of Spencer’s unpublished correspondence with her mother revealed an impassioned dialogue about women’s rights. The mother, a French immigrant and feminist socialist who lived in a utopian farm community in Ohio, urged her daughter to become politically engaged. The daughter, Spencer, responded that she was too busy as an artist and housewife to have time for politics. The resulting
chapter in *Picturing a Nation* was a patchwork quilt (to invoke a “minor” art or craft normally associated with women) that allowed me to stitch together into a relatively unified entity diverse bits and pieces of reading, seeing, and thinking. I came to appreciate Spencer’s art on aesthetic grounds, especially as it became clear that its awkward or infelicitous passages, of which there were many, materially embodied the difficulties that she and other women faced in that culture as they struggled to reconcile their hunger for autonomy and respect with their yearning for fulfillment as wives and mothers.

Let us say, then, that as an art historian you try to unpeel several layers of motivation: that of the artist (whose motivations are inevitably multiple and never entirely self-known), her critics, her patrons and admirers, and her latter-day viewers. What is it, do you suppose, they were looking for when looking at her art? Try also to grasp the motivations of the art historian (be it yourself or someone else) who, for whatever reasons, has chosen to write about her. Art history that attends to multiple motivations in this way can perhaps best be described as collage. It juxtaposes materials of different weight, color, and density, positioning them beside or on top of one another. It is decoupage, or cutting and pasting, and the trick is to make it feel fresh and clear, rather than jumbled and confusing. In cinematic terms, it is a form of montage, in which the art historian wipes, fades, or jump-cuts from one topic to another or slowly blends them together by means of superimposition, as in a lap dissolve.

My hope is that one or more of these angles will draw the reader in for the ride.

In my youth I did a lot of hitchhiking, and sometimes when I am writing, that experience comes to mind. The hitchhiking metaphor works for me in two ways. In its completed form, the essay or book chapter that I have written should be a vehicle offering you, the reader, a lift, as the Brits say, that ultimately gets you to a desirable destination, such as a more complex understanding of a work of art in relation to its time, but with unexpected detours, or digressions, along the way. If, once we’ve started, you don’t like my company, that’s fine; you are not my prisoner. I will willingly stop and let you out, no hard feelings. My goal, though, is to have your companionship for the whole drive without talking your head off like a garrulous sales rep who has been on the road too long. Ideally, you’ll do your bit to carry on the conversation. The hitchhiking concept also pertains to the writing phase, when I flag down a passing idea and hop in, anticipating that it will take me for a safe and eventful journey rather than do me harm or leave me stranded in the middle of nowhere. False starts and ill-advised meanderings don’t usually make the final collage, however. Just because I got stuck doesn’t mean you should, too.

Here’s an example of authorial thumbing. When I was writing about the often reproduced photograph of the Kennedys and their hosts, Governor and Mrs. John Connolly, motoring through the streets of Dallas in a massive, open-air Secret Service limousine, I was reminded of the opening credits of a TV series I had enjoyed as a child, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which portrayed the fictional Clampett family entering Beverly Hills triumphantly in an antiquated flatbed truck (Figures 27.3 and 27.4). At the time Kennedy was killed, the situation comedy was the most popular program on television, so I decided to hitch a ride with it and see where it took me. This digression involved watching several episodes of the show on an old-fashioned editing machine in the Library of Congress. That was fun, for sure, but also instructive, as it led me to think about the anti-poverty initiatives of the Kennedy and Johnson eras, which, I learned, were inspired by Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* (1962),
a pioneering work of sociology that exposed the depths of poverty in a proudly prosperous nation that kept its poor hidden from sight.

I wouldn’t have gotten onto this topic had the entry-into-Dallas photo not reminded me of the TV show opening, which in turn referenced the broken-down Ford truck in which Steinbeck’s Joad family crossed America in the 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and John Ford’s film adaptation in 1940. That’s what I mean by hitching a ride from one idea or cultural reference point to another. I would also think of what I was doing as collage-making, in that I was joining together pieces of culture—the assassination, the sitcom, the social protest novel, etc.—that normally reside in separate conceptual boxes.

The Clampetts were nouveau riche millionaires who made their money in oil and, despite their common-folk instincts, consumed wealth as conspicuously as any of their Beverly Hills neighbors. Years after I thought I was finished with JFK and had no desire (note that crucial word) to write on the topic again, I received an offer too intriguing to refuse (desire rekindled). It involved Texas oil millionaires and the conspicuous consumption of modern art. Before arriving in Dallas on the morning of November 22, 1963, the Kennedys had spent the night in nearby Fort Worth at the Hotel Texas, where a special exhibition of modern art from local private collections

**Figure 27.3** President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy smile at the crowds lining their motorcade route in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963. Minutes later the president was assassinated as his car passed through Dealey Plaza. Photo: Walt Cisco. 
*Source:* © Bettmann / Corbis.
had been hung in their suite of rooms. Those sixteen works were to be reassembled for a fiftieth-anniversary exhibition in Dallas, and I agreed to write an essay for the catalogue. I began my research with a trip to Texas to view the works in question, but I also, as is my habit, tried to find out through library research what political and social issues were in the air at the time of the Kennedy visit and to track down the entertainment and consumption patterns of Dallas and Fort Worth inhabitants in the early 1960s in general and November 1963 in particular.

A dim memory of a movie trailer I had seen as a child, at around the time Kennedy was assassinated, led me to an obscure romantic comedy called *The Wheeler Dealers*, which, I happily discovered, opened nationwide seven days before the Kennedys came to Fort Worth. It’s a story of Texas oil millionaires who scoop up modern art on a buying spree in New York in order to diversify their portfolios, but also to “bring culture” to a part of the country generally thought averse to it. The movie gave legs
to my own speculation, which was that the overnight exhibition at the Hotel Texas fulfilled at least three functions: to show hospitality to weary travelers, to show off cultural competency on the part of the collectors, and to put Fort Worth a notch ahead of its rival sister city, Dallas, where the president was headed next. I might have come to the same conclusion without the help of The Wheeler Dealers, and, in itself, the movie doesn’t prove anything, but it does provide a colorful and satirical perspective on the conjunction of art, money, and petroleum in early 1960s America. I called the piece “Oil on Canvas.”\footnote{11}

As my examples indicate, I often employ a “speak, memory” (to borrow from Nabokov) approach to art history: take time to see what unbidden memories the subject under analysis stirs in you and pay attention to these as potential leads, or rides, that can help you grasp how its original viewers, and later ones, responded to it. Although it would be ahistorical and wrong to presume that our reactions today perfectly conform to those of viewers who lived in a previous era, it’s equally wrong to assume no match or resonance whatsoever. I therefore advocate a judicious use of memory, fantasy, and free association when investigating art and popular culture from the past. In other words, art historians would do well to turn their gaze inward as well as outward in their effort to make sense of—and, in a physical, corporeal, embodied way, \textit{sense}—the past.

I recently put this principle to work in a piece on Howard Pyle, a late nineteenth-century artist and teacher known as the father of American illustration, who, in addition to depicting Robin Hood and his men and King Arthur and his knights, specialized in pictures of eighteenth-century pirates. When invited to write a catalogue essay on Pyle and the pirates of the silver screen, I accepted because I had thrilled to his adventure tales and illustrations as a boy and wanted to figure out why. I refamiliarized myself with his illustrations, slogged as best I could through the verbose texts they accompanied, and screened as many Pyle-inspired pirate films as I could find.\footnote{12}

I saw now what I couldn’t have seen as a child: that the Gilded Age artist-illustrator allegorized the Social Darwinist ethos of his era when he depicted bloodthirsty buccaneers dueling on the sand for leadership of outlaw bands, pistol-wielding pirate captains ensuring the eternal silence of proletarian crew members whom they have commanded to bury secret treasure, and marooned sailors stranded on desert isles with not another soul in the vast, indifferent universe available to give them comfort or aid (Figure 27.5). Pyle’s pirate pictures addressed other matters of the time as well, including intellectual property theft (“piracy”), which concerned him professionally, and his country’s fledgling involvement in imperialist expansion (cf. the Spanish–American War), which concerned him politically.

One night when I was about 12 or 13, the 1935 pirate film \textit{Captain Blood}, which bears the clear imprint of Pyle, who had died decades earlier, appeared on TV. My father told me it had been his favorite movie when he was a boy, and so it became mine. Looking back decades later, I see how the movie might have meant one thing to viewers in the Great Depression, such as my dad, and another to young viewers, such as me, during a period of national prosperity. A tale of wealth-circulation on global trade routes and an allegory of good leadership, as embodied by Errol Flynn, versus bad leadership, as embodied by Basil Rathbone, the movie would have had one sort of meaning during the build-up to World War II and another, different meaning at the height of the Cold War. Flynn and his pirates were essentially democratic,
freedom-loving good guys who plundered the ill-gotten gains of despot’s and redistributed them equitably. A few years later, at the turbulent close of the 1960s, as my filial devotion turned into filial defiance, I still regarded Captain Blood as one of my favorite movies. Only now I tended to view long-haired Flynn and his scruffy men as rebellious hippies with swords or as the seventeenth-century equivalent of rock-and-rollers with guitars.

Pasting together differing moments in time, superimposing one on top of another, is what I think of as temporal or vertical collage. Going back in time is not unusual in art history; indeed, it’s standard in the discipline to refer to previous periods that influenced the art or artists under consideration. Nor is going forward in time unusual, either, particularly not when the purpose is to trace an art object’s reception through successive generations. What I have in mind, though, is more recursive, nonlinear, and multidirectional in time, combining, as it were, public history with glimpses from the art historian’s personal history, as appropriate to the larger task of shedding light on the work and its manifold meanings. It can also mean pulling together art and popular culture from completely separate time periods.

In Shooting Kennedy, for example, I deliberately juxtaposed instances of art and popular culture from the 1950s and 1960s with examples drawn from a wide array of earlier decades and centuries. In writing that way, I kept in mind Walter Benjamin’s injunction to “make the continuum of history explode,” that is, disrupt the comforting illusion of a neat and orderly flow of history from one stage to another. In other vertical or trans-era collages, I have tried to find a way of writing about an artist’s

Figure 27.5 Howard Pyle, Marooned, 1909, oil on canvas, 101.6 × 152.4 cm. Delaware Art Museum. Source: Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, USA / Museum Purchase / Bridgeman Images.
“then” (the Gilded Age, for example) that interactively links it to series of subsequent “now” moments (the Great Depression, the early 1960s, the late 1960s, today), most of them collectively experienced, but some of them more specific to me, and to do so in a manner that makes the seams or paste-lines visible to the reader, rather than neatly invisible.

A compatible alternative to temporal (or, if you will, diachronic) collage might be called lateral, horizontal, or spatial (that is, synchronic) collage. It juxtaposes works of art high and low—jumping the fence that separates these binary designations is itself an act of collage—with seemingly unrelated social phenomena that occurred at the same moment in history, thus charting unseen or previously unnoticed affiliations. (Let me digress: parentheses, commas, colons, semicolons, and dashes, in plentiful supply here, are to the collage-making art historian what staples, nails, and tacks are to a roofer; they make joins.) The social history of art intrinsically produces this sort of cross-cultural or cross-genre collage, inasmuch as it places art movements or oeuvres or individual works of art side by side with what the historian takes to be relevant and concurrent historical and cultural happenings.

Most social historians of art, however, would probably not characterize their efforts as a form of collage, since the reigning art-historical paradigm insists on consistency of theme, evidence, and expository discourse; the non-scientific, non-systematic eclecticism of Lévi-Strauss’s bricoleur is anathematic to a discipline that has long struggled to prove its legitimacy and claim its place at the academic table. Indeed, art history as collage has no single, unadulterated purpose or goal. Unlike the reproachful dinner companion I mentioned above, I am not solely, or even chiefly, interested in an artist’s intentions, but rather in the broader structure of feeling that gave rise to those and other intentions. I’m more inclined to see the artist, however much he or she resisted the broader culture, as an outcropping of that culture, a manifestation or symptom of its overarching conditions. What old-fashioned art history has in common with much of what is now called “modernist” art history, it seems to me, is an overinvestment in the artist as genius, as The One who stands apart from the mediocrity and mass-produced conformity of his or her time. Despite all the canonical poststructuralist utterances about the death of the author, the cult of the artist remains surprisingly entrenched.

In the early 1960s Raymond Williams, a British literary historian, used the term “structure of feeling” to refer to the ineffable, hard-to-pin-down, but nonetheless mutually influential ways of thinking, seeing, and understanding that were shared by members of a generation. To uncover a past structure of feeling, Williams writes, it is necessary “to select certain activities for emphasis, and it is entirely reasonable to trace particular lines of development in temporary isolation. But the history of a culture, slowly built up from such particular work, can only be written when the active relations are restored, and the activities”—be they art and literature or history and politics—“seen in genuine parity.”14 The collage-style approach to art history I have been describing attempts to uncover a structure of feeling by pointing to multiple cultural, political, and personal “activities” that took place in that earlier period. It searches for lost or subterranean connections between them, few of which are instantly apparent to us now, nor perhaps were they so to inhabitants of the time.

To be sure, if cultural connections are immediately apparent, they’re probably illusory as well. We’re given to “epistemic closure,” which means that we unthinkingly draw our evidence from a winnowed, preselected pool. As human beings, we are
susceptible to what psychologists call “confirmation bias,” the tendency to sit up and take notice of that which validates our pre-existing beliefs and to discount or filter out everything else that does not. The collage approach cannot overcome this failing any more than self-reflexivity can, but it does resist it by multiplying the number of pools from which evidence is drawn. Metaphors, similes, and analogies are at the theoretical core of my approach to art history, because they involve drawing connections between things normally thought to be unalike. A work of art bears important, if not immediately recognizable, congruencies with other works of art from its own time period and earlier; with other types of cultural expression, such as music, literature, and film; and with social energies that circulate in non-aesthetic realms, such as politics and private life. The social function of art, I believe, is to generate metaphors or analogies that individual users can—and will—apply to essential aspects of their lives. Drawing these out requires playful, creative thinking, which makes the work of interpretation both challenging and fun.

That said, I sometimes have to caution myself not to go overboard (however I might define for myself that excess) in an effort to reinterpret a work of art or reflexively contradict received wisdom about an artist or historical period. As noted earlier, I came of age intellectually in the glory days of poststructuralism, when a premium was placed on an author’s ability to reverse, double-reverse, or triple-reverse a standard reading of a literary or artistic text. Eventually, I came to think of this as predictable unpredictability, and I became less enchanted with the practice of what I called “twisty art history.” And yet it’s still important for me to be surprised by my material, which is perhaps what most scholarly researchers live for, and to impart that thrill to my readers. On the page, as in the classroom, I hope to create a satisfying frisson or, better yet, series of them—but not in a way that might compromise or distort what my research and ruminations have led me to believe about the material I have examined.

That belief, I should add, is always tentative. No one, including the artists in question, can know for sure what they unconsciously meant by their art or how their contemporaries unconsciously perceived it and folded it into the narratives of their lives. As Socrates wryly noted, the only thing we can be certain of is our ignorance. The best we can hope for in striving to uncover the past is to make a plausible case or paint a reasonable picture, leaving certitude aside.

I will conclude this rumination on method by saying a few words about the four or five metaphors I have used to structure it. The first of these is digression. I’m interested in art-historical writing that does not always go directly to its point but instead circles around its subject or glances off at angles (to use other figures of speech). The second metaphor is jazz. Like jazz, good art-historical writing can be spontaneous and improvisational, although it should be noted that improvisation and risk-taking require a great deal of preparation and hard work. Coltrane was not born with a saxophone between his lips; he paid his dues, and so must we. More indirectly, “My Favorite Things” has been a metaphor, too, in that I try in all my writing, this piece included, to speak of things I care about personally and find ways of using them to illustrate my points.

Hitchhiking is a metaphor for moving from one idea or topic or discourse level to another in what can sometimes appear to be a random and haphazard manner. It’s meaningful to me in another way as well. One of the reasons I hitchhiked so much in my teens and twenties, often at a woeful cost of time and comfort, was because it brought me into direct contact with all kinds of people I would not otherwise have
met; it pushed me out of my white, middle-class, college-oriented Midwestern habitat and helped me view the world through other eyes. I favor art-historical research and writing that once again allow me to multiply the windows or windshields through which I see the world.

Finally, **collage**, the jamming together of dissimilar elements. Everyday life is a rapid succession of collages, with image, music, and text from a multitude of sources, electronic and otherwise, crashing into and over us throughout the day, rarely in smoothly blended configurations; our attention is cut up into ill-assorted pieces, which we struggle to paste together in a functional manner. Society itself is a collage—as opposed, say, to a tapestry—of cooperating or competing identity groups characterized by race, income, nationality, sexuality, and political viewpoint. Again, the juxtapositions are often jarring. An approach to art history that’s modeled on the concept of collage certainly won’t resolve these deep-seated tensions. But it can, perhaps, help us wend our way through them.

This looks like a good place to stop the car. Before getting out, I call your attention to the typographical beauty and existential meaning of the three little dots that follow, footsteps into a fresh field of snow …

**Acknowledgments**

This collage took shape, piece by piece, through a series of face-to-face encounters, in roughly this order, with Richard Leppert, Michael Gaudio, Gus Lubin, Morna O’Neill, Jay Curley, Angela Miller, Alex Nemerov, Martin Berger, Subhashini Kaligotla, Stephen Whitman, Elaine Yau, Fareed Ben-Youssef, and, first and last, Libby Lubin. Thanks also to David Steinberg for his (not in person) fine-grained critique and to my astute, insistent, and encouraging editors, especially Jennifer Greenhill, who made it fun to re-collage the essay when I thought I’d already hung up my scissors and put away my paste. Some of the pertinent pieces of writing recommended by these friends and colleagues include Adorno, 1958;Dimock, 1990 and 2006; Mitchell, 2002; Nochlin, 1992; and Pandey, 1992.

**Notes**

1 Lévi-Strauss, 1966.
2 Greenblatt, 2011.
5 See, e.g., Jameson, 1972, p. xiii: “It can be admitted that [critical theory] does not conform to the canons of clear and fluid journalistic writing taught in the schools. But what if those ideals of clarity and simplicity have come to serve a very different ideological purpose, in our present context, from the one Descartes had in mind? What if, in this period of the overproduction of printed matter and the proliferation of methods of quick reading, they were intended to speed the reader across a sentence in such a way that he can salute a readymade idea effortlessly in passing, without suspecting that real thought demands a descent into the materiality of language and a consent to time itself in the form of the sentence?”

Salinger, 1951, p. 238. See Kleist (1805/06) for an earlier homage to digressive thinking and speaking—that is, figuring out what you have to say in the process of saying it: “I have only to begin boldly and the mind, obliged to find an end for this beginning, transforms my confused concept as I speak into thoughts that are perfectly clear. … I interpose inarticulate sounds, draw out the connecting words, possibly even use an apposition when required and employ other tricks which will prolong my speech in order to gain sufficient time for the fabrication of my idea in the workshop of reason” (p. 42).


Lubin, 2011a.

Lubin, 2013.

Lubin, 2011b.


Williams, 1961, p. 46.


References


Part IV

Art and Public Culture
Material Religion in Early America
Louis P. Nelson

St. Michael’s Church, erected in Charleston, South Carolina, in the 1750s, has long been celebrated as an icon of early American architectural history (Figure 28.1). Making clear visual reference to James Gibbs’s St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, St. Michael’s is frequently enlisted to illustrate the derivative nature of American colonial architecture. The significance of colonial American architecture should not be reduced, though, to superficial analysis blind to the building’s primary function: religion. Understood contextually, St. Michael’s architecture demonstrates that Anglicans enlisted the material world to navigate transformations of religious understanding. Put simply, St. Michael’s is material religion.

To understand the implications of these changes we need to begin not in the church but in the churchyard. Not long after the death of her 19-year-old son Benjamin on January 17, 1718, Sarah Seabrook sent for a stone to mark his grave near their church in the South Carolina plantation parish of St. Paul’s (Figure 28.2). Standing little more than 14 inches tall, the stone followed the formulaic geometry of most permanent markers in the colony. A square tablet relays Benjamin’s vital information under a semicircular tympanum carved with a winged head. The rectilinear shape of the tablet reinforced the popular association of the square and the number four with things mortal or temporal: the early modern body had four humors (blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy); the earth had four cardinal directions and four elements (fire, air, water, and soil); land was quantified by the acre; and the year had four seasons. Whereas the square tablet reported the events of Benjamin’s mortal life, the circular tympanum presented the hope in things unseen. Like most early modern Protestants, the Seabrooks viewed heaven in entirely theocentric terms. Since heaven was about God’s perfection, his eternity, and his immutable nature, the circle became its obvious geometric signifier. The winged head filling the tympanum was not an angel, but Benjamin’s immortal soul rising from his body and ascending toward the cope of heaven, where the firmament
separates to invite his passage. Fusing the square with the circle, Benjamin Seabrook’s marker signified a door—“death’s door” to use a contemporary expression—a liminal threshold engaging two spaces or spheres of existence.

As Sarah Seabrook was awaiting the arrival of the gravestone to mark her son’s burial in remote St. Paul’s Parish, Anglicans in the colonial capital of Charleston were in the midst of building the grand city church of St. Philip’s (1711–23). In the interior of St. Philip’s a tall arcade on either side of the nave carried a soaring, barrel-vaulted ceiling, mirroring the arch-over-square formula of contemporary headstones (Figure 28.3). Just as the arched tympanum was ubiquitous on Anglican headstones, so too the barrel vault was typical of their church interiors. Just as the square and circle of the gravestone signified a temporal gate, the rectilinear nave

Figure 28.1 St. Michael’s Church, Charleston, South Carolina, 1752–61. Photo by author.
Figure 28.2  Benjamin Seabrook gravestone, ca. 1720, former St. Paul’s churchyard, South Carolina. Photo by author.

Figure 28.3  John Blake White, interior of St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina, 1835. Source: Provided by St. Philip’s Church.
and the barrel-vaulted ceiling of the church constructed a space where the thin veil separating earth from heaven was parted, a space where—like the threshold of death—mortals met the divine. The geometric continuities between arched tympana and barrel-vaulted ceilings evince a shared theology, a conscious extension of the gravestone’s two-dimensional symbolic liminality between time and eternity, earth and heaven, and the mortal and the divine to the very real three-dimensional space of the church. For Anglicans, the material world was a lens onto the invisible mysteries of God.

Religious meaning pervaded even the most mundane materiality. Early eighteenth-century Anglicans in South Carolina—and elsewhere in the British world—commonly celebrated their church buildings as “regular.”7 Manifestations of such regularity included centralized doors with evenly spaced flanking windows and marches of windows or columns disposed in consistent iterations. The church at St. James, Goose Creek, begun in 1714, for example, is a compact rectangular box with a centrally placed door flanked by evenly spaced arch-topped windows on each of the long sides; the narrower end has only two windows, one on each side of the central door (Figure 28.4). Regularity was not a natural state; it implied a consistency of form or action that was the result of submission to a superior rule. In the eighteenth century, the word regular still retained connotations derived from its ancient association with monastic orders; in this understanding a regular was a person “subject to, or bound by, a religious rule.”8 Shades of this definition are apparent in the request by the vestry of St. Helena’s Parish for a minister with “a studious turn and regular deportment.”9 Similarly, one South Carolina minister, the Reverend Levi Durand, was pleased with his “very regular congregation.”10

Figure 28.4  Exterior of St. James, Goose Creek Church, Goose Creek, South Carolina, begun 1714. Photo by author.
Regulating the passions played a critical role in governing the “moral sense.” Late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theories of faculty psychology taught that personal actions were hierarchically organized according to “faculties.” ¹¹ Mechanical responses, over which there was no conscious control, comprised the lowest of actions. Emotional impulses—the passions—were described as animal powers and associated with the natural, the flesh. Moral virtues, among the highest faculties, found their origins in the divine. Rational religious thought—thought most closely associated with the divine nature—reigned over the passions. Eliza Lucas Pinckney, a prominent South Carolina Anglican diarist, demonstrated her knowledge of faculty psychology when she admonished her younger brother to “keep the sacred page always in view” and to “remember that the greatest conquest is over your own irregular passions.”¹²

The Anglican liturgy was a regimen designed to instill regularity.¹³ The late seventeenth-century Anglican divine Bishop Beveridge summarized its efficacy:

Whatsoever good things we hear only once, or now and then, though perhaps upon hearing them, they may swim for a while in our brains, yet seldom do they sink down to our hearts, so as to move and sway the affections, as it is necessary they should do in order to our being edified by them; whereas by a set form of public devotions rightly composed, we are continually put in mind of all things necessary for us to know or do, so that it is always done by the same words and expressions, which by their constant use, will imprint the things themselves so firmly.¹⁴

Beveridge’s concern was for a consistency that did not linger in the mind but burrowed deeper into the person’s affections, edifying or reshaping the moral sense. Defenders of the liturgy believed that repetition of holy words depended on broader assumptions about the power of mathematics to order, to regulate, thereby inculcating virtue in ordinary believers.¹⁵ Francis Bacon, for example, had argued that regularity in mathematics had the capacity to “fixe” the “wandering” mind.¹⁶ The power of the liturgy to edify the soul was understood by South Carolina’s Robert Smith when he argued that God was best worshiped “when men have a good form of sound words, and a decent orderly way of addressing themselves to Almighty God; where worship is grave, solemn, and intelligible.” Charles Woodmason, another South Carolina Anglican minister, described the Anglican sacraments as best “perform’d with great Decency & Order.”¹⁷ Put into action, the repeated prayers and lines of psalmody performed in the liturgy commingled with the mathematical consistency of architectural form in “regular” or “regulated” Anglican churches. The mathematical character of regularity and the reformational power of order extended to architecture. It was no accident that Levi Durand described “a very neat and well finished chapel” in his parish of St. John’s, Berkeley, wherein “assembles a regular and devout congregation.”¹⁸ Just as the term “upright” simultaneously implicated one’s posture and moral stature, Anglicans conflated material and moral regularity.¹⁹ The exacting proportions of windows and the repetition of the Gloria Patri conjoined architecture and liturgy to see irregular passions submit to regular virtues.

In addition to architecture and liturgy, regularity defined Anglican musical practice. The most common form of music in very early Anglican liturgy was the practice of lining out the psalms.²⁰ In this mode of church music the parish clerk read or sung a line of the psalm and the congregation followed, singing the same line to one of a handful of popular tunes. These tunes had a simple, declamatory character with
repetitive rhythms and one note per syllable. In the opening decades of the eighteenth century, however, lining out the psalms was slowly replaced by “regular singing,” in which both psalms and anthems were sung from printed musical compositions. The new repertoire of music was usually organized in three or four parts and printed together with the words, producing much more sophisticated, aesthetically rich, musical arrangements. The “regularity” of this music depended on new rules for performance that imposed musical symmetry, metric discipline, and a harmonic balance among vocal parts, introducing musical rule and order. Echoing efficacious repetition within the liturgy and the visual regularity of architecture, the moral reformation implied in this particular musical practice depended on the long-standing Pythagorean understanding that music had the capacity to “realign the arithmetic coordinates of the self.”

By the opening of the eighteenth century, Anglican church architecture enlisted sacred geometries to manifest the divine in space and time. And in this space, the irregular passions of human nature were reshaped as regularity in architecture, liturgy, and music became both an agent and evidence of Christian moral refinement.

Signification of the divine through sacred geometries and liturgical, musical, and material regulation was the prevailing mode of material religion through the first half of the eighteenth century. Yet St. Michael’s abandoned these forms (Figure 28.5). In the

Figure 28.5  Interior of St Michael’s Church, Charleston, South Carolina, 1752–61. Photo: Charles N. Bayliss, 1978, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.
early eighteenth century, barrel-vaulted ceilings reflected the continuing popularity of a Ptolemaic mapping of the cosmos, where heavenly bodies and their orbits were contained in concentric spheres surrounding the Earth. Seemingly ignorant of Copernicus’s observations, for example, the definition for heaven in editions of the Dictionary of Arts and Science published into the 1740s described it as an “azure transparent orb.”22 Through this lens, the circular tympanum of the gravestone and the barrel vault of the church readily symbolized a conflated scientific and theological heaven. Yet over the course of the eighteenth century, the empiricism central to the work of Descartes, Copernicus, and Galileo slowly reshaped popular perceptions of everyday life.23 The Cartesian or Newtonian view of the universe, in which the Earth was understood to be just one of many independent objects suspended in the vastness of space, slowly replaced the Ptolemaic framework which positioned it at the center of a finite universe, orbited by all celestial bodies. By contrast to the earlier definition, a 1759 edition of a similar dictionary describes heaven as “the expanse of the firmament … extending every way to an immense distance.”24 As a result of these changes in scientific understanding, the sphere-heaven sign so important to the visual formation of early eighteenth-century Anglicanism lost its cultural currency.

But St. Michael’s was not without its own material theologies. As they loosed their grip on the supernatural, Anglicans invested their buildings with new visual qualities that had the power to reshape the soul. Rather than being celebrated as regular, a new term emerged to describe new churches: beautiful. The new church in Prince William’s Parish (ca. 1766) was described soon after its completion as “beautiful, elegant, and well ornamented.”25 Unlike earlier buildings, Prince William’s Church took the form of an ancient Roman temple with a projecting portico of four columns supporting a pediment and simple gable roof that spanned the whole depth of the building. This new building was far more sophisticated than the simpler, if regular, boxes of an earlier generation. In the second half of the eighteenth century, beauty supplanted regularity as the critical theological frame for Anglican architecture.

Like regularity, beauty was deeply theological. Engaging an ancient philosophical tradition, later eighteenth-century Anglicans understood earthly beauty to be a shadow of its divine original. Such Neoplatonic philosophies were part and parcel of the theological moderation called Latitudinarianism by contemporaries. Latitudinarian theologians focused their preaching and writing on the moral state of the individual soul rather than doctrinal matters, questions of liturgy, or ecclesial structures. By mid-century, Latitudinarianism held broad sway over popular Anglican belief.26 The well-respected minister of St. Philip’s Church in Charleston, for example, wrote an entire sermon in the 1760s dedicated to contrasting the “Beauty of Holiness and the Deformity of Sin.” This Anglican theological understanding aligning holiness with beauty derived from broader philosophical thought of the period. In the late seventeenth century, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, offered “the analogy between the perception of external beauty by the senses of sight and hearing, and the perception of moral beauty by the moral sense.” Similarly, Francis Hutcheson, a premier philosopher of aesthetics in eighteenth-century Britain, argued that beauty directed the viewer to consider the Godhead. Beauty had the capacity to reveal the divine and reform the soul.27

Reflecting a deep concern for the power of aesthetics, this Neoplatonic tradition had implications not only for Anglican architecture, but also for musical performance.28 The increasing interest in beauty found expression in “beautiful” organ accompaniment to
“regular” church music. Whereas organs were a rarity in the seventeenth century throughout the Anglican world, they were becoming increasingly common by the middle of the eighteenth century. In 1768, St. Michael’s Church paid over £500 to purchase a Johann Snetzler organ, which was at the time one of the largest organs in British America. But beautiful music was not confined to church interiors. In 1762, the vestry of St. Michael’s purchased a peal of eight bells outfitted for the musical art of change-ringing. Complementing the musical depth offered by the organ, the peal installed in St. Michael’s elevated the solitary tone of a single bell to a musical melody that resonated throughout the city every quarter-hour, with more complex arrangements using all eight bells on Sundays or other special occasions. Together with its new organ, St. Michael’s introduced the beauty of music to the soundscape of early Charleston.

Demonstrating the spiritual efficacy of beautiful music was the sermon-writing practice of Richard Clarke, minister of St. Philips’s from 1755 to 1759. A testimony written by the vestry on behalf of Clarke described him as a man of “gravity, diligence, and fidelity.” They claimed “he was more known as [a] theologian beyond the limits of America than any other inhabitant of Carolina.” Furthermore, he was “admired as a preacher both in Charles-town and London. … When he preached the Church was crowded, and the effects of it were visible in the reformed lives of many of his hearers.” The vestry attributed the power of his sermons to the fact that they were “often composed under the impressions of Music.” Clarke’s vestry understood that music was an agent used by the Holy Spirit to shape his sermons much in the same way that Anglicans believed beauty in architecture begat holiness.

This new emphasis on the beauty of music had practical implications for church interiors. Such concerns were limited when most congregations were simply lining out the psalms. Even Christopher Wren, architect of fifty new Anglican churches after the Great Fire of London, proclaimed that the central functional responsibility of an Anglican church was that all might be able to see and hear the preacher. He made no comment on the accommodation of music. Such accommodations were just then emerging in secular venues. As early as 1676, Thomas Mace published the design for an octagonal music room; “A Good Room will make [Instruments] seem Better,” Mace argued, “and a Bad Room, Worse.” Mace argued that a room best suited musical performance when it had an “Arch’d Seiling … Plain, and Very Smooth” with an open interior and walls free from ornamental work so that “Sound has Its Free, and Un-interrupted Passage” (Figure 28.6). Building on such knowledge, eighteenth-century church builders recognized that architecture facilitated or deadened sound quality and they designed their buildings accordingly. It is very much possible that the builders of St. Michael’s knew that its own coved, tray ceiling rising over an uninterrupted interior would have diminished musical reverberation. Whereas the barrel vault had posed no problems when congregations were lining out the psalms, the introduction of an organ had implications for musical beauty. The barrel-vaulted ceiling of St. Philip’s channeled sound from the west-end organ down the length of the nave, certainly creating a disruptive echo when it struck the chancel wall. The new design for a tray ceiling installed by the builders of St. Michael’s transformed the Anglican church interior into a space dedicated to aural beauty.

If the church and its architecture, music, and liturgy were designed to refine the moral sense and to instill the beauty of holiness, the churchyard was evidence of those changes. Unlike the simple communication of vital information so typical of
earlier headstones, epitaphs, headstone iconography, and the profiles of later eighteenth-century headstones highlight the importance of beauty in the lives of Anglicans. In 1765, for example, Martha Chalmers’s children described her as “truly religious and patiently submissive … A most Affectionate wife and Mother and so eminently desirous and frugal in her family that in these respects she could be excelled by none. Ever sincere in her Friendship, Benevolent to all and Charitable to the Poor” (emphasis in original). John Mackenzie was described on his 1770 stone
as “agreeable … a most affectionate and tender husband, A humane master, of a soul sincere … and a temper remarkably frank.” Another significant change in headstones lay in the abandonment of the simple contrast between the temporal square tablet and the eternal arch-topped tympanum so critical to the visual culture of early eighteenth-century Anglicanism. Beginning in the 1750s, an increasing number of headstones employed complex classical profiles including C-shaped cavettos or S-shaped ogees instead of the simple arched profile used since the opening decades of the century (Figure 28.7). Nearly simultaneous with the disappearance of the barrel-vaulted ceiling, this change further signals the collapse of the temporal/celestial mapping of the cosmos. But as detailed portraits in word and image, these headstones constructed specific representations of the deceased, beautiful representations suited for emulation by those left behind.

The very different cultural work accomplished by these new headstones also created new meanings for the churchyards they occupied. Before mid-century, churchyards were often unkempt and open to livestock and there is little evidence for the practice of visiting the graves of deceased loved ones. Referring to her late husband, Eliza Pinckney wrote in 1760, “Sacred be his ashes and his memory.” Pinckney’s extension of sanctity to his physical remains helps us to understand the changing cultural work performed by the churchyard, now seen as a space sanctified by the congregation’s collective virtue. An increased concern for the appearance of the churchyard and the attention paid to individual markers during third quarter of the eighteenth century is contemporaneous with marked changes in headstone iconography and text. By the 1790s, “In Memory of ...” was replaced with “Sacred to the Memory of ...,” now clearly communicating the fact that the churchyard had been sanctified by its memorial responsibilities. Clean, accessible, and filled with reminders of Christian virtues, the churchyard was by the end of the century a public space dedicated to individual contemplation and personal reformation.
Eighteenth-century Anglicans in South Carolina enlisted their material world to negotiate rationalism, common-sense philosophy, and other tenets of Enlightenment-responsive Anglicanism. Aware of Newton’s vast universe and empirical arguments against supernatural beings, Anglicans divested themselves of a symbolic geometry that linked the church with the immediacy of the supernatural. Embracing an ancient Platonic connection between the aesthetic and morality, regularity ordered the moral sense while beauty transformed the self as it pointed to greater, more perfect beauty. Architecture joined with liturgy and music as agents of moral refinement. As virtues became the evidence of Christian faith, headstones and church steeples placed less emphasis on God’s immanence and more on the beauty and identity of the individual. As beauty moved to the center of Anglican religious culture, certain places that best exemplified beauty—and by extension best exemplified the holiness of God—were sanctified, set apart from the rest. Whereas early eighteenth-century churches were sacred because they manifested the presence of the divine, later churches and churchyards were sacred because they reflected the nature of God.

But Anglican expressions of beauty had social implications as well. In embracing beauty and reason as evidence of virtue, these churches ordered religious space as they did domestic and civic spaces. South Carolina’s growing black majority was ensnared in the ugliest realities of that place and time. As Dell Upton has suggested, eighteenth-century whites did not incorporate slaves in the social order because they did not believe slaves were “susceptible to the same kinds of display” that elites used to order the social hierarchy.41 Evaluated by these new theologies, black slaves were neither regular nor beautiful. In fact, poor whites who owned no pews competed with slaves for seats in the aisles. In 1773, the church wardens of St. Michael’s informed the vestry that “a number of poor White people had applied to the Clerk, to obtain Leave to carry Chairs &c. to the Church, to be plac’d in the Aisle for seats.” The applicants wished the vestry to remove the many benches owned by house slaves currently in those locations. In response, “The gentlemen of the vestry order’d … benches made, and fix’d in the Aile leading from the No. to the So. Door, and others near the Pulpit solely to be appropriated to the use of the Poor White People who may want seats.” The vestry determined that those benches used by blacks should be moved to “the Gallerys, or under the bellfry and that no Negroes shall be permitted to sitt on the benches so ordered to be made.”42 Thus, the poor whites, who occupied a station above all blacks, were permitted to sit on benches in the aisles while blacks—even favored house slaves—were relegated entirely to the back of the galleries or to the floor of the belfry. Anglican theologies of regularity and beauty extended no grace to those found lacking, those pressed to the margins and eventually out of the church entirely.

If blacks were marginalized, Congregationalists and other Protestants openly critiqued Anglican material theologies, and it is through the dissenting critique of these Anglican forms that we can clearly see the power of Anglican material religion. Penuel Bowen, a Boston Congregationalist visiting Charleston immediately after the revolution, described for a Boston friend the city’s two Anglican churches:

They accord to my material sensations, being efforts and effects of great cost and ingenuity. They appear without and within quite superb and grand … and the organs large and full. One of them especially is finely played and the assemblies of people large and splendid and well behaved too.
Bowen observed his own response to the rich aesthetics of the church and the impact of these aesthetics on the congregation. As he continued, however, he expressed the conflict between the effect these churches had on him and his own material theology, which rejected the agency given to church aesthetics by Anglicans.

I will own to you Sir these things have and always had an agreeable effect on the sensitive, nay the feeling part of Devotion in me. You will lampoon the idea if you please and beat it out of me if you can please. ... I am too much a materialist.43

The “feeling part of Devotion” that had tempted Bowen was a critical aspect of Anglican worship throughout the eighteenth century. As Anglicans sought to refine the passions, liturgy, architecture, and music realized the regularity, beauty, and holiness they sought for themselves.

Anglican churches were often the largest and most expensive buildings in the early American communities, especially in Virginia and the Carolinas, where Anglicanism was predominant. The same was true for meetinghouses in the middle colonies and New England. As eminent American historian Jon Butler has concisely declared, “religion stood at the very center of early American life.”44 Yet until the past few decades scholarship on these and other early American places of worship was limited to descriptive catalogues. Historians of American architecture have held a long-standing predisposition against the study of religion; belief (or “authentic” religion), we assume, is immaterial. The fundamental change in this historiography came with Dell Upton’s monumental and prize-winning *Holy Things and Profane: Anglican Parish Churches in Colonial Virginia*. In this volume Upton deftly examines the design and construction of early Virginia churches but also, and more importantly, situates them in their particular historical context. And, in doing so, he offers a compelling interpretation of the social, political, and religious functions of these buildings: they were a stage for religious but also social and political performance. Upton is more interested in the latter, and in his view these buildings functioned to reify elite hegemony. And he is right—the earlier interpretation of St. Michael’s seating depends on Upton’s methodology. Yet as the shape of St. Michael’s ceiling reveals, an interpretation of the subtleties of form and text means that hegemony is only part of the story. An efflorescence of scholarship on early American churches and meetinghouses offers refreshingly complex readings of these buildings, readings that acknowledge the multivalent and often contradictory meanings of places of worship. This more recent work analyzes these buildings as material religion, a mode of inquiry that falls at the intersection of material culture as it is generally understood by art and architectural historians and lived religion, the subfield within religious studies that examines religion through practices in everyday life.45

Among the most important work in this arena is Gretchen Buggeln’s *Temples of Grace: The Material Transformation of Connecticut’s Churches, 1790–1840*.46 In her telling, the early nineteenth century witnessed the widespread embrace by evangelical Americans of elegant, steepled churches, a building type previously associated with Anglicans and shunned only a generation earlier by Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists. Offering a balanced account of this transformation, Buggeln situates these new buildings in the context of changing ideas about the role of aesthetics, declining political authority, and emerging republicanism. Whereas the latter themes offer appropriate counterpoints, her first explanation centers on the rising power of
sentimentality in evangelical religious culture. In short, her more churchly buildings performed religious work that earlier generations had not asked of architecture. She argues convincingly that in the context of the Second Great Awakening these buildings provided aesthetic and emotional fulfillment in a graceful (theological and aesthetic) setting that was both orthodox and orderly. She even argues that beautiful churches had the power to arouse in the sinner an awareness of God’s grace and beauty. In this way, architecture is evidence of and an agent in belief.

As other scholars have also shown, however, absence can also be a powerful marker of religious belief among early American Christians. Early Quakers advocated a life of “plainness” as evidence of the personal embrace of the Christian truth or Inner Light. By the early eighteenth century, plainness was regularly addressed in meetings, usually as a warning against lack of moderation in attire. Early American Quaker meetinghouses are notoriously plain in form and detail. But as Catherine Lavoie has suggested, this simplicity was also grounded in the Quaker progressive vision of the pursuit of peace and justice. Quaker theology was distinctive in that it strongly asserted personal non-violence and the spiritual equality of the genders. Quakers were also early abolitionists. By extension, the simplicity of Quaker meetinghouses participated in this progressive religious ethic. By the end of the eighteenth century, Quaker meetinghouses always included two equal halves for men and women to hold business meetings. But even more, the careful maintenance, rebuilding, and reuse of materials was the expression of the Quaker conviction that confining oneself to one’s real needs created greater abundance for others. As a result, a plain meetinghouse was both evidence of and an encouragement toward moderation. Just as Anglicans invested their churches with changing material theologies, so too did other early American Christians. Early nineteenth-century Congregationalists practiced the material expression of grace while early Quakers embraced self-conscious material austerity.

Some of the most recent and interesting interpretations of early American religious architecture, however, focus on practices of embodiment. Robert Blair St. George’s magnificent Conversing by Signs: Poetics of Implication in Colonial New England Culture speaks directly to the body, architecture, and the imagination in a chapter on “Embodied Spaces.” Although he writes primarily about houses and not meetinghouses, St. George’s subtle understanding of the Puritan theological mind allows him to read the Puritan house through that lens and ultimately as a space not just occupied by bodies but itself implicated as living, embodied. His dense analysis of sermons, letters, prescriptive literature, and historical events entangles architecture and the theological mind, and heavenly mansions and human houses together take on an architectural pathology. A very different understanding of embodiment emerges from the pages of Samuel Edgerton’s Theaters of Conversion: Religious Architecture and Indian Artisans in Colonial Mexico. The middle chapters of Edgerton’s volume examine the church complex—called a convento—as theater. Catholic churches erected for the purpose of conversion became, he argues, stages of pageant and spectacle. On these stages Native Americans enacted complex practices of cultural continuity and public conversion. And in a similar vein, Arthur McLendon has recently argued that the early meetinghouses of New England’s Shakers participated in the Shakers’ central worship practice: millennial dancing. As McLendon argues, the builders of these meetinghouses recognized the unusual requirements of building a structure with a large open floor that could accommodate and withstand the vigorous racking introduced by rhythmic, congregational dancing. “As they danced in uniform movement
across the wide floor,” McLendon tells us, “both the Shakers and their meeting house embodied belief in a unique rhythmic convergence of the built and human geometries of celestial order.” From theological implication to millennial dancing, religious architecture in early America was most certainly embodied.

Collectively, these scholars demonstrate that religious action or practice often has material dimensions. Central to their work is the claim that architecture opens windows onto aspects of theological formation and religious practice inaccessible through documents alone. This work has breathed new life into the discourse on early American architecture and material culture by enlisting objects as evidence of religion in the everyday. In doing so these scholars have moved past the functionalist view of religion, which understands religion solely in terms of social structure, elite hegemony, or, more generally, as evidence of cultural identity. This body of new work is also much more in line with the arguments of theoreticians of sacred space, ranging from Belden Lane and Jonathan Z. Smith to Lindsay Jones. These scholars remind us that human behavior plays the critical role in assigning sacred meaning to place. Furthermore, they help us to recognize that religious meaning is never stable. Jones argues, for example, that the dense formulations of meaning integral to any religious place are continually disrupted and reconstructed as devotees engage and re-engage. As a result, scholarship on material religion should presume a superabundance and fluidity of meaning—an ever-expanding horizon of interpretation. This new body of scholarship on the religious environments of early America has just begun that journey.

Notes

11. For a concise summary of early modern faculty psychology, see Howe, 1997.
17. “Mr. Woodmason’s Account of South Carolina in 1766,” box 316, no. 300. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC.

Calvert, 1994, p. 274.

Wilson, 1996.


Chambers, 1728.

Barth, 1959, pp. 15–16. See Bronowski and Mazlish, 1960, p. 191; see also Leventhal, 1976.

Society of Gentlemen, 1759.

“Mr. Woodmason’s Account of South Carolina in 1766,” British transcript, box 316, no. 300. Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, DC.


See Kivy, 2003, pp. 18, 111–123; see also Walsh and Taylor, 1993, pp. 29–45.


Temperley, 1979, p. 7.


Wren, 1750, p. 320.

Mace, 1676, pp. 238–240.

Forsyth, 1985, pp. 21–43.


South Carolina Society of the Colonial Dames of America, 1950: Minutes of St. Michael’s Church, April 27, 1773.

“Letter from Penuel Bowen in Chas to Gen Lincoln, July 9, 1786.” Bowen-Cooke Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston.


Historian of American religion David Hall has argued that “the religious lies in what we do—in practices and in the meanings that energize such practices.” Hall, 1997, p. 159.


See Lapansky and Verplanck, 2003; Lavoie, 2012.


Lavoie, 2012.


For alternative readings of Puritanism and material belief, see Peterson, 2001; Promey, 2005.


Lane, 2001; Smith, 1978; Jones, 2000.
References


In the 1840s and 1850s in the United States, a world in which pictures were rare and remarkable began to give way to one permeated by them. A daguerreotype by William Langenheim of his brother Frederick emblematizes this moment: Frederick sits with pictures in both hands and more surrounding him (Figure 29.1). It also evokes the dynamic shuffling of pictorial media that was fundamental to this transition. Here a daguerreotype (a unique image) documents the multiplication made possible by the Talbotype process (which employed a paper negative to make multiple paper prints). The Langenheims had recently bought the United States rights for the Talbotype process, so the daguerreotype is a record of their reveling in image proliferation and seeing dollar signs in it.

The emergence of a mass visual culture comprised various fundamental changes: new image technologies enabled the production of tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of images from a single metal or glass plate or stone; new uses and appetites for pictures developed alongside new venues for containing and displaying them; new collaborative and additive production practices displaced those associated with the traditional artist’s studio; and social relations increasingly became mediated by pictures. These developments are essential ingredients in the formation of Western modernity and the image-saturated world we inhabit in the twenty-first century.

The crucial importance of these developments warrants better histories than we have: finer-grained, spanning media and artists, and engaging large issues. Writing such a history presents challenges that are archival, organizational, and methodological. In this chapter I will highlight two of the most challenging.

The first is the issue of a canon. The proliferation of pictures is a radically dispersed phenomenon with many geographic centers. It follows multiple, non-parallel axes of development, encompasses several image technologies, and features a host of noteworthy artists, most working collaboratively. Its breadth and dispersal might seem to
require some new, rhizomatic form of history writing resistant to any master-narrative. On the other hand, such an approach could perpetuate the marginalization and obscurity of this history relative to the broader history of the art and visual culture of the mid and later nineteenth century.

The second issue concerns systemic organization. How should we conceptualize the relations among the myriad producers and consumers, individuals and institutions implicated in the circulation of mass images? Despite a vast amount of scholarship on the production and reception of mass media in the late nineteenth, the twentieth, and the early twenty-first centuries, there exists no articulated, systemic, historical model mapping the roles and interactions of its institutions and agents along the lines of

Harrison and Cynthia White’s paradigms for the dealer-critic system and the academic art system, which have been so fundamental to scholarship on the history of modernist art.¹ Lacking this, we are on our own when it comes to weighing and correlating whatever fragments of production and reception evidence can be recovered. I have no illusions of solving this very large problem in this chapter, but I do wish to open the discussion by articulating some possibilities regarding the issue of reception based on my research to date.

My discussion of these two issues will concentrate on slightly different time periods: the 1840s for the first, the 1860s for the second.

Developing a Canon

I have come to believe that developing a history of early mass visual culture that provides a foundation for further work will require establishing a canon: not for celebrating heroic auteurs but for identifying specific artifacts that can reasonably be claimed to be “landmark” works. This goes against the grain of much art-historical scholarship in recent decades, which has been committed to dismantling canons and widening our focus to encompass previously overlooked and marginalized work. However, when faced with an already leveled cultural landscape—one usually treated in broad categories of medium and genre, and one marginalized as a subject of cultural study—identifying particular works warranting concentrated attention is an effective way of arguing for the significance of that landscape.

The process of selecting important works could be an exercise in anachronistic judgments of quality, but I am more interested in discovering which works period commentators, audiences, and image-makers considered breakthroughs. Thanks to new keyword-searchable databases of nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines and to new databases of mass produced art, we now have adequate tools for recovering some evidence of this kind.

Some of the works deserving a place in this canon will have been quite forgotten. For example, I have argued for the significance of a collaboration between Edward Anthony, a daguerreotypist and photographic entrepreneur who is well known to photo historians, and Thomas Doney, an engraver specializing in mezzotints who is almost completely unknown, and who supplied political portraits to leading magazines in the 1840s.² At their best, Doney’s prints after Anthony’s daguerreotypes—a good example is a portrait of former president Andrew Jackson made near the end of his life—translated an elusive daguerreotype image flickering in its reflective plate into stabilized ink on paper, anticipating the distinctive look of sharp-focus photographs on paper grounds, which were still some years off. It also rendered the daguerreotype a multiple suitable for publication in popular magazines. The truly landmark work by these two artists is their United States Senate Chamber (1843–46), which compresses some hundred portraits based on daguerreotypes into a single mezzotint (Figure 29.2). This picture was extensively discussed and extravagantly praised: it was said to do honor to the country, to rival the finest mezzotints of Europe in delicacy and strength, and to mark “a second age of the country, as Trumbull’s Declaration of Independence [installed in the Capitol rotunda in 1826] did the first.”³ Copies were purchased for homes, schools, and public buildings; they were also given as diplomatic gifts and as premiums for subscriptions and memberships. Moreover, the picture inspired a large
number of imitations. As a mezzotint (in contrast to a lithograph or a wood engraving) it marks a transitional moment when market expansion had exceeded the capacity of an old-fashioned image technology. The print’s innovation and influence qualify it to stand as an exemplar of the issues and possibilities of its moment.

Another example of a watershed image would be Nathaniel Currier’s *Awful Conflagration of the Steam Boat Lexington*, from 1840, by some accounts the first chromolithograph to attract mass attention and demonstrate the possibilities of this developing medium (Figure 29.3).\(^4\) Reportedly produced in three days following the fire and sinking of one of Cornelius Vanderbilt’s steamboats, a version of the print was inserted into an extra edition published by the *New York Sun* to report on the accident.\(^5\) Artists William Hewitt and Napoleon Sarony are credited with designing and executing the print, some versions of which were hand-colored. The extraordinary demand for the picture and its variants, which were issued in multiple editions after the *Sun* extra, established the disaster picture and the chromolithograph as staples of early mass visual culture.

One further example of a landmark work was in production during the very same years as the *Senate Chamber: Harper’s Illuminated and New Pictorial Bible* (1843–46; Figure 29.4). This massive publication, containing over 1,600 illustrations, was initiated by wood engraver Joseph Adams, another key figure largely lost to history, who had recently completed a series of successful collaborations with the

---

**Figure 29.2**  Thomas Doney and Edward Anthony, *United States Senate Chamber*, 1843–46, mezzotint after daguerreotype portraits, 30½ x 39½ in. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003666712/.
Figure 29.3  Nathaniel Currier, Napoleon Sarony, and William Hewitt, *Awful Conflagration of the Steam Boat Lexington*, 1840, color lithograph. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

artist John Gadsby Chapman, including a book of illustrated fairy tales, for Harper Brothers.\textsuperscript{6} The two artists teamed up again for the Bible project, with help from Adams’s students and assistants. Elaborate ornamental borders that occupy more surface area than the images they surround are a striking feature of many of the largest illustrations. The profusion of stuff in these borders posits a realm of excess between our space and that of the biblical scene. These borders were no doubt a device for maximizing the size of illustrations while keeping costs minimal, but they are varied sufficiently to minimize the sense of repetition. Many allude to medieval manuscript illuminations, but others point more immediately to classicizing sources, such as prints from the School of Fontainebleau and Renaissance tapestries. The publication was widely praised as one of the most beautiful productions of the printing industry in the United States to that date, and it was credited with being a pioneering technical feat as well: one of the first publications to use electrotyping—an electrochemical process for making multiple metal casts of the engraved woodblock—to extend the durability of wood engravings. Adams was a pioneer in the development of the electrotypes, and his work prepared the way for the pictorial press just then getting started.

The bible was issued in fifty-two installments between 1843 and 1846 for 25 cents each and attracted 50,000 original subscribers. Another 25,000 copies were published on completion in 1846. Two additional printings appeared at roughly ten-year intervals. Adams’s share of the profits from the first printing was $60,000, enough to enable him to retire at the age of 43. Harper’s used its substantial profits to erect a lavish new building designed for the efficient mass production of texts and pictures.

A chronological history of landmark works such as these, encompassing all the media involved in the early mass production of images and attentive to the issues raised by particular examples, would give the concept “mass visual culture” the specificity and weight it has lacked in much historical and theoretical discussion.

Re-envisioning Mass Audience Reception

Our ways of understanding and describing art under the new conditions of mass production and consumption have relied on a small number of sometimes crude conceptual tools: the opposition of mass culture and modernism; notions of a lost aura and of a culture industry; and the division of the audience into highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow categories. Large fundamental questions have gone unaddressed.

How might we envision a systemic framework for studying mass visual culture that allows us to test conventional wisdom and which is calibrated to the differences between mass visual culture and less sprawling and heterogeneous cultural phenomena that constitute traditional art histories? Among other things, this would entail understanding how mass visual culture engages socially and culturally diverse viewing subjects, their ways of seeing, and their social and cultural relations. In what follows I outline a way of thinking more systematically about the issue of reception in mass visual culture. To this end I will present a case study that is unusual in having a reception file that is large and thorough, whose idiosyncrasies make it useful for developing a paradigm. First I will provide some schematic information about the case and then outline a framework for making sense of it.
During the early 1860s, John Rogers rose to prominence as a sculptor of genre subjects related to the Civil War. He worked in clay, but produced and sold plaster casts of his clay models in unprecedented numbers. Between 1860 and 1890 he sold approximately 80,000 copies of his figure groups, of which there were about eighty different designs. His most popular groups sold between 5,000 and 10,000 copies. He was more successful than any of his contemporaries anywhere at bringing sculpture into the mass market for images that was taking shape at this time.

Most of Rogers’s works are just the sort of thing one would expect to appeal to a mass market: narrative works featuring stock characters in easily legible scenarios displaying relatively simple motivations and clear emotions. The homely subject matter and naturalist handling are deliberately antithetical to neoclassicism, which was by far the dominant mode in sculpture at the time in the United States. Rogers himself evidently found inspiration in a liberal mix of high and low reference points, encompassing classical statuary mediated by mass-produced photographs, David Wilkie’s popular genre paintings translated into elegant engravings, and wood engravings and chromolithographs gathered from the mass market. Correspondingly, critics vacillated between comparing his sculptures to canonical masterpieces and to chromos.

One of his most successful works, commercially and critically, was *Taking the Oath and Drawing Rations* which shows a subject that was evidently familiar to contemporaries (Figure 29.5). Here is the description of the subject from Rogers’s sales catalogue:

After the war many Southern families were very much reduced and obliged to ask for food from the government; when they did so, they were compelled to take the oath of allegiance [i.e., to acknowledge defeat and pledge loyalty to the victorious Union]. The group represents a Southern lady, with her little boy, compelled by hunger, reluctantly taking the oath of allegiance from a Union officer, in order to draw rations. The young Negro is watching the proceedings, while he waits to have the basket filled for his mistress.

In his article on this sculpture, Michael Clapper has done an excellent job of mapping its ideological profile. He notes that like many other representations of the war, this one construes it in terms of gender and family relations. It is the mother’s love for her child that motivates her to overcome her antagonism to the power that has laid waste her land and her privileged life and pledge allegiance to it, and this “is the key to redirecting emotions that might otherwise erupt into conflict. The whole group works by displacing discord, channeling it into more positive or at least less explosive pathways.”

The work merges divisive elements—victorious Northerner, vanquished Southerner, and slave boy—into a new image of the nation as family.

*Taking the Oath*’s inspired suggestion of the dynamics of an idealized family helped many viewers believe the reassuring message that sympathy and adherence to stereotypical roles would defuse regional and racial antagonisms. In the reconstructed society imagined here, men are dominant but not tyrannical, women are demure and loving, children look up to their parents, and blacks remain content with their lot as impoverished, infantilized, and subservient. Making these stereotyped roles appear natural and true, and thus providing an avenue for dignified reconciliation, was the main cultural work that *Taking the Oath* performed and the wellspring of its popular success.
I find this an insightful and convincing interpretation, but I think it important to clarify the relation between what Clapper calls the “main cultural work” of the sculpture and its reception. His account of the ideological operations of the sculpture conflicts with some interesting threads in the reception record. For example, one contemporary reviewer, noting that the woman faces away from the officer as she takes the oath, speculated that “she evidently hates the sight of him.” Some saw more conflict than budding reconciliation in this family group.

Rogers’s letters record that the seed idea for the sculpture was a scene observed in Charleston, South Carolina, by his wife’s uncle. When he began working on the piece he wrote to his wife that the idea for it was “The same idea your uncle told of seeing in Charleston, with a difference.” We do not know any more about what was highlighted in the uncle’s verbal recounting of the scene he witnessed, but Rogers had a eureka moment some time later that came from converting the scene from a verbal
narrative to a sculptural composition “with a difference.” Rogers’s own first verbal description of the work, in that same letter to his wife, focuses on the character of the woman: “a proud southern woman taking the oath and drawing rations. There is a chance to make a magnificent woman—something of the style of Marie Antoinette in the trial scene.” His motivating idea seems to have been to show a proud woman, defiant despite humiliation, with a touch of class discernible in her aristocratic stiff upper lip. Although his language suggests this idea came from a theatrical production, he probably had in mind Paul Delaroche’s painting Marie-Antoinette before the Tribunal (1851; Forbes Collection, New York), which he may have seen in Paris or in a printed reproduction. Stephen Bann has called attention to the importance of interactions between art and theater in Delaroche’s work and in the development of art with appeal to a mass audience.14

When Rogers’s sculpture was finished, it moved into the marketplace in the form of plaster casts, accompanied by advertisements and publicity notices. These in turn provoked diverse verbal and visual responses. The critical commentary on the sculpture is striking for the attention it pays to the complex, multilayered emotions reviewers located in the figures. They were evidently discovering the possibility of distinguishing multiple, conflicting emotions in a fixed face and bearing. Empathy for the character’s situation was engendered in this process. Here, for example, is a passage from a Brooklyn newspaper in 1865:

Her face is very beautiful and expressive, and traced with conflicting emotions. … Her head droops slightly. Plainly, she is humiliated, yet not wholly scornful. Love for the boy; sadness at the want which compels her; a proud self-respect, which smothers the bitterness that the past few years have bred toward the Government whose officer now stands with quiet courtesy inviting her allegiance—all are visible. It is a credit to the artist that he has moulded the lady’s form to express more than the superficial and passing feelings, and to show these qualified and refined by the influence of affection which is higher, and principle, which is deeper. The lady’s figure is a success, not less than the face, in its exquisite grace and pride, and in the tenderness which pervades it.15

This interpreter revels in piling up qualities in the woman’s expression: humiliation, scorn, love, sadness, dignity, bitterness, principle. All seem plausible readings of her somber expression, which is restrained but finely tuned. Her eyes are lowered, the corners of her mouth turned down, face muscles relaxed, head bent forward toward the boy. Her fingers rest tentatively, delicately on the Bible, in a gesture that seems more to make token contact or steady herself than to establish a firm bond between her hand and the book. The writer noted that other figures in the group displayed a complex mix of emotions: “The form of the young soldier is as interesting as that of the lady. … His glance is curious, respectful, courteous, amused, and firm—all together, and all distinctly.” So too the “ragged and cute little ‘dargy’”: “His face is a very effective study. All the gravity of his race mingles with its equally characteristic irrepresibilenes, and it is evident that a very profound and shrewd criticism is going on under that twisted and knotted covering of hair, in which criticism, we surmise, the claims of the inherent superiority of the Southern whites over the Southern blacks are coming to grief.” Grave, irrepresible, critical—even the black child’s face spoke volumes. This reviewer was far from alone in finding reference to slavery in the work.
The critic for the Independent, identified in Rogers’s scrapbook as “Mrs. Childs,” wrote: “The pretty hand that rests on the Bible looks too delicate to handle a whip; but we know that very lady-like looking hands have done such things, and will do them again, if the power remains.” Even the most cursory mentions of Taking the Oath commented on the woman’s “mingled expression of pride, humiliation, and tender affection for the little boy that clings to her dress.”

What I am proposing is that cognitive interests emerge in the critical commentary on Taking the Oath. As the work is translated from visual artifact into verbal commentary and interpretation, the ability of figural representations, and perhaps even of figures themselves, to display psychological and emotional complexity, density, and conflict is recognized. To suggest that this could be any sort of discovery may seem preposterous, but one would look long and hard to find evidence of it in the commentary on any American genre art prior to this moment, to say nothing of mass-produced images. Even the best genre paintings, the tradition of which was only a few decades old in the United States, usually elicited interpretations of relatively monolithic motivation and expression.

A precisely contemporary work can illustrate this point: Winslow Homer’s painting Prisoners from the Front (1866). Like Taking the Oath, the subject is a group of vanquished Southerners facing a Northern officer. However, the complex emotional and psychological factors playing out in this situation are dispersed among the figures, each representing a characteristic aspect of the warring parties.

[The painting] expresses, in a graphic and vital manner, the conditions of character North and South during the war—the South, ardent and audacious at the front, like the young Virginian rebel; bound to the past, and bewildered by the threatened severance of that connection with the past, like the poor old man nervously holding his hat; resting on ignorance and servile habits, as expressed by the “poor white,” the third prisoner of the group. These are confronted by the dry, unsympathetic, firm face of the Federal officer, who represents the reserved but persistent North.

This strategy of making each character emblematic of a single emotional or psychological condition was conventional in American genre art to this time, and Homer employed it with maximum effectiveness, to judge by the confidence and consistency with which commentators interpreted the picture. Even later, in a painting that addressed some of the most charged and complicated feelings associated with slavery and the Civil War—A Visit from the Old Mistress (1876), which showed a rather cool, stiff encounter between a white woman and her former slaves—Homer did not try to make facial expressions, which are largely illegible here, do the difficult signifying work. Instead, he relied on body language and mise en scène.

Ironically, neoclassical sculpture—against which Rogers’s art defined itself—sometimes explored facial expression as signifier of psychological and emotional conflict. In concert with pose and evocative symbols of bondage, the impassive face of Hiram Powers’s Greek Slave (1844) powerfully signaled to audiences a combination of modesty, fear, and resignation felt by a Greek woman taken into slavery by Turks. As in Rogers’s work, lowered eyes and bowed head lend evocative weight to a pensive expression. The expressive features are subtle, and they become rich by virtue of accommodating the viewer’s projection of emotions inspired by the narrative.
In the context of a still immature and developing field of visual representations of ordinary and extraordinary social interactions, Rogers’s *Taking the Oath* provoked newly complex readings of conflicted psychology, readings that took form in verbal commentary. Visualization of emotional conflict may well have been a key element in promoting postwar reconciliation by encouraging empathetic identification, but this question is tangential to the issues at hand.

Rogers’s sculpture was also taken up in other forms of verbal discourse by interpreters with other sorts of interest. Ministers, for example, including Henry Ward Beecher, who were inclined to find moralizing content in visual and literary anecdotes, concocted didactic lessons from Rogers’s sculpture for use in their writings and sermons, in this case possibly focusing on atonement and forgiveness.19

Other commentators appreciated especially Rogers’s ingenuity in composition and engineering. The *London Times* in 1865 praised the “cleverness of grouping” in his work.20 Rogers approached everything he did, as Wallace puts it, “with the ingenuity of a master mechanic.”21 His interest in sculpting figure groups seems to have sprung from his inclination to tinker, to manipulate clay and assemble many parts in pleasing and effective arrangements. (Rogers began as a machinist and engineer.) He taught himself to carve figures, and his method was already deep-rooted before he went to Europe in search of finer technique and more serious subjects. To describe his figure groups as machines, often finely tuned ones, for telling stories visually with maximum clarity, efficiency, and charm is not at all to diminish their achievement. His works are careful arrangements of discrete, interchangeable parts, each with its own function keyed to those of other parts, and the precision tooling of this machinery was part of their appeal to some viewers.

The technology of Rogers’s mass production process interested many in his audience as well. In 1865, *Scientific American* explained to its readers “The Way Rogers’s Statuary Is Made.”22 The article emphasized the importance of highly elastic molds made from a glue recently developed in France, which could be pulled away from deeply carved areas much more easily than was possible with more rigid casting materials. Moreover, the glue allowed the mold to be made in fewer pieces, which saved labor time by reducing the number of seams to be finished. This and the use of bronze master models were the crux of Rogers’s technical contribution to the mass production of sculpture. The business he knew was making the engines of industry run smoothly; he was not a designer of efficient production lines. So it is not surprising that when he built an enterprise for mass-producing sculpture, he concentrated on improving the mechanics of the traditional craft process rather than on developing a high-powered, mechanized, and rationalized production system. Visual artifacts designed for mass production almost always provoked technological interest, especially in the early years when the pace of experimentation and invention was intense. This sort of interest might be quite unrelated to aesthetic or artistic aspects of the work.

*Taking the Oath* was translated into other visual media as well, with and without Rogers’s approval. It was photographed and engraved by Henry Penfield for *Harper’s Weekly*, which sold about 200,000 copies per issue at this time.23 The short note accompanying it told readers that the subject was so familiar it hardly needed explanation. Photographs of the sculpture were published in every format with mass-market distribution, including a stereograph by the Moultons, part of a series of Rogers’s groups subsumed within their new series of *American Views*; a cabinet card by Wood;
and a carte de visite by Stadtfeld (Figure 29.6). Each photographic representation remakes the work, highlighting particular features. The stereograph shows the sculpture with strong contrast and deep shadows against a relatively light background, intended no doubt to maximize the effect of depth when seen in a stereoscope. A relatively high viewing position situates the sculpture as if on a table. The carte de visite maximizes the effect of miniaturization initiated by the sculpture. In this version
the sculpture is turned (the oval of the base is positioned at an angle to the picture plane) to foreground the mother and child. The cabinet card gives a stately presentation to the work and provides it with a caption in elegant script. It takes the lowest viewing position on the work, lending it an imposing quality, insofar as a 2-foot statue can be made to seem imposing. These varied formats, designed to serve different functions and appeal to diverse tastes, expand the range of the work’s features by virtue of their interpretive representations.

Like any successful mass-market artifact, Rogers’s sculpture was represented in various media by many agents with different ends in view. This extended the features of the work along myriad axes, increasing its capacity to sustain a broad range of readings, some conflicting.

So what does this dispersed, fragmented, and incomplete reception file tell us? Let me offer three propositions about how I believe a reception study of this sort of mass-audience artifact will need to differ from a reception analysis for a work of fine art that is categorically more stable and is directed to a more limited audience. I want to propose that the magnified diversity of interests and uses supported by an artifact successful with a mass audience is productively understood as a form of socially distributed cognition, a kind of collective cognition defined in the work of cognitive scientist Edwin Hutchins. My proposals adapt to the reception of mass visual culture elements of his study of what he calls “cognition in the wild,” by which he means cognition as a component of real cultural and social practices rather than as observed in cognitive science laboratories.

1 Different subgroups emerge within Taking the Oath’s mass audience by virtue of the specific features and themes that dominate their attention and the style of engagement they extend to the artifact. This is always true of responses to art, but the difference of degree entailed in a mass audience warrants special consideration. (Quantitative differences here add up to a qualititative one.) Multiplied diversity in the audience increases the probability that issues of morality, narrative style, and significant meaning will be controversial where mass artifacts are concerned, and the reproductive technology that enables the artifact to reach that mass audience will also draw significant attention. Some of the variety of responses will stem from the different cognitive properties associated with different individuals and subgroups. By “cognitive properties” I mean, following Hutchins, the specific types of mental activities habitually performed, the forms of representation normally used, the ways different representational schemata are exchanged and reconciled, the ways learning takes place, and the ways cognitive interactions correlate to social organization.

The mass audience itself, as a totality, may display cognitive properties different from those of the individuals and subgroups that constitute it. Such differences may instantiate socially distributed cognition. This should not be understood as describing merely an intellectual division of labor, as if each actor were adding one set of numbers and passing the sum along to the next. Rather, it proposes that the cognitive activities of individuals and groups involved in collective problem-solving and communication (including art interpretation) are qualitatively different from group to group.

To clarify these points let me describe briefly Hutchins’s study Cognition in the Wild, a painstakingly close but surprisingly riveting analysis of the activities of a navigation crew on a military transport ship as the crew generates the knowledge necessary to steer the ship. The book is thick with the particulars of the subject, yet its
observations and conclusions are suggestive for cognitive systems of vastly different characters, and indeed, for human cognition generally.

Hutchins notes that “Many important human activities are conducted by systems in which multiple actors attempt to form coherent interpretations of some set of phenomena.” Such structures, small or large, constitute “systems of distributed interpretation formation.”24 This is a cumbersome but precise way of characterizing any interpretive community or art audience—including navigation crews and mass audiences as well as juries, management teams, and scholarly communities—and so the relevance for reception studies becomes explicit here. The system may be highly structured with clearly defined roles for participants, such as a navigation team, or it may be an ad hoc collectivity whose operational rules develop in disorderly practice, such as a mass audience.

What Hutchins’s analysis of the navigation crew revealed was that the actual cognitive activities performed by the individuals in the crew were distinctly different from person to person, comprising sighting and matching, remembering, managing communication, computation, arranging numbers on charts, etc. No single individual in the crew had all the relevant information or understood all the cognitive operations involved in collecting it, and the system itself was a formidable actor in the actual navigation process. At a moment of crisis, when the ship’s engines failed, steering control was lost, and the ship was in danger of crashing into the port, “the solution was clearly discovered by the organization before it was discovered by any of the participants.” The participants themselves, Hutchins says, “represented and thus learned the solution after it came into being.” No member of the crew could explain why the collision was averted, but the organizational structure itself solved the problem. For Hutchins, this process exemplifies cultural innovation. “The processes by which work is accomplished, by which people are transformed from novices into experts, and by which work practices evolve are all the same process.”25

Despite considerable differences, a mass audience for art resembles a navigation crew insofar as cognitive labor of various types merges to form a totality—a reception—that comprises artistic value, meaning, cultural significance, and aesthetic pleasure. I am proposing that the diverse components of the art audience broadly constituted can be treated as a collaborative body pursuing a common objective: the production, circulation, patronage, understanding, and use of art. A mass audience is, in other words, a system of socially distributed cognition, even if some of its elements are in outright conflict with one another, and even if protocols for relating the reactions of different elements are constantly being negotiated and revised. Moreover, just as a navigation organization may solve a problem before any of the individuals can grasp the solution, a mass audience as a system will generate value for an artifact—an assessment of its utility and significance—and assign meaning to it beyond the ability of any individual or subgroup to comprehend or evaluate.

Approaching the reception of mass cultural artifacts in this way would bring distinct advantages. Reception by a mass audience would become mappable as an array of nodal interpretations associated with diverse and particular cognitive properties and viewing styles. Those cognitive properties may cross boundaries of class, race, gender, generation, and so forth, or they may be congruent with them. They may be marked by overarching similarities—historical or cultural cognitive styles—crossing
distinct differences. Reception by a mass audience is never likely to have a monolithic, coherent logic or imply a unitary perspective, and this paradigm for interpreting mass reception ensures that it will not acquire false ones.

2. A fundamental procedure within a system of socially distributed cognition is “propagating representational state across a set of structured representational media until it arrives” at a form in which the accumulated information is organized in the necessary way. “The ship’s situation is represented and re-represented until the answer to the navigator’s question is transparent.” In other words one of the principal things that individual actors in a system of socially distributed cognition do is transform information from one representational schema into another and pass it on to other agents for further transformation. Knowledge is gathered and linked in a cascade of re-representation. Following Hutchins we can call this a theory of cognition “by the propagation of representational state.” Such transformations are the motor of cognition.

For Hutchins’s navigation team a fundamental transformation involved moving back and forth between digital and analogue representations. For the world of mass visual culture, the equivalent watersheds would certainly be verbal and visual media. As an artifact is described and translated, represented and re-represented in descriptions and reproductions, in publications and responses, and in subsequent visual works that emulate or caricature it, its cognitive value takes shape alongside its aesthetic, economic, social, political, and other values.

The appropriate unit of analysis for reception studies of mass visual culture should not be an individual work at all but rather a string of related artifacts and discursive representations of them. Here the printed and photographic reproductions of Rogers’s Taking the Oath along with the verbal descriptions of them and the sculpture itself provide an example, in which a cluster of connected ideas undergoes revision and adaptation as it constantly crosses and re-crosses media and modes.

3. The system of communication between individuals is as important to the cognitive properties of a group as are the cognitive properties of the individuals themselves.

For example, a group’s openness to new ideas and new ways of thinking corresponds to its systems for organizing communication and its social distribution of cognition. Hutchins illustrates this with a discussion of “confirmation bias”—that is, the “propensity to affirm prior interpretations and to discount, ignore, or reinterpret evidence that runs counter to an already-formed interpretation.” It is, in essence, the tendency to be conservative about beliefs. Hutchins demonstrates that “some ways of organizing people around thinking tasks will lead to an exacerbation of the maladaptive aspects” of confirmation bias, “whereas other forms of organization will actually make an adaptive virtue” of it.

Confirmation bias, which has been well documented as a property of individual cognition, serves an evolutionary purpose, since it helps to maintain a stable set of interpretations against insignificant disconfirmatory evidence, even if it does sometimes result in slowing adaptation to changing environmental conditions. It is an effective tool for minimizing risks of chronic indecision and erroneous commitment.

Hutchins demonstrates that two variables of interpretive systems are especially influential for the level of confirmation bias in any system: centralization of authority and volume of communication. Where interpretive power is widely distributed in a “horizontal” structure, as across a mass audience, “there is more potential for
diversity of interpretation and more potential for indecision. Where that power is collected in the top of a ‘vertical’ structure, there is less potential for diversity of interpretation, but also more likelihood that some interpretation will find a great deal of confirmation and that disconfirming evidence will be disregarded.”

This horizontal/vertical opposition corresponds to some extent to the difference between reception structures for mass culture versus those for fine art.

A rich pool of diverse interpretations, however, does not automatically result from a more horizontal authority system. When communication among the elements in a system is easy and rich, persuasive interpretations may quickly achieve wide dispersion. The rapid spread of a persuasive interpretation may limit the chances that strong, competing alternatives will be developed. As a result, diversity of interpretation may suffer, and the group may rush “to the interpretation that is closest to the center of gravity of their predispositions regardless of the evidence.” In such circumstances, “the importance of sharing an interpretation with others outweighs the importance of reaching a coherent interpretation.”

The system’s tendency toward confirmation bias, consequently, will be elevated. A networked system in which agents are in constant communication (for example, through networked mobile devices) could have a dangerous susceptibility to confirmation bias. As Hutchins notes, more communication within a group is not necessarily better than less when it comes to generating good interpretations.

The type of structure likely to generate consistently the best interpretations is one in which communication is delayed until each agent has had an opportunity to work independently for some time. This will mean that more available evidence is considered, more proclivities indulged, and a richer pool of interpretations generated.

There are guidelines here for classroom discussions, reading groups, and reception studies as well as for decisions taken by navigation teams. The bottom line for the purposes of this chapter, however, is that the broad, horizontal social organization of a mass audience will likely entail systems of communication different from more vertically oriented and more orderly fine-art reception models. In reception studies of artifacts successful with mass audiences, these systems of communication may be factors as important as the greater diversity of cognitive properties represented in the mass audience.

A group of people processing an array of data in different ways can guide a ship into harbor or establish meaning and value for cultural artifacts. Seeing the reception data for Rogers’s *Taking the Oath* as an instance of socially distributed cognition draws our attention to several features: the reception’s cognitively heterogeneous character; the strings of images in different media from which it emerged and to which it gave rise; the importance of remakings and translations across media as a motor of meaning production; and the clustering of interpretations in disconnected pockets that fostered difference and variety. This way of modeling reception will be especially relevant for the formative years of mass culture, when the challenge was greatest of shaping a mass audience from a diverse population with little commonality in terms of language, cultural traditions, education, political interests, and social practices. Walter Benjamin shrewdly observed that two developments were fundamental to the creation of a mass culture in the middle of the nineteenth century: “for the first time the form of the commodity imposed itself decisively on the work of art, and the form of the masses on its public.” Some form of socially distributed cognition must have been an essential part of the process by which the masses were
produced; perhaps its outlines may be reconstructed in part from case studies involving early successes, such as Doney’s *Senate Chamber*, Currier’s *Awful Conflagration*, and Harper’s *Illuminated Bible*.

**Notes**

1 White and White, 1965.
2 Leja, 2012.
4 Peters, 1942, pp. 1–2.
5 Brust and Shadwell, 1990.
6 Linton, 1882, pp. 12–16.
7 Orcutt, 2010; Leja, 2010.
8 Taft, 1903, p. 181.
11 Clapper, 2004, p. 278.
18 E.B., 1866.
26 Hutchins, 1995, p. 126.
28 This idea has analogues in the work of other authors; for example, Bruno Latour’s (1990) anthropological study of formalism attributes fundamental significance to processes of translation between writing and drawing.
29 Hutchins, 1995, pp. 239, 240.
References

E.B. (1866). “About ‘Figure Pictures’ at the Academy.” *Round Table* 3 (36), p. 295.
It has been proved by all experience and, indeed, it is a truism, that the arts cannot flourish without patronage in some form.

John Trumbull, address to the American Academy of Fine Arts, January 28, 1833

The artist who feels the necessity of patronage, must do one of two things—abandon his high and responsible character, bow to the golden calf that he may partake of the bread and wine set before the idol, or abandon his profession—grasp the axe and the plough, instead of the crayon and pencil.

William Dunlap, History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States

A string of public controversies in the field over the past decade has generated heated debates about the role and influence of collectors and markets, including Alice Walton’s high-profile acquisitions for her Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, and de-accessioning efforts at Brandeis and Fisk universities and Randolph College. Many art-world observers have also lamented the influence that major collectors wield over cultural institutions: critics have, for instance, accused Eli Broad of exerting undue control over Los Angeles art museums, and Charles Saatchi of increasing the value of his contemporary art holdings by staging and publicizing his collection at the 1999 Sensation exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. These events not only suggest the continual relevance of these topics, but also demonstrate that we need a fuller understanding of the operations and histories of collectors and the art market.

The history of the art of the United States often figures the consumption of art as both arbitrary and secondary to artistic production in shaping cultural forms. Newer scholarship more productively accommodates consumers and markets by treating...
artists as economic actors in their own right, narrating from vantage points besides those of artistic producers, and even conceptualizing consumer demand as a precondition for artistic creation. In order to explore my themes comprehensively and indicate how greater attention to art consumption might transform the field, I address Americans’ consumption of the “fine” arts of the United States before about 1965.

**Superficial and Substantial Consumption**

In 1911, the satirical magazine *Puck* published a cartoon centerfold (Figure 30.1) that in many ways emblematizes the conventional wisdom, both then and now, about art patronage by fin-de-siècle corporate millionaires. Reclining atop New York City, a gargantuan John Pierpont Morgan extends towards Europe a large dollar sign that exerts an irresistible magnetic force over the cultural treasures of the Old World. Across the Atlantic fly paintings and sculptures, codices and crosiers, swords and sarcophagi. A dozen years earlier, Thorstein Veblen had famously attacked the nation’s plutocrats in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) by denigrating their buying habits as “conspicuous consumption” governed by “pecuniary canons of taste.” Despite profound differences in media, audience, and intent, both Veblen’s work and period pictorial satire dismiss patronage of the arts as arbitrary and thus insignificant.

Udo Keppler’s cartoon whimsically satirizes Morgan’s collecting practices as indiscriminate; the financier acquires thoughtlessly, and evidently merely for the sake of acquisition. In addition, his attraction to art is purely financial, as symbolized by his

![Figure 30.1](image-url)
large monetary magnet. With his powerful but blunt instrument, Morgan is the antithesis of the judicious connoisseur. Like the Puck caricature, Veblen’s critique of the performance of class identity through luxury goods characterizes consumption as pure spectacle, in which all sorts of non-utilitarian products or skills serve interchangeably as wasteful tokens of status. The author’s insistence on a purely “pecuniary” system of value ignores any non-economic motivations for patronage and drains collecting of any content, so that the ownership of a rare, purebred pet, or the connoisseurship of imported wines, is equivalent to and indistinguishable from the purchase of an oil painting. His approach cannot account for consumer preferences for particular artworks, genres, styles, and media.

I dwell on Veblen because his work casts a long shadow over scholarship on the topic. Instead of following Veblen’s lead, we should recognize his writings as a contemporary’s partisan response to the rapidly growing power of industrial capitalists. Other, more recent, sociologists likewise regard art-collecting largely in relation to the articulation and legitimization of class status. Although a more comprehensive and finer-grained account of consumption and taste, Pierre Bourdieu’s landmark Distinction largely examines the actual content of art in purely negative terms, as “the area par excellence of the denial of the social.” However sophisticated his intricate diagrams of classed tastes, Bourdieu, and especially his followers in American sociology, pay little attention to the physical characteristics of particular artworks.

Other studies of art collectors are as celebratory as Veblen is damning, but they too generally figure consumption as indiscriminate. More interested in documenting patrons’ relative taste, munificence, and civic spirit, these histories also rarely consider the precise content of or variations in individual collecting practices. These hagiographic accounts emerge most frequently in internal museum histories or in exhibition catalogues of private collections, and often appear on major institutional anniversaries. Since museum professionals quite understandably would not want to alienate either founders’ families or future potential benefactors, they generally adopt an insufficiently circumspect attitude towards their subjects. In some cases the collectors themselves or their descendants compose these laudatory narratives. Even older than Veblen, this tradition traces its pedigree back to Gilded Age “vanity publications” such as Earl Shinn’s Art Treasures of America (1879–82). As today, authors could only compile these directories with the permission and favor of leading collectors. Rare therefore are fascinating exceptions like the display of John D. Rockefeller III’s holdings in American art at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, whose catalogue openly acknowledged the public debate that surrounded its previous exhibition at the Whitney. At the earlier, bicentennial, event, a coalition of artists and art historians advanced an extended critique of the show’s near-omission of women and minority artists in a counter-publication, an anti-catalog, that now stands as a milestone in the social history of art.

Accordingly, these histories of patronage lack sustained arguments. The most basic simply attest to the passion, mania, love, addiction, or obsession that purportedly motivates art consumption. But explanations like “they … acquired what they liked” do little to illuminate collecting practices and outcomes, and even undercut the need for an extended analysis of art consumption. And whether these texts argue that collections demonstrate cultural sophistication, missionary zeal, educational aims, or simple patriotism, their effect is the same: they quarantine art from society. Oddly enough, these idealist writings, in which collecting is never about money, are the mirror image of those materialist accounts in which collecting is exclusively about
money. All attribute different forms of art consumption to a single cause and in so doing extract them from the ebb and flow of history and culture.

Many honorific accounts of patronage depend on a psychobiographical methodology in which collecting serves a compensatory function as a surrogate for a lost loved one. Influential writers in this tradition include Jean Baudrillard, who in *The System of Objects* declares “It is essentially oneself that one collects,” and psychologist Werner Muensterberger, whose *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* relies on the object relations theory of D.W. Winnicott. His notion that consumer goods act as transitional objects that substitute for personal loss also governs Martha Sanger’s profile of Henry Clay Frick, whose “collecting eye was uniquely shaped by grief” over his daughter Martha. For Sanger, the untimely death of a child or spouse likewise explains the careers of leading collectors like William T. Walters, J.P. Morgan, Isabella Stewart Gardner, and Jane Stanford. Among others, art historian Michael Camille and anthropologist Paul van der Grijp have critiqued this approach as an oversimplified and “unproductive pathological model.” By this, art patronage and other collecting practices like philately serve equally well to satisfy the “needs of the phallic-narcissistic personality,” to use Muensterberger’s terminology. The universalist implications of psychoanalytic explanations for collecting prompt van der Grijp to wonder “why everybody is not a collector?”

These reductionist tendencies are even more pronounced in studies of the art market than in profiles of individual collectors. The limitations of importing economic theory into art history have less to do with the utility of quantitative analysis than with the uses to which it is put. Scholarship on the domestic art market, for example, generally addresses questions of supply and the role of cultural intermediaries rather than buyers. When consumers do take center stage in studies of the art trade, writers generally assign exclusively economic motives to their purchases, as though an art collection was merely another holding in a sizable investment portfolio. These approaches depend on the assumptions of mainstream neoclassical economic theory in that they presume purely rational consumer behavior, assume all participants have full and equal access to the same market information, and negate any potential social or cultural motivations for buyers. More fundamentally, numerous economists have argued that art generally makes a poor investment option despite the reassurances of art-world intermediaries who continually circulate the canard about the investment potential of art to safeguard their trade.

Trends in behavioral economics offer art historians more productive models for gleaning cultural significance from commercial transactions. Sociologist Stuart Plattner has convincingly shown how art markets function as “a community of people acting in social and cultural contexts with a past and a future, and not as isolated short-term decision-makers.” Even the most purely commercial acts—pricing a work of art—can signify much more than simple economic value. “[J]ust as culture infuses other social settings that sociologists and anthropologists have studied,” writes sociologist Olav Velthuis, “it infuses market settings.”

Instead of considering art consumption a direct reflection of personal wealth, refined taste, repressed desire, or speculative acumen, many scholars have undertaken less mechanistic approaches that are more persuasive for their sociohistorical specificity and multi-causality. Among these more nuanced accounts are studies that address the antebellum performance of gentility through elite material culture, the Cincinnati bourgeoisie’s communication of moral discipline, civic boosterism, and social
harmony through arts patronage, the intersection of Charles Lang Freer’s collecting with his beliefs in agnosticism, Spencerian thought, and therapeutic culture, and the liberal anti-communist appropriation of the ideologies and cultural products of the postwar avant-garde. This more particularized analysis seems more common when authors examine how consumption articulates personal and social identities, whether class, racial, gender, sexual, religious, regional, or organizational. Not surprisingly, scholarship on portraiture has benefited most from this approach, particularly when writers consider how artworks forge identity rather than document likeness.

Also common in this literature are treatments of female patrons and collectors. Successful accounts carefully attend to differences between women or over time, as when Kathleen McCarthy periodizes “separatist,” “assimilationist,” and “individualist” forms of matronage in her magisterial *Women’s Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830–1930*. Many studies, furthermore, ably demonstrate how women productively exploited overlooked, marginalized, or devalued areas of collecting, like Native American, folk, and modern art, before their full canonization in the discipline. The desire to compose narratives of empowerment and agency, however, can run the risk of producing arguments about distinctly “female” modes of collecting as essentialist as many classical Marxist and psychoanalytic consumption histories. And with the importation of masculinity studies into art history, scholars have investigated how collecting affirms discrete conceptions of manhood, whether for the financiers and industrialists who purchased Winslow Homer’s turbulent seascapes and maritime genre paintings, or for Pop Art enthusiasts who wished to signal a playboy lifestyle and masculinize the domestic sphere.

Less explored and explained are the art-consumption practices of ethnic minorities, due no doubt to their more limited archival presence and relative lack of access to the requisite economic and cultural capital. In the case of African American art, for example, recent scholarship such as Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw’s *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* consists mostly of important projects of archival recovery and challenges to undertake additional research. There is, by contrast, much more literature on the appeal of black artists’ work to white collectors.

**Passive and Active Consumers**

A second major problem with conventional narratives of patronage is that they categorize collectors as secondary to producers in generating culture. For if consumers amass indiscriminately, what possible influence could they have upon the creation of art and its meanings? Veblen’s account drives a wedge between the art maker and the art buyer, between creativity and commerce. In the same fashion, the collecting practices of *Puck*’s cartoon Morgan are not fruitful but predatory, even parasitic. In both instances, this segregation of the production and consumption of art devalues art-collecting and effectively makes its study unnecessary to cultural analysis. Classical Marxism also considers luxury consumption fundamentally epiphenomenal or, at best, symptomatic of bourgeoise decadence, and some neo-Marxists—most notoriously, the members of the Frankfurt School—likewise assume that buyers and audiences are naive recipients of culture. Even the passive connotation of terms like “reception” suggests that producers alone possess agency in the art world.
The mythology of the artist-genius, which runs deep down to the disciplinary bedrock of Vasari’s *Lives*, abets these stereotypes about the incidental nature of consumption. The field teems with colorful anecdotes about artists who forsake, renounce, or affront their clientele: J.A.M. Whistler’s defiance and caricature of his patron Fredrick Leyland during his creation of *The Peacock Room*, Edward Coates’s rejection of the provocative tableaux of naked men (*Swimming*) Thomas Eakins painted to fulfill a commission, Jackson Pollock’s alleged drunken urination into Peggy Guggenheim’s fireplace, and the soda bottles—denoting winners of Pepsi-Cola Art Competitions—that Ad Reinhardt used to weigh down the more representational branches of his notorious family tree of Modern Art. In a 1961 revision of his cartoon, Reinhardt added avian allegories of collectors, critics, agents, and dealers who further burden an even more barren tree (Figures 30.2, 30.3). Alfred Stieglitz’s prickly assertion that “I am not in the Art business nor in any other business” after the *American Magazine of Art* identified him as a dealer echoes the declaration made at the outset of this chapter by the field’s first art historian, William Dunlap, exactly one hundred years prior.18 The recent proliferation of the term “gallerist” is another symptom of a long-standing reluctance to associate art with the “golden calf” of the marketplace.19

However, scholarship that abandons the notion of a parasitic market attends more often to questions of supply and the role of cultural intermediaries than to consumer demand. Recognizing artists as economic actors, these texts conceive markets as an enabling, not a corrupting, influence, as when Kevin Murphy reveals how Winslow Homer was “an artist who was aware of his public and remarkably responsive to it.”20 Numerous writers also document producers’ shrewd entrepreneurial and evangelical efforts to cultivate a mass market for art, from antebellum touring pictures, to John Rogers’s parlor sculpture multiples, to the organization of the famous 1913 Armory Show.21 More radical are authors who frame commodification as intrinsic to art production. “The market,” asserts Michael Fitzgerald in a volume devoted to Picasso, “was not peripheral to the development of modernism but central to it.”22

Even more prolific are treatments of market intermediaries like art dealers, gallery owners, critics, and auctioneers.23 However, as in the case of collectors, a great many studies of cultural brokers uncritically celebrate their subjects by touting their merchandizing savvy, public service, or advanced aesthetic taste. More illuminating are texts that build on the scholarship that established the fundamental importance of the “dealer-critic system” in the shape and evolution of the modern French market.24 Concerning the domestic trade, Diane Crane and Joanne Robson have highlighted the growing importance of art galleries, while JoAnne Mancini has persuasively argued for the central role of art critics.25 Here too the literature often takes up cultural brokers’ periodic campaigns to capture larger audiences for art, from the American Art-Union to the American Artists Group.26

But collecting must represent more than a mere postscript to artistic practices in the studio and stylish merchandizing in the showroom. In his work on nineteenth-century France, Nicholas Green has called for “recognition that points of distribution and consumption may be equally important as the moment of production in the projection of cultural meanings.”27 Several intellectual traditions usefully reposition consumption as an active shaper of culture: the neo-Marxist conception of a more dynamic and mutually constituted economic base and cultural superstructure, the poststructuralist deconstruction of conventional ideas about authorship, the interest in the significance of consumption patterns in cultural anthropology and material culture studies, and the

emphasis on the performative nature of collecting suggested by queer theory. 28 “The meanings of a text,” writes Terry Eagleton in his influential Literary Theory, “do not lie within them like wisdom teeth waiting patiently to be extracted.” 29 Instead, consumers of literature and the visual arts alike actively produce them.

Endowing consumers with agency permits art historians to pinpoint more specific constituencies instead of presuming that artworks express either individual artistic personalities or an undifferentiated cultural zeitgeist. Art historians have thus revealed the infusion of Thomas Cole’s Oxbow with its patron’s interests in Freemasonry and religious reform movements, the attraction of Eastman Johnson’s Negro Life at the South to New York businessmen whose fortunes depended upon slavery, and the appeal of fin-de-siècle trompe l’œil paintings to dry goods merchants. 30 Attention to audience demographics often generates productive debates about whether, for example, early American sitters intended their portraits for their family members and descendants or for their peers in the gentry. 31

This emphasis has also helped recuperate non-elite and marginalized consumers’ (often oppositional) uses of visual and material culture. In lieu of the theories of the Frankfurt School, this body of scholarship borrows from the methods and political imperatives of material culture and British cultural studies. 32 “Make history the biography of a people,” writes folklorist Henry Glassie, “and you will not be content … with a list of exceptional persons and moments.” In a recent book, for instance, David Jaffee has instructively overturned normative trickle-down models of cultural diffusion, in which subaltern groups uncritically (and usually imperfectly) emulate elite culture. In so doing he avoids reifying “high-styles” as symptomatic of superior aesthetic tastes. These tactics promise to shed further light on the shadowed cultural contributions of women and minorities. This “marked break from traditional Marxist disinterest in bourgeois and nonutilitarian goods and services,” writes Ann Smart Martin in an important survey of material culture studies, “opens the door on one of women’s most important historical roles—as managers or participants in household consumption strategies.” 33

Others have pioneered a kind of prismatic art history that demonstrates the significance of artworks to multiple constituencies. Anthony Lee’s A Shoemaker’s Story compellingly models how different stakeholders—patrons, makers, subjects, rivals—may variably infuse visual culture with meaning, in this case, a single 1870 photograph of Chinese immigrant workers posed outside a Massachusetts shoe factory. 34 Treating art as a palimpsest also fosters a fundamentally transcultural understanding of cultural products like eighteenth-century Native American portraiture and the domestic arts of the Progressive Era “Indian craze.” 35 Other studies foreground how artists deliberately encode their works, whether stoneware vessels or landscapes, so that cultural producers, cultural consumers, and other audiences read them differently. 36 Still other writers take up the “object biography” to craft diachronic studies of artworks and to investigate the “social life of things.” 37 These bodies of scholarship, such as many treatments of the Colonial Revival, 38 are important reminders that the meanings of artworks continually migrate over time.

And yet most of the methodologies outlined above are additive analyses in which consumption is by nature distinct from and successive to production, or in which discrete players generate distinct meanings for art. Writers who embrace the mutuality of culture can avoid the interpretive difficulties of regarding cultural production as a zero-sum game in which either artist or patron determine cultural forms. 39 My goal here, after all, is neither to replace a canon of art makers with a pantheon of art buyers,
nor to determine who is chicken and who is egg. Nonetheless, it is critical to con-
ceptualize patronage and other forms of consumption as one of many preconditions for
art making. “[C]riticism … directly shapes what modes of ‘organization and process’
are available to artists even before their works are made—and even before they have
become artists,” writes JoAnne Mancini; during the consumer revolution of the eight-
eighth century, aphorizes Cary Carson, “demand came first.”

In the end, neither cultural producers nor consumers are autonomous agents. As
redefined by sociologist Howard Becker, art is an indelibly collaborative practice that
depends on a system of buyers, brokers, critics, and other art-world professionals. In
order to create a more dynamic model of cultural negotiation, we may also look to
Bourdieu, who argues that ideology is necessarily “doubly determined,” both by cul-
tural producers and by cultural managers, brokers, or consumers. For Diego Rivera’s
mural suite *Detroit Industry*, as Terry Smith has demonstrated, is neither simply a
revolutionary artist’s indictment of nor merely an auto manufacturer’s paean to indus-
trial capitalism. Put simply, “culture is an intricate web that people weave together
every day.” Of course, no two cultural transactions are precisely the same; there
are an infinite number of geometries that inscribe the relations between producers,
consumers, and their intermediaries. Although I have throughout this chapter used
the terms patron, collector, and consumer interchangeably, each comes freighted with
its own connotations: positive or negative, active or passive, aesthetic or sociological,
even male or female.

Certain types of cultural production lend themselves more readily to this more
dynamic approach. It is, for example, easier to conceptualize and argue for the influ-
ence of consumers with direct commissions than in an open market, but the tremen-
dous leverage collectors and consumers can exert over markets belies the supply-side
arguments that tend to dominate the literature on markets.

Institutional consumption also seems to attract more nuanced scholarship, whether
about government entities, business corporations, labor unions, assorted associations,
or even museums. Because these organizations demonstrably wield authority over
individual producers, scholars may find it less difficult to recognize the mutuality of
these transactions. That these bodies have often left large archival footprints that
detail the give and take of the commissioning process surely helps explain the preva-
lence of this literature as a whole, and of government agencies (with their public
records) most especially. Authors have demonstrated, for instance, how US Capitol
commissions advocated American imperialism, how an “archive style” served the
federal agencies underwriting the US Geologic Surveys, and how New Deal murals
perpetuated prevailing discourses of gender.

Also numerous are excellent studies of the corporate patron, most of which cluster
around the second quarter of the twentieth century. Whether hiring artists for
advertising campaigns, sponsoring awards competitions, or amassing corporate col-
lections, companies as diverse as American Tobacco, Ford Motor, Hawaiian Pineapple,
International Business Machines, Standard Oil of New Jersey, and Upjohn became so
prominent in the field of cultural production that one contemporary could observe in
1946 that “industry appears to have established itself as the largest single source of
support for the contemporary American painter.”

Although its literature is too vast to properly canvas in this brief overview, museum
studies is another important subset of the study of institutional patronage. At the very
least, many museums owe their creation and holdings to major private collectors, so
that stories of individual patronage and organizational development usually interlace. More importantly, museums are also players in the market in their own right despite nonprofit charters.\textsuperscript{45} No institution ratifies value more effectively, and numerous donors, trustees, and patrons have exploited the museum for personal gain through public–private governance structures, special exhibitions of private collections, and bequests promised or realized.\textsuperscript{46} Monuments and public art, finally, have also been popular subjects for the investigation of how different interest groups negotiate cultural meanings.\textsuperscript{47}

**Consuming Content and Form**

Despite this renaissance of scholarship on art consumption, art-historical briefs on the patronage of specific objects generally grant collectors limited control over certain aspects of artistic creation. In particular, authors appear to be most reluctant to probe connections between the conditions of art-collecting and the formal elements of artworks. The default position in art history seems to be that aesthetic considerations exceed the reach of the consumer. This problem is two-sided. Leading sociologists like Becker, Bourdieu, and DiMaggio focus their attention on macro-cultural concerns like the creation and management of cultural institutions, and neglect the consumption of individual artworks.\textsuperscript{48} Accordingly, in the words of Janet Wolff, “it is rare that questions of aesthetics are permitted in this discourse, or indeed any discussions of the works themselves.” Among others, she has urged we combine this “‘production of culture’ approach” with more scrupulous “attention to features of the art object itself.”\textsuperscript{49}

This then is the most far-reaching effect of the persistent belief that true art transcends the marketplace. Even more, there often exists an inverse relationship between perceived aesthetic quality and consumer agency in art-historical literature. Patrons and markets more readily play significant roles in disciplinary accounts of “second-rate” artists, genres, styles, and media, but more often disappear from view in art histories of canonical figures. Elizabeth Prettejohn has perceptively observed this tendency in studies of Victorian art: “‘Mainstream’ art thus appears to mimic the ideologies of its patrons, while ‘avant-garde’ art innovates in glorious freedom from bourgeois control.”\textsuperscript{50}

When they do take on individual artworks, most authors restrict the influence of the consumer to the means of cultural production. This tendency dates back to many of the classics in patronage studies, such as Michael Baxandall’s *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, which readily addresses patrons’ influence over considerations like materials, labor, and cost, but has little to say about consumer preferences for subject matter, and even less about style.\textsuperscript{51} And when writers permit buyers to influence content, as do the many studies enumerated in the previous section, they generally linger on matters iconographic. Histories of art-collecting should look beyond more familiar examinations of consumers’ taste for particular subject matter and find ways to link collectors to the emergence and transformation of specific styles, genres, media, and modes of visuality. “The social,” writes Jeremy Tanner, “is not simply the background to or context of styles, but reaches deeply into the formation of styles.”\textsuperscript{52} It is here that art-historical training and expertise can contribute most to these subjects; the discipline should not simply cede the study of art consumption to sociologists and economists.
A literature in this spirit is already underway. Recently writers have looked to patrons and collectors to account for the variable Anglo-Dutch and neo-medieval styles of seventeenth-century portraiture, the ascendancy of the mid-century landscape mode known as “luminism,” and even formal elements of such icons of aestheticism as Whistler’s Peacock Room. Greater attention to consumers can illuminate histories of media. Antebellum Philadelphians with inherited wealth, for example, preferred portraits in more traditional media, like painted miniatures, as well as newer technologies, like opalotypes, that mimicked older forms. These texts demonstrate the benefits of expanding the analytic repertoire of the art historian to encompass concerns normally left to social scientists. Macro- and micro-histories of art need not be incompatible.

My recent book Manufacturing the Modern Patron in Victorian California will, I hope, model this approach. Taking up the cultural consumption of the executives of the Central Pacific Railroad, it joins a venerable literature on the cultural by-products of industrial capitalism. But instead of pursuing a familiar iconographic analysis of locomotives in period imagery, I look beyond the frame of the rail line to explore the broader philosophies and cultural manifestations of industrialism: new social spaces, modes of perception, concepts of work, value systems, and forms of consciousness and identity.

One notable example of this difference in analytic focus is my discussion of the corpus of photographer Eadweard Muybridge, who regularly worked for this clientele. But rather than linger on the series of stereographs Muybridge took in 1869 along the newly completed transcontinental route, I address his stop-motion images of horses, his photographic plates of the Yosemite backcountry, and his panoramas of San Francisco, all of which participate, to varying degrees, in a kind of managerial and industrial way of looking: a literal super-vision. The greater prominence of these latter photographs, both in their day and in the subsequent scholarly literature, suggests their greater success in communicating and rationalizing the emergent discourses of industrialization. Finally, how collectors acquire and display artworks is just as critical to understanding consumer preferences and the shape and evolution of markets as what they acquire. Collecting habits and display strategies are also legible texts with their own grammar, idioms, conventions, audiences, and meanings. In my article on the sudden emergence of high-profile auction sales in New York in the 1880s (Figure 30.4), for example, I argued that the very conditions of trade, which include such diverse phenomena as sales publications, display techniques, and the protocols and conventions of art-buying, were as important to consumers and are as worthy of close scholarly analysis as the features of the artworks themselves.

The way in which patrons display their collections, meanwhile, can also provide important clues to the underlying motivations for and meanings of art consumption. To this end scholars have explored the Enlightenment ideals and expansionist policies that dictated the Indian Hall at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, and the tangled discursive web of republicanism, anti-Catholicism, gentility, and cultural nationalism that structured the collection of the steamboat Albany. Other recent texts have elucidated the social and aesthetic philosophies that governed the presentation of renowned domestic collections of modernism, whether Katherine Dreier’s belief in universal form, Duncan Phillips’s desire to de-radicalize the avant-garde, or Albert Barnes’s progressive pragmatism.
On the whole, much necessary work on the consumption of American art remains to be done, as evidenced by the near-absence of essays on the art of the United States from *The Journal of the History of Collections*. Many of the field’s contributions remain sequestered in dissertations. The relative youth of this subfield has meant that, by necessity, most studies have been more descriptive acts of archival recovery than synthetic analyses of larger trends and developments. And many consumer-oriented archives still await sustained attention.

I therefore echo Betsy Fahlman’s call for scholars to harvest rich archival repositories like the Archives of American Art in Washington, DC, which boasts the papers of hundreds of collectors, dealers, galleries, and auction houses.⁵⁷ Other institutions possess equally invaluable resources for the study of art consumption, most notably the Archives Directory of the Center for the History of Collecting at the Frick Art Research Library, and the Provenance Index and Collectors Files Databases at the Getty Research Institute. The fellowship program and publication prize instituted by the Frick’s Center for the History of Collecting in 2008 will hopefully speed these efforts.

As I hope this brief overview has demonstrated, the art-world headlines that opened this chapter have a long prehistory. The debates from Trumbull and Dunlap’s time about art’s proper relationship to the market still reverberate in our own. But these
continuing developments should also remind us that art historians are market players as well. Any art appraiser can attest that published scholarship endorses and even produces value for individual artworks, artists, and even entire genres. We are no more autonomous than the artworks we study.

Acknowledgments

The research for this chapter was conducted with support from the Fellowship Program at the Center for the History of Collecting at the Frick Collection and Art Reference Library, New York.

Notes

1 Dunlap, 1834, vol. 1, p. 10.
2 Bourdieu, 1984, p. 11.
5 Hirschland and Ramage, 1996, p. 103.
8 For example, Goetzmann, 1993; Agnello, 2002.
10 Bushman, 1992; Katz, 2002; Pyne, 1996; Guibaut, 1983.
11 For example, Lovell, 2005; Rebora, 1995–96.
12 For example, Corn, 1997; McCarthy, 1991; Macleod, 2008; Reist and Zorzi, 2011.
15 Shaw, 2006.
16 For example, Ketner, 1993, pp. 94–111; Metcalf, 1983; Reynolds and Wright, 1989.
18 Stiegitz, 1934.
19 For example, Schjeldahl, 2004.
20 Murphy, 2002, p. 160; see also Blaugrund, 1997; Skalet, 1980.
21 Clapper, 2009; Leja, 2010.
23 For example, Goldstein, 2000; Myers, 2000a.
25 Crane, 1987; Robson, 1995; Mancini, 2005.
29 Eagleton, 1983, p. 89.
30 Bjelajac, 2006; Davis, 1998; Whiting, 1997a.
31 Lovell, 2005.
32 For example, Thompson, 1963.
References


Historicism in the American Built Environment

Kevin D. Murphy

Even in parts of the American built environment that seem most impervious to it, historicism surfaces nonetheless. This proposition—explored and defended below—raises a number of difficult and interconnected questions, both of a theoretical and a historical nature. First of all, could any builder in the North American colonies, or later in the United States, ever have set out to alter the built environment in any way without a consciousness of the past or without participating in existing traditions? If the answer here were “no,” then the presence of a historicist frame of mind on the part of builders or architects would be unremarkable. However, the engagement of new architecture with tradition, with history, has not been consistent since the seventeenth century, but has instead evolved over time. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century exhortations to invent a “new” architecture appropriate to the times and to the American context notwithstanding, notably with modernism, the tangible remains of the past—in the form of landscape development patterns, villages and cities, individual buildings, and more—have never been irrelevant to design and building. In some cases, for instance with the once maligned revival styles of the nineteenth century, forms self-consciously drawn from the history of Western architecture were central to the formulation of new designs. In other cases, beginning with the first settlements and structures produced by the earliest European settlers, tradition was something that provided an essential if unarticulated grounding for new building. Between the poles of outright revival and willful suppression there lie an incalculable number of ways in which builders—including architects, carpenters, owners, housewrights, contractors, urban and regional planners, and others who are involved in creating the built environment—have engaged the material manifestations of the past.

No one work could gloss the full spectrum of these responses, but this chapter will point to some key transitional moments at which historicism went from being an innate part of building practice, to being a self-conscious design strategy. The first
important turning point came by the mid-1820s when the revolutionary generation was aging and dying off and the founding events of US political life were moving from the realm of lived memory to history. In 1824–25, during the course of his famous “farewell tour,” the Revolutionary War hero General Lafayette offered Americans lessons in how to preserve artifacts as evidence of those early years. The celebrated tour coincided with a period of great political division. Many observers at the time, including Thomas Jefferson, hoped that national unity would be created around Lafayette and the memory of the revolution. Several decades later, in the wake of the Civil War, and leading up to the celebration of the national centennial in 1876, the history of the colonial and revolutionary periods was again invoked, at least in part, to solidify the union, although by that time the process of modernization had created certain social, political, and environmental issues that historicism was intended by some to resolve. As the chapter moves into the twentieth century, it will consider the dynamic relationship between modernism and historicism in American architecture and will show how the range of historical sources deemed relevant to new building was expanded, especially in the period between the two world wars. In so doing, it will illuminate the changing American historical consciousness as it exerted an impact on the built environment.

Identifying historicism in American architecture and urbanism is just the first step to understanding something more important: What did it mean for a builder (in the largest possible sense, suggested above) to make a new settlement or structure that embodied forms associated with earlier times and/or places? In other words, what motivated historicism? Some answers to that question have been proposed by scholars, and often they have been suspicious of the intentions of historicists, sensing politically reactionary and socially exclusionary attitudes on the part of those who would bring back forms associated with earlier periods in Western, and specifically American, history that were ordinarily construed as less complex and more static than the present. While it is certainly legitimate and politically necessary to show how, for instance, the late nineteenth-century Colonial Revival movement served to separate “legitimate” Americans from new immigrants—the “wild motley throng” invoked by Thomas Bailey Aldrich in his notorious poem “The Unguarded Gate,” who “[brought] with them unknown gods and rites”—it is equally important to demonstrate how historicism could serve more progressive purposes. Thus, the chapter assesses the intentionality behind historicism and proposes that while the invocation of the past could unquestionably serve to shore up the hegemony of dominant groups—Anglo-Americans, for example—at the same time the representation of the past in material form was a varied and dynamic activity that could also support the claims to legitimacy of otherwise politically and culturally marginalized groups, such as women, especially from the turn of the twentieth century onward. Not only do I argue that historicism was not necessarily politically retrograde, I also maintain that for some architects and others who took an interest in the historic built environment, doing so was also not an aesthetically backward and anti-modernist enterprise, but was instead a way of using the artifacts of the past to invigorate modernist art and architecture in especially creative ways.

This approach avoids the familiar teleology which would propose the widespread emergence of historicism around the time of the nation’s centennial in 1876 (although W. Barksdale Maynard has already argued that it happened much earlier), the subsequent acceleration of preservation activity and other manifestations of
historical-mindedness, and a waning of the historicist sensibility in the early to mid-twentieth century. Instead, I will propose that a confrontation with historic precedent was always a precondition to intervening in the built environment, from the seventeenth century forward, while allowing that encounters with the past were constantly colored by the contemporary situation and by the meanings which had been ascribed over time to the tangible remains of earlier periods. Three general observations will undergird the consideration of a variety of examples here. First, the argument of Barrett Kalter, that it was in eighteenth-century England that history was first seen to be represented in material artifacts, provides the conceptual foundation for understanding historicism in the built environment, as will be explained below.4 Second, it will become clear that the concretization of history in discrete things expanded in scale over time, culminating in the creation of museum villages and historic districts within the larger environment. Third, instead of separating various revivals based on the source materials used—for example, distinguishing the Gothic Revival from the Greek Revival—the chapter will instead consider historicism broadly while acknowledging that over the course of the nineteenth century, as early American material culture increasingly became the subject of antiquarian inquiry and therefore generally better known, it was ever more able to provide source material for revivalists. Regardless of their scale, what unites all of the examples considered here is the conviction, on the part of their animators, that the representation of the past in buildings or larger environments was a powerful means of making history palpable and persuasive.

**Modernity’s Historicism**

The earliest European settlers of North America were heirs to a historical consciousness that emerged in Great Britain and on the Continent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and coincided with the beginnings of the historical process of modernization. E.A. Wrigley writes that “modernization was taking place in England from the sixteenth century onwards (Smith, Marx, Weber and many lesser men are in substantial agreement here although their descriptive vocabularies differ), and was followed by the Industrial Revolution.”5 The English Civil War and the later French Revolution were both seen to signal profound historical breaks between past and present, a consciousness of which is for some a fundamental characteristic of a modern mentality. Such a notion—that the modern age was to some degree disconnected from a past that was foreign to it—was an essential precondition for architectural and urban historicism: the self-conscious preservation of the tangible remains of the past, or their recapitulation in new work, were both based on a belief that traditions in building had been ruptured.6

Since it has continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, modernization has had a vast global impact and is the subject of extensive analysis and critique on a number of levels, especially the degree to which it has attempted to impose on developing countries and regions forms of technological transformation, economic integration, urbanization, agricultural systematization, democratic government, and more, all based on models from the “First World.”7 Setting aside the controversies surrounding the interpretation of modernization, from both historical and policy points of view, it is nonetheless possible to describe a set of transformations that accompanied or
Historicism comprised it and that have a bearing on how the historicity of the built environment was considered over time. Among them, industrialization, urbanization, and the development of national identities have a particular significance in this context. Furthermore, these processes underpinned what was identified from the mid-nineteenth century onward as the condition of “modernity” in which, as Marx and Engels famously put it in *The Communist Manifesto*, “All that is solid melts into air.” This sentiment was echoed by any number of American commentators from the mid-nineteenth century onward who worried that the sweeping environmental changes taking place around them threatened to eradicate the material remains of the past.

Yet that is not to suggest that preservation was simply a bulwark against modernity; in fact, preserving and reproducing aspects of the historic built environment developed in a complex and dynamic relationship with modernization. Those activities in some cases depended upon the changes connected with modernity, as Kevin Lynch points out:

Environments rich in historic remains often follow a particular pattern: once markedly prosperous, they then suffered a rapid economic decline and remained stagnant for long periods, though continuing to be occupied and at least partially maintained. Many now charming New England towns and farming areas were well-to-do in the early 1800s but in the later years of the century sank into the trough of the westward wave of national expansion. This stagnation must then be followed by a second period of wealth (whether belonging to the region itself or brought in by visitors) that can bear the costs of preservation.

Lynch makes clear that modernization, especially as it entailed a boom-and-bust economic system, created pockets of obsolescence in the United States, which were then ripe for rediscovery by outsiders on the basis of their historic resources. Older neighborhoods of Newport, Rhode Island; Nantucket Island, Massachusetts; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; and other New England cities were rediscovered from the last quarter of the nineteenth century as troves of antiquated buildings that were ripe for restoration and available for emulation in new buildings. The architect-historian Lucius Harney, a central character in Edith Wharton’s 1917 novel *Summer*, tells us how widely established was the belief, by that date, that New England’s outmoded rural villages possessed architectural riches when he arrives at the fictitious hamlet of North Dormer (the name itself is noteworthy) looking for old houses to draw, exclaiming, “This place must have had a past—it must have been more of a place once.”

Already we sense the importance that has been attached to the architectural, even spatial, remains of history as modernity has conceptualized its past. Kalter has shown that the belief that history inhered in things, that objects carried important information about earlier times, was not self-evident but instead emerged at a particular moment. “The conceptualization of the artifact as an objective and therefore indispensable form of evidence,” he writes, “was a key feature of antiquarianism.” Particularly in the late eighteenth century, the expansion of antiquarian study of the past in England attached increasing significance to the representation of the nation’s past in material objects. The concept of history’s tangible remains as both important documents of the past, but also as usable in the present, was a crucial one that undergirded American historicism after the revolution.
Historicism in the Early Republic

As much as the establishment of the American republic represented a political break with the colonial past, its visual character was always threaded through with references to the art and architecture of earlier periods, often for political reasons. To take just one example, Thomas Jefferson imagined a classical form for the Virginia State Capitol as early as 1776 and designed the building in the mid-1780s in collaboration with the French architect Charles-Louis Clérisseau using the Maison Carrée, the first-century Roman temple in Nîmes, as a model. For Jefferson, Roman classicism was associated with republicanism and exemplified a rational and austere approach to design that stood in opposition to the flamboyance of eighteenth-century aristocratic taste and made it a suitable touchstone for a new American architecture. As Richard Guy Wilson has observed, Jefferson also laid the groundwork for later interest in American architecture and history with his publication of important historical events in his Notes on the State of Virginia (1781) and through his relationship with John Trumbull, the painter of the Declaration of Independence (1786). From 1817, Trumbull produced a series of history paintings for the rotunda of the US Capitol, which, as Wilson suggests, established official interest in representing and hence memorializing the American past. More importantly, perhaps, the painting cycle also demonstrated the belief that a spatial, bodily immersion in history—as conveyed by the works but also by the neoclassical architectural form of the Capitol itself—was a powerful means for conveying knowledge of the past.

George Washington also occasioned what were among the earliest and most focused discussions about the capacity of historic architecture both to represent history and to shape the contemporary United States in particular, to demonstrate the nation’s long-term political viability. As Jean Lee has shown, from the time that Washington returned to Mount Vernon in 1783, his Virginia plantation was a virtual pilgrimage site for Americans from a wide variety of backgrounds: “In eighteenth-century travelers’ experiences—and meanings ascribed to them—one finds recognizable beginnings of the process whereby Mount Vernon was incorporated into the remembered Revolution.” Over their lifetimes, George and Martha Washington received many visitors, and even in their absence the house itself remained a powerful physical manifestation of the man. In addition, the house contained Washington’s papers documenting his military career and was reportedly full of “trophies of American valor by sea and land.” One object on view was especially significant: the key to the Bastille which Lafayette had sent to Washington on March 17, 1790, with a print of the destruction of the famous prison and a letter that stated, in part: “Give me leave, my dear General, to present you with a picture of the Bastille just as it looked a few days after I had ordered its demolition, with the main key [sic] of this portal of despotism—it is a tribute which I owe you as a son to my adoptive father, as an aid de camp to my General, as a Missionary of Liberty to its patriarch.” The destruction of the Bastille was understood as a defining event of the French Revolution, and the key was particularly poignant in the way that it transformed the space of Mount Vernon from a domestic one to a public and political one in which the American Revolution was commemorated and connected with the larger, international revolutionary movements of the late eighteenth century.

Washington’s entombment at Mount Vernon following his death in 1799 only increased the potency of the site as a material manifestation of the revolution. Lafayette’s famous and emotional visit to the tomb, as part of his 1824–25 tour, deepened the
attraction of Mount Vernon and also connected it to a major conceptual shift that took place in that decade, and which decisively and permanently established the significance of objects, including architecture, for conveying memory of the revolutionary period into the present. Lafayette’s tour coincided with what was perceived to be a transition whereby the revolution, which had until then been the stuff of living memory, was written into history. The fact that the famous battles for independence were by then nearly fifty years in the past, and the belief that America’s early political leaders were quickly dying off, motivated the concretization of the historical record in material objects. Lafayette was instrumental in that process. For example, in Lexington, Massachusetts (the site of the famous Revolutionary War battle of April 19, 1775), in August 1824, a member of the crowd showed Lafayette a gun, “the one which first answered the fire of the English at this place in Lexington.” The general and his company examined the firearm, then “[i]n returning it to the young man, the General counseled him to inscribe on the grip the date of April 19, the name of the brave citizen who made such beautiful use of it, and then to place it in a box in order to preserve it from the ravages of time. The young man was touched by this advice and promised to follow it.”

In every major city he visited, Lafayette was received by legions of dignitaries and throngs of admirers from every walk of life; in many places he was paraded through the streets where temporary triumphal arches marked the spots where the general would address the crowds. Such street furniture harked back to Roman antiquity as well as to Roman triumphal military processions; architecture connected the American Revolution to democratic traditions that were grounded in antiquity at the same time that it underscored how history was more than a matter of books and documents: it was experienced in space. Moreover, this history was widely considered to be politically advantageous for the union. Thomas Jefferson predicted at the outset of Lafayette’s American tour that “the Nation’s Guest” would be “rallying us together and strengthening the habit of considering our country as one and indivisible.” Later, Jane Charlotte Washington, who managed Mount Vernon between 1832 and 1842, made a similar point about her forebear’s home when she expressed the belief that, by honoring George Washington’s memory at Mount Vernon, Americans would “cement more firmly the ties, that bind us together as a Nation.”

In the 1830s it was not just earlier American architecture that was used for political ends. That decade was also decisive for the Romantic revivals that exerted an important impact on US builders in the middle of the nineteenth century. Both the historic Greek and Gothic styles, which were becoming better known through antiquarian publications at that moment, were emulated in new buildings of many different kinds; indeed, for some observers the ubiquity of columns, entablatures, and pediments signaled a profligate and indiscriminate use of neoclassical forms. For instance, the Boston architect Ammi B. Young, who was trained through a brief apprenticeship with a practicing architect (as were most American architects at that point) executed commissions in a variety of historic styles from the early 1830s up until his appointment as supervising architect to the US Treasury in 1852. Early in his career, in 1837, he won the important commission for the Customs House in Boston, but received criticism in the *North American Review* even before the building’s completion in 1847 for having used a Greek temple form (in granite) surmounted by a dome (a Roman form), which created “an incongruous and absurd pile … a mass of jumbled features and discordant characteristics … a blankness and poverty of design” that resulted from the architect’s over-reliance on published drawings of antique monuments by British antiquarians.
Similarly, in 1846 the *New York Mirror* lambasted the Gothic Revival house designs published by William H. Ranlett, concluding that “there can be nothing more grotesque, more absurd, or more affected, than for a quiet gentleman, who has made his fortune in the peaceful occupation of selling calicos, and who knows no more of the middle ages than they do of him, to erect for his family residence a gimcrack of a Gothic castle.” On the other hand, many observers felt that the medieval European styles, associated with the origins of Christianity, were appropriate to contemporary American ecclesiastical architecture. And however much the use of Greek-inspired forms may have lacked a specific typological and functional rationale in the United States, as Young’s critic claimed it did, the revival nonetheless had political resonance in the eyes of some. The aesthetic preference for massive Greek forms was supported in part by American identification with Greece in that country’s war for independence fought against the Ottoman Empire between 1821 and 1832. As an American chronicler of and participant in the conflict, Samuel Gridley Howe, commented in 1828, “The revolution now in progress in Greece, differing certainly in some important respects from our own, is in others of equal importance.” The reuse of Greek forms, then, created associations for viewers with the international efflorescence of republican revolution, which began at the end of the eighteenth century, as well as with the American Revolution, then nearly a half-century in the past. Such revivals underscore a modern mentality that saw all architectures of the past as potentially viable material for contemporary design.

The Invention of an American Tradition

Well before the Civil War, historic architecture had thus been construed as politically useful to the nation, and the styles developed in earlier periods had been made available to contemporary builders. In the wake of the cataclysm, which had incontrovertibly demonstrated that the union was not inviolable but fragile, the imperative to represent US identity in architecture and in historic environments gained further momentum. This growth in historicism was also a function of the education of prominent American architects in European, and especially French, institutions. The professionalization of architectural design in the last quarter of the nineteenth century placed a premium on education at an established European school or at one of the few new schools of architecture in the United States. Some of the most noted American architects of the period, starting with Richard Morris Hunt in 1846, studied with French architects who were associated with the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. In Paris, Americans were steeped in a design method that deployed classicizing forms for contemporary uses.

In England as well, American architects encountered historicist architecture, as noted by Robert Swain Peabody, a Boston designer who was educated in his home city, in Paris, and in the London office of architect Alfred Waterhouse. At the Atelier Daumet in Paris, Peabody met Charles Follen McKim. The two men would return to the United States around 1870 and establish large and influential architectural firms in Boston and New York—Peabody & Stearns and McKim, Mead & White, respectively. Both men were engaged with the historic character of the built environment in two key ways, and they played important roles in the architectural profession on a national level. First, they extended to early American buildings the practice—begun in the eighteenth century by British and French antiquarians—of drawing and publishing the surviving monuments of antiquity and the Renaissance. Second, they produced new works that blended historicist
motifs from all the Western traditions to which they had been exposed, on the Continent, in Great Britain, and in North America. However heterodox their sources were, they nonetheless perceived their own revivalism to be appropriate in the American context.

Peabody made this point explicitly in a series of articles published in the Boston-based American Architect and Building News. Among these was “A Talk about ‘Queen Anne,’” first delivered as an address to the Boston Society of Architects on April 6, 1877, in response to a previous, critical, discussion of contemporary architecture in Great Britain that revived vernacular forms ostensibly associated with the reign of Queen Anne (1702–14). Peabody defended the Queen Anne, which would naturally have interested him since he had been apprenticed in England. Affinities between the work of England’s foremost Queen Anne architect—Richard Norman Shaw—and that of Peabody and his contemporaries, including H.H. Richardson (Figure 31.1),

![Image](image_url)

underscore their awareness of contemporary British architectural culture. In his talk, Peabody likened English revivalism to historic American architecture, and justified the invention of a corollary to the Queen Anne in the United States:

To those who do believe in revivals, “Queen Anne” is a very fit importation into our offices. There is no revival so little of an affectation on our soil, as that of the beautiful work of the Colonial days. Its quiet dignity and quaintness and elegance, always attract us. It is our legitimate field for imitation, and we have much of it to study right in our own neighborhood. In fact, any one who in summer drives over the ancient turnpike from Hingham to Plymouth will not only pass through a beautiful country full of old homesteads, but will find the sunflowers still nodding behind the gambrel-roofed houses that line the road through Queen Anne’s corner.28

Although framed as a justification of an imported revival style, Peabody’s essay ended by advocating renewed interest in early American architecture, and indeed, in entire landscapes that possessed extensive collections of historic buildings, such as southeastern Massachusetts, which he calls “Queen Anne’s corner.” Peabody sees New England through a sensibility trained in England to value local vernacular building traditions. When he refers to “gambrel-roofed houses” he is likely thinking of the famed seventeenth-century Fairbanks house in Dedham, Massachusetts, which was among the early vernacular buildings admired by architects in the 1870s.29

The conceptual association between the Queen Anne and the American colonial was made by McKim in 1876 when he renovated the eighteenth-century Dennis house in Newport and turned the former kitchen into a spacious stairhall—the sort of “living hall” first used by Shaw.30 The following year, McKim and his architectural partners made what became a famous “Colonial Tour” of New England, visiting and drawing some iconic sites. Among them was Indian Hill at West Newbury, Massachusetts, the home of Ben: Perley Poore (who insisted on writing his name with a colon), the construction of which had been originally inspired by a visit to Sir Walter Scott’s house, Abbotsford, in Scotland. From the early 1850s, Poore had transformed his family home into a picturesque shrine for a collection of antiquarian relics. Among its highlights was a “colonial kitchen” (Figure 31.2) much like those at contemporary expositions.31

Around the time of the centennial, then, a conceptual foundation for a revival of early American architecture had been established, based on contemporary English practice, and to some degree on French architectural pedagogy which stressed drawing and learning from tradition. The Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, like other similar events, built on the revivalist mentality and featured spaces that demonstrated the power that immersion in historic environments could exert on visitors. The “colonial kitchen,” for example, which typically contained a massive fireplace and obsolete cooking equipment such as iron kettles hung from cranes, was a staple of fairs and expositions and provided an opportunity to re-enact such aspects of early American domestic life as open-hearth cooking. As Abigail Carroll suggests, the colonial kitchens emphasized hard work and the virtues of domesticity, but:

spoke more of Victorian middle-class and later, Progressive Era values than of Early American realities. Colonial kitchen exhibits three-dimensionalized this motif, providing an opportunity for engaging its mythology in a more active, experiential, and
transformative way. Indeed, visitors at colonial kitchens did not merely tour carefully curated spaces; they became actors in dramas that these spaces facilitated.32

Colonial kitchens subsequently became part of other manifestations of historicism in the built environment, including newly built houses as well as many restored public and private buildings such as Indian Hill. The imagery of tranquil domestic life conveyed by the kitchens provided the political justification for the Colonial Revival in the half-century that followed the Civil War, just as the revival of other traditions had been considered useful to the nation in earlier periods.

**Modernism’s Historicism**

From the immersive experience of the colonial kitchen, it took only a minor conceptual leap to suggest the creation of entire historic neighborhoods and towns. These places were either newly built in historic styles, made by bringing together groups of salvaged historic buildings from different locations, or were complete restored towns, of which Colonial Williamsburg, in the 1930s, was the most nationally influential.33 For the same reasons that the public gravitated to colonial kitchens—especially for their associations with a period that was putatively morally superior and socially less complicated than the
present—home builders and owners were attracted to neighborhoods that drew on community models from the distant past, either European or American. During the first several decades of the twentieth century, urban enclaves and suburban developments were built to mimic both medieval and colonial settlements. To take but one example, in 1924–26 John Nolen and Philip Foster planned the community of Windsor Farms in Richmond, Virginia, for magnate Thomas C. Williams, Jr., whose own “reconstructed” fifteenth-century English manor house, Agecroft Hall, provided a focal point on the James River, along with Alexander and Virginia Weddell’s Virginia House, which incorporated elements of a sixteenth-century English building. Other, somewhat more modest, houses in Windsor Farms echoed the English vernacular domestic architecture that had been promoted as a model throughout Great Britain and the United States in conjunction with the turn-of-the-century Arts and Crafts movement. Popularly associated with pre-modern and pre-industrial society, the quintessential English cottage embodied a romanticized conception of domesticity without the challenges posed by urban life, factory production, and other modern developments.34

Associations with such personal and architectural characteristics as honesty, integrity, and sincerity combined to make certain revival styles the predominant mode for American building from the turn of the century through the 1930s. During the Progressive Era, as well as in the depths of the Great Depression, economic woes contributed to an appreciation for early American architecture among critics, architects, builders, and owners on the basis of its ostensible austerity and restraint, in pointed contrast to the extravagance of some Gilded Age design.35 Moreover, the characteristics attributed to revival styles—especially to the colonial and Greek Revival styles—also applied to modernist architecture, which became better known in the United States during the late 1920s and early 1930s. For example, the longtime editor of the influential magazine *House Beautiful*, Ethel B. Power, wrote in 1935 that “a large degree of the popularity of the Colonial house is due to its economy of construction,” which was typically expressed in simple, rectangular plans and unbroken rooflines.36 Power must certainly have been thinking of the implicit comparison to supposedly economical and efficient modernist houses, since her partner, architect Eleanor Raymond, had written in 1931, in a book about historic Pennsylvania architecture, that “[o]bservation of the modern movement, both abroad and at home, and a close study of these old Pennsylvania buildings will clearly show that the motives and ideals of both are the same.”37

Although a popular trope of architecture magazines and building competitions of the interwar period was a concocted battle between historicist and modernist architecture, some critics and designers such as Power and Raymond drew attention to the positive characteristics shared by the two modes, often construed in opposition to “Victorian” architecture. Thus, one important strain of American architecture from the 1930s through the 1970s drew on historic architecture for its inspiration, and particularly on vernacular buildings like farmhouses, sheds, and barns, to invent a North American corollary to European modernism (Figure 31.3).38 The perception of the historic built environment in this instance was unique. In earlier periods, the architecture of the past was seen as fundamentally disconnected from present-day building but available as a source of inspiration down to the level of specific motifs. Like nineteenth-century revivalists, modernist advocates of the vernacular perceived the past as essentially disconnected from the present; the difference was that modernists did not seek to revive past styles per se but rather sought commonalities between tradition—which they saw as dead—and their own enterprise. Doing so they, perhaps paradoxically, justified their own practice on historical grounds.
Although historicism was often construed as the enemy of modernism, as aesthetically retrograde, in fact an engagement with historic precedent often enriched the work of modernist architects. By the same token, as much as restoration and reconstruction projects have often been associated with reactionary political positions, racism, and xenophobia—when, for example, the history of slavery was elided in the initial presentation of Colonial Williamsburg, or colonial history and architecture were incorporated into efforts to “Americanize” immigrants—in other instances cultivating the historic character of the built environment became a way to create an alternative community or take an important public role when doing so was otherwise impossible. For instance, commenting on the very early efforts by the Mount Vernon Ladies Association to preserve Washington’s home, Lee writes that in the wake of political battles over responsibility for the place it became clear that “If the site was to be rescued and the nation redeemed through it, men clearly were unequal to the task. Sectional strife and competition had rendered Congress and the Virginia legislature impotent in this regard … Hence, only women—politically disenfranchised women—could save the nation’s most sacred place.”

Women’s hereditary and patriotic societies, like the Daughters of the American Revolution or the Colonial Dames of America, which purchased the former Mount Vernon Hotel in Manhattan in 1924, restored it, and opened it to the public as the...
Abigail Adams Smith Museum in 1939, made significant contributions to the preservation of the historic built environment. While their objectives often included preserving the socially and politically elite position of the Anglo-American upper class, these women nonetheless established public and civic roles for themselves at a time when they were discouraged, or even barred, from engaging in professional work. Also important to the early historic preservation movement were many single women and men who established museums, historical societies, and activist groups—such as the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities founded by bachelor William Sumner Appleton in 1910—or who turned historic houses into private enclaves where they could create communities outside the restrictions of bourgeois culture, with its emphasis on the heterosexual family.

For instance Henry Davis Sleeper, the society decorator who began his whimsical summer house “Beauport” in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1907, delved into the historicist culture of his time and undermined its well-established nationalistic associations. He created a highly personal, yet persuasive and influential space, full of old architectural fragments and esoteric collections. Beauport started out “Gothic” and became “colonial”; it was published widely and became the centerpiece of a bohemian summer colony.

At the moment that European modernism became familiar to Americans in the 1930s, the industrialist and philanthropist Hiram Halle adapted the idea of the historic village to his own socially progressive purposes. Like Sleeper, Halle incorporated pieces of historic buildings into new construction, but the scope of his vision was much larger: he renovated some forty houses and other buildings, principally in Pound Ridge, New York, north of New York City, starting in 1928 and continuing until his death in 1944 (Figure 31.4). When he renovated nineteenth-century houses, he removed the “Victorian” details that offended him and made them more colonial. His transformation of Pound Ridge into a quaint historic town went further: he also rebuilt stone walls to emphasize the area’s agricultural past. In some respects, Pound

Figure 31.4  Walter D. Gillooly, architect, sketch of Halle-Salem House reconstruction (façade), Pound Ridge, New York, 1930s. Source: Courtesy of the Pound Ridge Historical Society.
Ridge followed Lynch’s paradigm whereby economically disadvantaged villages, through infusions of capital, are reinvented as historic sites. Halle’s architectural projects complemented his philanthropic efforts. At the same time that he supported financially the University in Exile—an extension of the New School for Social Research, which employed academics who had fled fascism in Europe—he also provided employment in Pound Ridge for Jewish exiles, as well as for unemployed locals during the Depression, who worked on his renovation projects. Whereas some early twentieth-century restoration projects—of the Paul Revere House in Boston’s Italian North End neighborhood, for instance (Figure 31.5)—were intended to wrest venerated sites away from immigrant owners or residents and put them again under WASP control, Halle neatly inverted such a practice: he marshaled historic preservation for the benefit of new Americans.41

Hiram Halle’s rehabilitation of Pound Ridge suggests the expanded scale of history-making in the built environment by the 1930s. Scarcely a century earlier, the
veneration of old buildings, such as Philadelphia’s Independence Hall or Mount Vernon, had been anomalous activities amid the rapid construction and urbanization that accompanied the modernization of the United States. In the ensuing decades, however, the revival of historic styles and the renovations of buildings, neighborhoods, and entire towns became plausible, even urgent, projects as a consequence of the transformations that together constituted modernity. Projects like Halle’s, especially in the postwar period, often led to gentrification as the rehabilitation of housing made it more attractive, expensive, and ultimately unaffordable for the lower and middle classes, particularly in desirable cities like New York, Boston, and San Francisco. Thus, Halle’s renovations eventually made Pound Ridge an elite enclave, out of reach for the class of workers he had intended to help. Such scenarios show how difficult it is politically, economically, or socially to categorize the impact of historicism in the built environment, but they do demonstrate what a complex and fascinating phenomenon it has been.

In the twentieth century, aesthetic modernism was equated with social, political, and economic progressivism, and the opposite relationship was also implied, of historicism with cultural and social conservatism, as well as with economic and technological backwardness. Such pat formulations must be dispensed with, for they blind us to those moments at which interest in the past, or involvement in historic preservation, functioned in more complex and even contradictory ways. An exploration of older architecture could sometimes feed the development of a modernist idiom, and the celebration of the nation’s past could occasionally work against the forces of conservatism that it often endorsed, and instead challenge prevailing views of history or of the present moment. As people with complex relationships to the past made their views manifest in the built environment, they created powerful provocations to examine our own connections to the national past.

Notes

1 Weaver, 1986; Cummings, 1979.
2 Aldrich, 1895, p. 16.
4 Kalter, 2012.
5 Wrigley, 2000, p. 108.
10 Brown, 1995; Giffen and Murphy, 1992.
14 Wilson, 2006.
References


The Painting of Urban Life, 1880–1930
David Peters Corbett

The historian and critic of American society and literature Van Wyck Brooks (1886–1963) commented in 1918 on what he saw as the characteristic forms of American settlement:

All our towns and cities … share this alternating aspect of life and death—New York as much as the merest concoction of corrugated iron and clapboards thrown together beside a Western railway to fulfill some fierce evanescent impulse of pioneering enterprise. Like a field given over to fireworks, they have their points of light and heat, a district, a street, a group of streets where excitement gathers and life is tense and everything spins and whirls; and round that lie heaps of ashes, burned-out frames, seared enclosures, abandoned machinery…¹

Brooks's vision of American settlement stresses its provisionality. The “merest concoctions” of flimsy building materials, temporary but devastating “clapboard” interventions in pre-existent space, somehow produce for Brooks the same impact and emotional tone as the might of a world metropolis like New York. Both are conditional, their buildings, no matter how grand, mysteriously impermanent and disconnected from the ground over which they lie in grids and abstract systems. Like the filled-in declivities and flattened hills of Manhattan Island, they disdain the topography beneath.² For Brooks this impermanence is connected with the urgent processes of American change as “alternating … life and death.” On the one side, there is a thrilling dynamism and energy; on the other, a bleak landscape of ashes and dust. Turn the corner and you are in the desolation, the world that has been used and abandoned.

In Brooks’s diagnosis, American “nature has been robbed and despoiled and wasted” by this violent human activity, the “temporary gains” offered by individualism and
ambition and the net of settlement and human landscape laid over the world, and is now “taking its revenge.” Writing in the same years as Brooks, the poet John Peale Bishop and the literary and social commentator Edmund Wilson also found life in interwar America to be corrupted and misused, “a sort of death,” so that “the city streets” seemed to them “as deep and as dark as graves” and “the great buildings ... like tombs where the dead lay tier on tier.” Like Brooks, they attribute this to the fact that “our environment and age have at last proved too strong for us.” For all three commentators, urbanization and the revenge of the natural order are hard to separate. Lurking beneath the sparking, vital energies of American materialism, and obscured by the fierce “concoction” of its settlements, nature returns as an implacable double.

This chapter is about some of the major ways in which American painters depicted the city over the fifty-odd years between 1880 and 1930, years when urbanization became a dominant force in American life. It is also about the continuing presence of nature in that story, both as expression of American experience and as threat—a view of America that Brooks called that of “a civilization that perpetually overreaches itself,” so that it is “obliged to surrender again and again to nature everything it has gained.” To reflect its historical importance, I will concentrate on representations of New York City during this period, although the phenomena I describe are not confined to New York or to the East Coast. The responses of authors like Brooks, Peale, and Wilson to what they saw as the materialistic disdain for the natural in American society echo wider debates of the time about the change and evolution that the great industrial and commercial cities represented. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century Americans had become powerfully conscious that their nation, long exemplified through natural symbols and thought of as an overwhelmingly rural society, was in reality an increasingly urbanized and industrialized land. This was a process that had been in train since at least the early part of the nineteenth century, but its pace and energy gathered a new speed after the Civil War, so that by the 1880s America seemed increasingly to demand of painters, authors, and others that it be represented most profoundly through the life and character of its cities.

In this historical unfolding, the legacy of the great nineteenth-century landscape tradition played an important if shadowy role. As the predominantly rural character of the nation began to slip away, or came to seem incapable of imaginatively enclosing the new conditions of American experience, the natural as the vehicle for the expression of national concerns continued to be a defining principle for the new art of the cities. Both the experience of the continent and the sense of evolution and growth characteristic of US society in the nineteenth century were given a compelling visual form in the landscape works of Frederic Church and others. This heady, vigorous, civic view of the role of painting in the national consciousness offered Americans a cogent view of their world and nation and made it a principal expression of the developments and characteristics Americans thought central to their identity and future prospects. Something of that highly charged role contributed to the formation of American city painting towards the end of the century.

During these years, artists from Childe Hassam to George Bellows evolved images of New York that transformed its streets and skyscrapers, sidewalks and brownstone houses into echoes of natural forms, canyons, crags, and bluffs. Hassam’s Lower Manhattan (View down Broad Street) (Figure 32.1) presents New York as a classical city hewn out of the living rock like the Roman and Arabic city of Petra. The antiquity and exoticism of Petra in present-day Jordan had fascinated Westerners from its discovery in 1811,
its most striking feature being its extraordinary architecture of temples and tombs, a substantial number of which are carved from the soft red sandstone of the area and which open out into passages and caves within the rock. Not only does Hassam’s canvas exploit the prestige and glamour of Roman architectural practice, but it reflects the...
identity of man-made structures and natural forms. Hassam’s beetling architectural cliffs and the narrow gully of the streets shrink the human to the point where nature as potent symbol and extra-human scale can be mobilized to provide a usable language to describe the new urban and commercial power of the city. New York as nature trades on a sense of sublimity as “that state of the soul, in which … terror” is “the ruling principle.” This is what Leo Marx long ago identified as “the rhetoric of the technological sublime,” in which “the new mechanized landscape itself” transforms “the entire relation between man and nature,” and ends up transferring the sublimity of the landscape to the railroad, factory, and city.

In a different and less celebratory idiom to Hassam’s, Bellows’s River Rats (Figure 32.2) positions his tiny protagonists at the foot of a slick, perpendicular cliff of earth. The columns and classical architecture, depicted without irony in Hassam’s painting, are represented in the Bellows by the uneven heap of houses tottering above and by the piles of the wooden dock, which suggest columns and entablature. However different in their readings of the situation, both paintings insist on the city as transformed nature and as stupendous, overwhelming, and impressive in its dramatic size.

The art historian Wanda Corn notes that 1900–10 was the moment when “the classic trademark images of Manhattan … took root” and “established a basic

Figure 32.2 George Bellows, River Rats, 1906, oil on canvas, 77.5 × 97.8 cm. Private collection, Washington, DC. Source: Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington.
As part of this evolution of representational categories, New York was invoked by artists as gigantic and sublime, and was imaged by the toppling skyscraper-urban skyline it presented from the waters of the bay. Even at the small physical scale of works on paper such idioms applied. Joseph Pennell’s influential images of the city offer the viewer now familiar panoramas of skyscrapers and bustling, dynamic energies of monumental verticality or, as in *The Bay, New York* (Figure 32.3), more distant views that utilize the lurid vigor of the sky as an enhancement of the sublimity of the city’s architectural forms. This association of the power and authority of the city of New York with its watery natural context appears as a regular trope. Henry James, returned to a transformed America after his long self-exile in Europe, gives a forceful evocation of the sublimity and power of New York City from the vantage point offered by “the restless freedom of the Bay.” “The wide waters of New York inspire me,” James wrote, their “real appeal, unmistakably, is … the appeal of a particular type of dauntless power … the most extravagant of cities, rejoicing … in its might, its fortune, its unsurpassable conditions.” James goes on to describe it as a natural scene which mediates the “power” and “motion” of the city.12 Like Hassam’s natural-architectural hybrid in

---

**Figure 32.3** Joseph Pennell (American, 1860–1926), *The Bay, New York*, 1922, aquatint, image: 7 1/8 × 8 7/8 in. (18.9 × 22.6 cm). Source: Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the artist, 25.37.
Broad Street, James’s watery New York combines human and natural power, but in ways that are hard to express or understand, and that quality is the guarantee of its natural state, the alienness and sublimity of the world beyond the human landscape.

John Sloan’s *Wake of the Ferry, No. 1* (1907; Detroit Institute of Arts) offers the stormy waters behind the ferry as metaphor or equivalent for the towers of Manhattan Island visible at left. Sloan’s watching figure absorbs the sight, taking in garbage scows as well as skyscrapers and making concrete something of the implications of James’s industrial power made manifest in the Bay. But most versions of this trope do not possess Sloan’s Ashcan School grittiness, preferring their exaltation neat. The young Midwestern painter Eugene Witla in Theodore Dreiser’s autobiographical novel *The Genius* (1915) first arrives in New York via the crossing from Jersey City. The watery epiphany he experiences there is similar to James’s but posits an absolute identity between American nature and culture. “He walked out through the gates to where low arches concealed ferry boats, and in another moment it was before him—skyline, bay, the Hudson, the Statue of Liberty, ferry boats, steamers, liners. … It was something he could never have imagined without seeing it, and this swish of real salt water, rolling in heavy waves, spoke to him as music might, exalting his soul. What a wonderful thing this was, the sea—with ships and whales and great mysteries. What a wonderful thing New York was, set down by the sea, surrounded by it—this metropolis of the country, the world.”

For other visual artists such cultural transformation of nature into urban sublime provoked other reactions. Alfred Stieglitz’s 1898 photogravure, *Icy Night* (Figure 32.4), frames the lights and buildings of New York through an enfilade of bare winter trees and parallel lines of swept snow. Along the center of the track between the trees formed by the piled snow runs a line of human footprints, dwindling away into shadow and towards a distant tree, placed centrally between the two lines of the enfilade. Stieglitz’s image plays off the city and the natural world, linking the two by means of the track of human presence which vanishes in the center of the composition into the deepening shadow cast by the trees. The shadow of one tree falls at the right-hand side of the image out and over a low wall, and the shadows throughout are the result of the artificial light that bathes the scene while the trees themselves are dark as they recede into the sharp perspective created by the composition and starkly illuminated at the front left. The intertwining of landscape and city, natural and artificial here is very deep. The world Stieglitz’s image describes is composed of the city and of nature, but it is also formed out of their interaction. It is both urban and natural, and it is the natural, landscape elements that are allowed to lead and define the picture, while the city is structured through the grid these natural forms supply. The natural, however, is regimented in its turn by human design, ordered into lines and perspectives, and the grid the trees describe already partakes of the organized world of the city. It is impossible to pull apart these two aspects of the scene. The perception of the city—itself rather unstructured and indeterminate in this image—depends upon the net of the trees, which in turn depends upon human intervention and organization.

A sharp contrast to Stieglitz’s elegant and ambivalent composition is the Ashcan artist George Luks’s *Roundhouse at High Bridge* (Figure 32.5). Luks sets the roundhouse of High Bridge Station on the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad against a hazy panoramic sweep tracing the line of the Harlem River and the distant Bronx. Situated in the areas of 164th to 166th Streets, Luks’s motif is one of a number of
paintings of the early twentieth century that take the upper reaches of Manhattan as their subject matter. It is of interest for its forthright representation of the industrial cityscape, as well as for its fusion of disparate traditions. Luks draws on the example of James McNeill Whistler’s expatriate depictions of London. In the 1860s and 1870s Whistler in his nocturnes had transformed London’s dank fogs, industrial shoreline, and dripping darkesses into rapturous signs of an intoxicating and mysterious significance (Nocturne: Blue and Silver, Chelsea, 1871; Tate). By the time Luks painted this section of upper Manhattan, Whistler’s influence had extended far into American painting. The nocturnes of pictorialist photographers such as Stieglitz and Edward Steichen (The Flatiron, 1904), and of American Impressionist painters like Childe Hassam (Fifth Avenue Nocturne, 1895; Cleveland Museum of Art) and J. Alden Weir (The Plaza: Nocturne, 1911; Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC) gave a native turn to Whistler’s London genre.15 These images aestheticize New York as a parade of twinkling lights, mist, or fog and consciously poetic mystery. In the Roundhouse Luks chooses to flex the possibilities of the genre further and to offer something rawer and more demanding. His sky-obscurring vapor is unequivocally industrial and anchored into the group of workaday buildings at left which give the painting its title. There is no sense here of Whistler’s dematerialization of London factories into “campaniles …
and … palaces in the night”; these are, overtly, working sites of mechanized activity.\(^{16}\) The dimensions of the canvas (30\(\frac{3}{8}\) × 36\(\frac{1}{4}\) in.) allow Luks to emphasize the assertive verticality of the smoke, which rises to fill the entire space at left and seems to crash against the clouds and the topmost edge of the canvas and descend again to suffuse the remainder of the panorama. Barbara Haskell has identified paintings of such suburban industrial scenes as “metaphors … for American power and prosperity,” exuding “a dynamic authority that mediated between urban modernity and rural arcadia.”\(^{17}\) But in the case of Luks’s painting at least, the ultimate impact seems more subtle than this implies. The river banks are described in gestural, muddy paint, and the magnificent sweep of the river against the far shore discloses a steadily plodding tug to the right and a dim, dissolving cityscape beyond its curve. Luks’s New York is both natural—its river, ground, and sky in liquid evening colors—and industrial, transformed not only by the glide from day to night but also by the greenish clouds of industrial exhaust that discharge and billow into the air. It is also the case that in both Icy Night and Roundhouse at High Bridge, whatever their differences, there is a sense of the natural as a neglected other, intruding into the world of the city and, to an unacknowledged extent, helping to define it.
Like the interpenetration of nature and the urban in *Icy Night* and *Roundhouse*, the first important group of American city paintings at the end of the nineteenth century, the works of the American Impressionists, are strongly meteorological, as if it turned out to be impossible to imagine the city without also inviting nature into the scene. This description of weather is one of the principal ways in which nature continued to be present in urban painting. Childe Hassam’s *Winter in Union Square* (1894; Metropolitan Museum of Art) inserts the spire of the historic Trinity Church on Wall Street between more modern buildings and swathes the scene in a dense wintry atmosphere. It is one of a large number of snowy days in New York that Hassam depicted, which defined a popular mode continued by artists such as Birge Harrison (1854–1929) and Guy Wiggins (1883–1962), whose tonalist works included a large number of meteorological city paintings with titles like Harrison’s *Madison Square, Rainy Night* (ca. 1910; private collection) and *Fifth Avenue at Twilight* (ca. 1910; Detroit Institute of Arts), which depict city forms and spaces dissolving into the tones and atmospheres of snowstorms or darkening evenings. Meteorology reinserts or preserves the natural in the midst of an otherwise wholly urban scene.

The authors of the catalogue to the 1994 exhibition *American Impressionism and Realism* think Hassam’s *Washington Arch, Spring* (1890; the Phillips Collection, Washington, DC), “epitomizes the Impressionist approach” by beautifying the city: “the painting reassures viewers of the city’s civility and past,” they write, “simultaneously reminding them of Paris and aggrandizing an elegant and historically resonant New York locale.”

The sunlight Hassam depicts bathes his well-mannered subjects—street cleaners, attentive cabman, and promenading well-dressed young women and older men—and articulates their “genteel and euphemistic view of city life, tempering urban realities with artistic choices that [hold] the ugly or the stressful at arm’s length.” Nature here is presented as the means by which any rebarbative or problematic elements in the city are toned down, tucked pleasantly up in a blanket of snow, or bathed in glorious and healthful sunlight. This is just, but another way of looking at it is to say that the natural invests the city in Hassam’s urban paintings. It detracts from or qualifies urban form, softening or veiling the city’s independence and substituting nature as the foundational fact. The consequences of this are significant for American painting’s ability to focus the character of urban experience.

It was during the first decade of the twentieth century that a group of artists began under the influence of the painter Robert Henri to take the streets and everyday life of the city as their principal subject. Henri had already seen New York through the lens of Impressionism as an atmospheric, meteorological vista both natural and urban. The Whistlerian *Cumulus Clouds, East River* (1901–02; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC) transforms the industrial landscape of the riverside into a glorious natural scene, the boats dotted on the shining expanse of the water suggesting freedom and pleasure rather than commerce and labor. John Sloan, George Luks, William Glackens, and Everett Shinn added the stylistic and reportorial techniques they had learned as newspaper artists in Philadelphia to the painterly directness of Henri, and the Midwesterner George Bellows joined the group when they arrived in New York with Henri around 1900. “To have art in America will not be to sit … on a pile of collected art of the past,” said Henri, “it will be rather to build our own projection on the art of the past” and to achieve a truly American art by dealing with American experience.

Henri’s sense of the pressure of history and rootedness on the present continued to be palpable for American artists. But contemporary social
realities drew closer attention. The focus on the sordid, everyday, and challenging aspects of experience in the city led the group to be called the Ashcan School, a gesture towards their representation of the down-and-out or everyday city.

Sloan later clarified the impact of Henri’s values, speaking to his own students at the Art Students’ League in New York about the need to “draw what you see around you. … Make life documents, plastic records about life.”22 Sloan’s Picnic Grounds (1906–07; Whitney Museum of American Art) depicts a lively group of young women flirting with a man of their own age in ways that suggest a considerable physical and personal freedom, symbolized by the modern fashions they wear, clothes that allow physical movement. “Young girls of the healthy lusty type,” wrote Sloan of them in the 1906 diary entry that records the incident at Newark Bay on which the painting is based.23 Other Ashcan pictures take similar subjects, and Bellows was responsible for a number of evocative depictions of urbanity, including the great New York (1911; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC), with its flowing, vivid crowds and toppling skyscraper roofscape rising behind. But the Ashcan artists also responded to and developed Henri’s aestheticization and transformation of the city. Bellows took up Henri’s industrial river scenes, producing a series of evocative, colorist images of upper Manhattan, with deep, sunlit snow, icy blue and glittering white, surrounding the jetties and tugs of the working river (North River, 1908; Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia). Sloan, too, experimented with this idiom (City from the Palisades, 1908; Santa Barbara Museum of Art), framing the city across the river with a verdant natural scene from the New Jersey shore. When Bellows came to conclude his quartet of paintings of the excavations for the Pennsylvania Station site between Seventh and Eighth Avenues and 31st and 33rd Streets in Manhattan, a pungently urban subject, with Blue Morning (Figure 32.6), in which the energy and urban dynamism and destruction of the excavations are recalled in tranquility, he referenced the transformation of what had been a quintessentially urban scene of creative-destructive force into a sunlit landscape. Douglas Tallack notes the “suggestion … of a rural fence, with someone perched on it taking things easy,” a summoning of an earlier American connection with the natural world.24 The gentle atmosphere, sunlight, and rural references are at odds with the location beneath the train tracks and facing towards the completed Pennsylvania Station in a busy part of Manhattan. Instead the transfiguration of the city into landscape, homologues of rural labor, and a benign climate reconceptualize the technological city as landscape and pleasure.

At first glance, it may seem as if the generation that followed the Ashcan artists turned more readily to a direct representation of urban experience along with modernism. John Marin’s vitalist watercolor images of Manhattan concentrate on the vertiginous dynamism and expressive force of the city. In Movement, Fifth Avenue (1912; Art Institute of Chicago), the city bends and flexes under the minatory clock of modern industrial time, sending out striking lines of force which appear even more vigorously in St Paul’s Manhattan (1914; MoMA), transforming sky and clouds into modernist shapes. Adopting the language of European Futurism, Max Weber produced a series of images of New York as visual cacophony and dynamism (Rush Hour, New York, 1915; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC). Weber’s preoccupation with the dynamism and relentless activity of the city was shared by Joseph Stella, who took up the Ashcan interest in urban pleasures in places such as Coney Island and reworked them following an epiphanic discovery of Italian Futurism in Paris during 1912. The results, memorably and accurately described by
Alfred Kazin as “overdesigned paintings,” replay the paintings of the Futurist Gino Severini as electric American energy. Crammed canvases depict the fierce, swirling vitality Stella discerned in the American scene, and Stella spoke in these terms of *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras* (1913–14; Yale University Art Gallery) as the “most intense dynamic arabesque that I could imagine” and of his ambition “to convey in a hectic mood the surging crowd and the revolving machines generating … violent, dangerous pleasures.”

If *Battle of Lights* is too dependent on its European models to entirely convince as a representation of a specifically American scene, Stella’s subsequent and even more ambitious painting attempts to express the characteristically American character of New York. The huge installation of five canvases called *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted* (1920–22; Newark Museum) seeks to overwhelm the viewer with the same synesthesia and visual impact as downtown Manhattan itself. At 88½ × 270 inches (with the dominant center panel higher still at 99¾ inches), *The Voice of the City* takes its spectators, in Wanda Corn’s words, “physically and literally, on a tour of Manhattan’s modern novelties,” from the Brooklyn Bridge to the Great White Way, and from Broadway to the Flatiron Building. These were “all major tourist attractions” of the time, and Stella’s depiction of New York is a version of the representation of the city and its modernity current in the early decades of the twentieth century.
The Brooklyn Bridge, arcing away from the viewer in a seductive swing towards the skyscrapers of Manhattan in the panel at furthest right, was one of the most frequently depicted symbols of New York, and many artists and writers saw it as a symbol of the purity of the ambition, as well as the achievement of modernity and its technologies during the first decades of the twentieth century. It is telling that when he began *The Voice of the City* Stella had already painted *Brooklyn Bridge* (1919–20; Yale University Art Gallery), for the structure, the longest suspension bridge in the world when it was opened in 1883 and a perennial symbol of American technological achievement, seemed a ubiquitous presence in visual, literary, and popular culture. In the short story *He,* for instance, written in 1925, H.P. Lovecraft’s anonymous narrator declares that in “coming to New York” he “had looked for poignant wonder and inspiration” in both “the teeming labyrinths of ancient streets … and in the Cyclopean modern towers and pinnacles that rise blackly Babylonian under waning moons.” And the narrative is careful to conjure up the city “seen … in the sunset from a bridge, majestic above its waters.”

This is from Lovecraft’s over-written period, it’s true, but his evocations of New York city are conventional for their time and display a number of the characteristic tropes through which American cities, and New York in particular, were represented. The later Lovecraft’s fascination, in stories such as “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadeth” (1927), with “Cyclopean” edifices and his imaginative expression of alienness through architecture is in reality one version of this trope of America as technological sublime. For his part, Stella wrote an essay, “Brooklyn Bridge, a Page of My Life,” in language that recalls Lovecraft’s. The bridge is “a weird metallic Apparition under a metallic sky, out of proportion with the winged lightness of its arch, traced for the conjunction of Worlds, supported by the massive dark towers dominating the surrounding tumult of the surging skyscrapers with their gothic majesty … the cables, like divine messages from above.” Stella sees the bridge “as the shrine containing all the efforts of the new civilization of America … the eloquent meeting point of all the forces arising in a superb assertion of powers, in Apotheosis.” Like Stella’s emphasis on the technological city as transformed versions of natural phenomena, Lovecraft’s evocation of the modernity of New York is couched in a romantic language which blends the natural (“sunset … flaming golden clouds”) with human constructions from the past (“incredible … pyramids”) in order to give expression to the understanding of the urban scene imagined through its architectural landscape.

Charles Sheeler’s New York paintings and photographs of the early 1920s evoke a skyscraper city of canyons and plunging perspectives. *Skyscrapers* (1922; Phillips Collection, Washington, DC) empties the scene of human presence and offers the geometric forms and clustered buildings of Manhattan as actors in a non-human and mechanistic drama. The photographs on which Sheeler based many of these paintings are even more concerned with unhuman spaces and perspectives (*New York: Buildings in Shadows and Smoke*, 1920). Sheeler’s city is extra-human, composed of clusters of mountains and canyons of humming, vitalist machinery, the rhythms of which recall the bleakly inhuman landscapes conjured up by Van Wyck Brooks. This fascination with the city as other than human, as a presence in its own right, and as an insistent, haunting element in the landscape, the forms of which it echoes and transforms, was taken up and developed in the work of Edward Hopper.

Hopper denied any direct interest in the social realities of the city. “Though I studied with Robert Henri I was never a member of the Ashcan School,” he said; “it had a sociological trend which didn’t interest me.” In contrast to Sheeler, Carol
Troyen has discussed Hopper’s dislike of skyscraper architecture and asserted that “Hopper knew the modern, skyscraper city but chose instead to bring together the commonplace, familiar, ordinary buildings that were most people’s lived experience of New York. His goal was to record, and by recording to make permanent, the coming together of structures that gave the city meaning.” But if this is true, that meaning is a strangely enigmatic one.

Comparison of some of Hopper’s paintings made towards the end of the 1920s gives a sense of the characteristics of the city as he described it. Automat (Figure 32.7) depicts a single woman sitting at a table in a restaurant of a type common at the time, the food and drink mechanically delivered to its self-consciously modernist customers. The woman stares into her cup, she seems entirely alone, and the plate-glass window behind her reflects the diminishing recession of the ceiling lights but not her back or the furniture. As deeply enigmatic as other figures in Hopper’s work at the time, the woman seems cut off from the surrounding mechanized world that hardly sustains her with the invisible contents of the cup, an extraordinarily impoverished image of nourishment.

Hopper’s paintings, such as From Williamsburg Bridge (1928; Metropolitan Museum of Art), throw their subjects into a fixed, empty, and static existence into which we look from beyond the picture plane. From Williamsburg Bridge induces a
sense of timelessness and stasis: a single, seated figure, immobile against the dark interior of a window, gazes onto a scene otherwise without human presence. Sharply edged shadows and rhythmic architectural features formed by series of windows, pediments, and chimneys give the image a regular, lateral visual pulse. Hopper abandoned the direct representation of the human subject in the window in *Early Sunday Morning* (1930; Whitney Museum of American Art), painting out a figure originally included in one of the second-floor windows and strengthening the sense of both rhythm and emptiness in the result. So strong is the impression of human absence in the painting that it is hard not to read the two vertical elements in front of the building façade, the willowy barber’s pole and the dowdier, stubby fire hydrant, as anthropomorphic.

Hopper’s work, of course, does not abandon the figure, and my point is rather that the evocation of enigmatic scenes and atmospheres can feature human actors but does not have to. However, even where figures are absent their presence continues to be intuited or implied. In the famous *Nighthawks* of 1942 (Art Institute of Chicago), the gleaming, upright twin coffee urns with their hats and clawed feet seem to accompany and observe the human interaction further along the counter. The effect is to compound the impression of enigma and therefore of the uncoupling of human experience from the mechanized contexts of the city. *Manhattan Bridge Loop* (Figure 32.8) describes that relationship, with its bleak, sunlit cityscape and single figure trudging out of the picture plane to the left. In a number of these images experience and the impression of the marks and inscriptions of experience on the surfaces of faces and façades seem shared by humanity and buildings, and more easily discerned in the façades of the latter. The presence of human figures in these contexts gives an impression of their tenuousness, the fragile or precarious connections to the gross weight and sullen gravity of buildings, roads, and sidewalks.

![Figure 32.8](image)

Humanity is shakily connected to the mechanized modern world around it, but that world is full of dark action and potential. Buildings, hydrants, and barbers’ poles seem latent with barely suppressed energies, quivering with watchful anthropomorphic vitality. The people, in contrast, seem enervated, life forces sucked from them so that they are blank, immobile, or enigmatically undemonstrative and emotionless. Compare the smooth, doll-like, and expressionless faces of the women in Automat and Chop Suey with the vitality of the shadows, lights, and glitter that make up the plate-glass window display in Drug Store (1927; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), its twin suspended vases of colored water mimicking eyes, or with the two, paired vertical windows gazing down on the hunched and depressive figure beneath them in Early Sunday Morning. In Hopper, buildings are more alive, more watchful, vital, and emotionally potent than the pensive or gloomy figures who inhabit them without ever entirely belonging to them. Speaking of the 1940 Office at Night (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis), Hopper said that “my aim was to give the sense of an isolated and lonely office interior rather high in the air, with the office furniture which has a very definite meaning for me.”

There is something here to do with the sundering of human experience from the natural in cities. The buildings, bridges, and roads that replace the natural landscape in Hopper leave their human occupants with the discomfort associated with loneliness of sojourns in woods or forests, for instance, the prickling of the neck and scalp and tensing of the muscles of the back as a result of sensing or scanning for presences behind oneself. But in the city these instincts and the capacity to be alert and connected with the natural context vanish, even though the city watches its often hapless citizens as closely as the inhabitants of forests do in earlier American culture. In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” (1835), the American settler leaves the town behind and almost immediately finds himself on “a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through.” “It was all as lonely as could be,” says Hawthorne’s narrator, “and there is this peculiarity in such a solitude, that the traveller knows not who may be concealed by the innumerable trunks and the thick boughs passing overhead; so that with lonely footsteps he may yet be passing through an unseen multitude.”

That pressing sense of watchfulness in nature is translated by Hopper into the solitary figures he places amidst the multitudinous and innumerable buildings that cluster around them, inching closer, or standing arrayed and distant blocking out the sky. Young Goodman Brown meets the Devil in the forest, and if that is unlikely in Hopper’s world, the sense remains that the substitution of urban for natural contexts has not expunged the possibility of some uncomfortable encounter.

When he set out to characterize and praise the painting of Charles Burchfield, Hopper interpreted the world as entirely composed of objects, each pregnant with meaning and a sort of sullen potency:

The look of an asphalt road as it lies in the broiling sun at noon, cars and locomotives lying in God-forsaken railway yards, the steaming summer rain that can fill us with such hopeless boredom, the bland concrete walls and steel construction of modern industry, mid-summer streets with the acid green of closecut lawns, the dusty Fords and gilded movies—all the sweltering, tawdry life of the American small town, and behind all, the sad desolation of our suburban landscape.
Sarah Burns has recently included Hopper amongst artists concerned with memory and the Victorian past,36 and David Anfam has observed the “considerable similarities” between Hopper’s “aims and means” and those of the German Romantic landscape painter, Caspar David Friedrich. “Both rely upon images of solitude and reflection and use the window as a basic symbol of a barrier or threshold between near and far, the internal and the external,” writes Anfam. “In Friedrich the human element, the ego, is contrasted with nature (and the supernatural), often figured as a virtually empty space. Hopper frequently resorts to a tension between the human presence envisaged as an actual person or as an architectural surrogate and the sphere of nature beyond, occurring in various guises dark woods … the night … the sky … or simply a luminous void.”37 For his part, Alfred Kazin saw that “Hopper was an indifferent psychologist, far more interested in architecture than in the human drama.” Kazin also saw that “the rooms and the buildings and the roofs talk more than the people do, and talk for them.” “He is the poet-painter of our total physical environment. … The people moving about in those buildings and that weather are really part of them. They have no life apart from these ‘forces’; they are wholly submissive to their material lives.”38

In Hopper the transformation of the landscape into the American city as a prospect of representation bends back on itself, turning the asphalt sidewalks and lowering skyscrapers and brownstones of the urban scene into a vitalist landscape of inhuman but watchful forces. In doing so, these eerie panoramas of the urban recall Van Wyck Brooks’s summary of American nature and settlement in 1918. In the passage immediately prior to the one I quoted at the start of this chapter, Brooks conjures up “a certain spot in New York … a lonely, sunny, windy plaza, surrounded by ramshackle hoardings and warehouses unfinished and already half in ruin.” This empty spot is skirted by “one of those interminable sun-swept avenues that flank the city on east and west, wide, silent, and forsaken, perpetually vibrating in the blue haze that ascends from its hot cobblestones. … For scarcely a living thing lingers here about the frayed edges of the town.”39 Hopper’s vacant but vital cityscapes possess similar qualities.

During the years I have looked at, it was impossible, or virtually so, for American painters to imagine the city without also imagining nature as a presence within it. It was not simply a matter of reaching for the trope of sublimity, borrowed from the great American landscape tradition, to account for the technological might of the new cities. It is also the case that in many of the images I have examined, there is a sense of the natural as a neglected other, intruding into the world of the city and, to an extent which seemed to them hard to focus or define, helping to make sense of it. In American city painting of this period, the city regularly and persistently witnesses the return of an ever-present nature. The provisional, fleeting quality of American urbanity, noted by Van Wyck Brooks, contributed to this situation, as if the flimsiness of the city in the landscape compromised the urban and left it haunted and oppressed by the presence of the natural beneath its bridges and glittering peaks.

Notes

1 Brooks, 1918, pp. 2–3.
3 Brooks, 1918, p. 5.
References


One evening in 1892 a group of five white men—let us for the moment call them photographers, though we will soon find it more apt to call them a small raiding party—ventured into San Francisco’s Chinatown to take some pictures. The sight of photographers descending en masse was not uncommon. Beginning just two years earlier, in 1890, when the California Camera Club was founded, armies of enthusiastic amateurs, with new Kodaks in tow, began regular outings to Chinatown to hone their skills. Already a tourist attraction, the quarter in the 1890s was becoming a photographic attraction and seemed to lend itself to a range of camera sensibilities.

The case of the five men, however, was somewhat different. Only one of them, Frank Davey, lugged a camera, a large glass plate contraption that, although used frequently by landscapers, was quite rare among street and club photographers. It was simply too bulky, complicated, and expensive and was reserved for professionals like Davey. He was a lead photographer for Isaiah West Taber, proprietor of one of the city’s major studios, and was under orders from his boss to get a pile of pictures for publications and boudoir prints. As the men set out, a casual bystander might have interpreted the sheer number of extra hands as being necessary to get such a camera to work its magic; it required a large tripod, a series of cumbersome lenses with different apertures and focal lengths, a set of lens boards to accommodate different base diameters, a thick stack of glass plates, and because the adventure was in the evening, an additional flash box, operated independently from the camera, with a plentiful supply of blitz-pulver. It was a great camera and, in the right hands, gave great results, but viewing all the many components, one could imagine the orchestration and sheer physical labor needed to get a decent shot.

In fact most of the men knew little about cameras and, rather than being present to wrestle the big machine, they accompanied Davey so as to run interference and allow him to get his pictures “by force of numbers, intimidation and diplomacy,” as one of the adventurers explained. Why? They were seeking, he declared, not just any scene
available to the casual amateur but one which photographers for “ten years ... have been trying to obtain ... without success”: pictures of opium dens. Previously, photographers pursuing such pictures “were driven out, their lives threatened, cameras ruined, and it was generally understood that a man took his life in his hands in making such an attempt.” Under these circumstances, the extra men were like bodyguards or a small phalanx—a raiding party—whose charge was to shoulder their way like rugby players into the dens, beat back the addicts and angry proprietors, and protect the photographer, who was all the while trying to work his enormous camera.

What followed that evening was both comic and cruel. The party forced its way into a basement on Spofford Alley, but before Davey could get his camera ready, the proprietor cut the light, the den’s patrons stampeded, and in the melee of total darkness, the party beat a quick retreat. Next the men tried a place off Jackson Street. This time Davey readied his camera just outside the door and prepared to open the lens as soon as his bodyguards pushed through. The lead raider, a thuggish cop named Christopher Cox, stood prepared “to knock down the first aggressor” so as to give the camera a clear view into the quarters. The door was flung open, Cox tackled the stampede, and Davey exposed a plate (Figure 33.1). He captured a “stupefied smoker” and other “opium fiends” who were preparing to rush the door, but alas, he also got Cox’s hat,

Figure 33.1  Isaiah West Taber, *Opium Den underground, by Flash-light*. The hat in foreground represents Detective who guarded the door while the Flash-light Photographer did the work, No. 1 5829, 1892, albumen silver print. University of New Mexico Art Museum (79.397.1). Source: University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque. Photo: Margot Geist.
which blocked much of the scene. He could not try for another; in seconds the Chinese
were “startled from their sleep in fear and alarm, shouting ‘Ay Yah, Ay Yah’ [and]
groping wildly about and finally running amuck against the wall,” making a photo-
graph impossible. The party tried place after place—there were plenty to choose
from—sometimes using diplomacy, other times bribery, but mostly brute force. The
men broke open doors, bruised patrons, avoided “knife stroke” and “bullet,” suffered
“curses and threats,” repeatedly confronted the “slamming and bolting of doors,” and
at one place even set the ceiling on fire when the flash explosion touched a loose paper
hanging low. At another, the whoosh of the explosion was so strong it blew out all
the den’s candles, rendering the scene illegible. Davey took picture after picture, some
betraying the mad scramble of events, others more restrained and showing what a little
extra time and planning (and perhaps less aggression) could yield (Figure 33.2).

Finally they arrived at an underground den somewhere in the heart of Chinatown
and, along the way, had picked up a Chinese interpreter. The policeman Cox had been
to the place before and, for this locale, decided on a different tactic. It’s worth quoting
the account concerning this den in full:

They next went to a den the keeper of which Detective Cox saluted by name. He
raised his head and nodded in recognition. The detective explained the nature of the

Figure 33.2  Isaiah West Taber, Opium Den underground, by Flash-light. The face of one
smoker was caught in the flash, the others concealed themselves, No. 6 5834, 1892, albumen
silver print. University of New Mexico Art Museum (79.396.2). Source: New Mexico Art
visit and begged the guests to keep their seats. The sight of a mysterious machine on three legs was not reassuring. They all looked uneasy, and some, remembering other engagements, hastily retired. The Chinese interpreter of the party made a long explanation in Chinese and after some persuasion Ah Kwai was induced to return to the pipe, placing himself in an excellent position. The trigger was pulled and off went the flash with an effect such as Ah Kwai had never dreamed of. It took a few minutes for that astonished individual to recover consciousness. A farewell peep at Ah Kwai showed that he had dropped his pipe and was rubbing his eyes, while his companions buried deep in blankets had disappeared from view. A sepulchral voice was heard asking what could have happened and whether Ah Kwai was hurt. “Ah,” said the keeper in Chinese, “I suppose the thing busted and killed somebody, and serve ’em right.”

The narrative emphasizes the fancy new flash and the effects it had on its startled subjects. The photograph emphasizes other aspects of the capture (Figure 33.3). We see a generous bedroom space, complete with a picturesque print of San Francisco Bay on the back wall, a clock to keep proper time, hooks for hats and coats, a small broom to sweep ashes and keep the place tidy (or to gather and reuse the ashes, as we will see), the proprietor holding up to the camera a long, darkened bamboo smoking pipe—a much-sought-after type—and Ah Kwai himself stretched out on a bunk “in

Figure 33.3 Frank Davey and Isaiah West Taber, Underground Opium Den, smoker caught in the act by the flash light. The keeper in the door had extinguished the lights, 1892. Source: © Mary Evans Picture Library / Alamy.
an excellent position.” Unlike Interior of a Horrible Opium Den underground (Figure 33.2), in which the clutter and dishevelment, the jigsaw-like arrangement of furniture and bodies, and the low-hanging, combustible paper shards rule the scene, the photograph of Ah Kwai suggests a neatness and orderliness to the business of opium smoking. And in contrast to scenes with reclining smokers, as captured in most of Davey’s pictures—indeed, most pictures of any sort concerning opium—the photograph of Ah Kwai includes the den’s keeper, who stands fully erect, as if to accentuate both his sobriety and the ceiling’s generous height. The light is robust; the gray tones more or less even from front to back; the plunging space and passageway to the adjoining room carefully elaborated—all these evidence of the careful disposition of the tripod and equally careful management of the lens and powder flash. An open bed is nestled closest to the camera, its sheets and blanket crisply made and pillows and quilts stacked neatly overhead ready for use, like an invitation to the viewer to cozy up and have a puff. It is clear that some house-cleaning was performed between the time Cox and his companions entered the den and Ah Kwai was cajoled by the interpreter to lie back down. Instead of smoking, Ah Kwai prepares the pipe, packing the opium pill into the bowl, as if he were the practiced smoker arranging the opium for a companion about to join him.

The picture was as good as Davey could get that evening. His boss, Taber, seemed to think so. To judge by the sheer numbers of copies that survive, in comparison to others from that evening, as well as by the early and wide distribution of the photograph for publications as far away as London, Taber found it a success, adding it to his list and giving it the long narrative title Underground Opium Den, smoker caught in the act by the flash light. The keeper in the door had extinguished the lights.5 In his title, Taber, too, followed the suggestions of the written account and emphasized the effects of the flash, even going so far as to say the den’s candles had been extinguished and all that remained for illumination came from his flash box. For him, the photographer’s detection and skill delivered the scene.

What should we make of this photograph, particularly the judgment of its success? In what ways can we measure Davey’s accomplishment in the terms set by the evening’s wild adventure? Should we, for example, regard the photograph as the pinnacle of a slumming excursion (a “pluckiest performance,” as one of the adventurers proclaimed), as a kind of titillating cultural encounter?6 How should we interpret the claim that Ah Kwai’s posture constituted an “excellent position”? (Because it lent itself to narrative? Clichés about opium addiction? Aesthetic or compositional ideas among photographers?) And what about the final claim, that the photograph was the result of skillful detection, that it caught its subject in the “act”? (Which act?) This chapter will pursue these and other questions surrounding the representation of this most wanted place, and suggest that such photographs are not only pictures of cultural encounters in Chinatown but also deposits of an array of social relations, and how, under certain conditions, those relations got hardened—figured, captured, frozen—into images. That is to say, the judgment of the picture’s success had something to do with the exquisite madness of life in a port city.7

* 

In the mid-nineteenth century, those journalists, doctors, and politicians who wrote on opium generally took for granted the myriad functions of the drug, including its medicinal qualities as used in different parts of the world. It was offered as a treatment for
dysentery, they explained, a general pain reliever for fever, diarrhea, and vomiting, a comfort for cholera, malaria, even childbirth. In America, it came in different guises—paregoric, elixir of opium—but was most commonly diluted as powder in alcohol, producing the compound known as laudanum, and used as an over-the-counter analgesic and cough suppressant. It was given to men, women, and children of all ages, ingested with food, as drink, in drops, even inserted by syringe. In its liquid-herbal and injectable form, also known as Tincture of Opium, it could be gotten as a home remedy, without prescription, well into the twentieth century. As late as the 1930s, it could be purchased through a mail-order catalogue. It is still available by prescription today.

Although smoking-opium delivered the same palliative and sedative effects in its users as liquid-opium, it was rarely viewed in the same manner. While liquid-opium was construed medicinally, smoking-opium was interpreted socially and carried with it a range of invidious characteristics: idleness, poverty, debauchery, criminality, and much more. Beginning in the late 1870s, the tone of the writings on smoking-opium became even shriller, the distinction between it and its liquid cousin more pronounced, and the drug was judged as offering no relief from pain but only a dubious kind of euphoria and, more often, a numbing, life-draining, destructive stupor that brought about social ills. In addition, the commercial spaces for smoking opium, in contrast to the home where liquid-opium was most often administered, obtained reputations as places of sordid leisure and escape, not much better than a brothel. Its users were not self-medicating; they were addicts who possessed secret “habits.”

All this judgment was due almost entirely to smoking-opium’s relationship with, and widespread use among, the Chinese. “The opium habit,” declared Willard Farwell in 1885, “is a species of intemperance worse, far worse, than intemperance in the use of intoxicating liquors. … [It] has been brought … by the Chinese; and in ‘Chinatown’ proper in San Francisco there is probably not a building occupied by Chinese in which the ‘opium lay-out’ is not found and the vice of opium-smoking indulged in.” In his eyes, opium had seeped into every building in Chinatown—had reached, like a communicable disease, epidemic proportions. Farwell was among the more sensational writers on the subject; he was no friend of the Chinese, wanted to see their total exclusion from the United States, and attributed a wide range of ills to them, including not only the spread of opium but leprosy too, as a way to scare up support. But his assessment of the opium situation, including the fear of contagion, was far from unique among his contemporaries. Opium was “an Asiatic vice,” and in Chinatowns was a “foul blot on society—a hideous, loathsome moral leprosy.” The “whole outfit [the smoking room] has a dirty appearance, causing people who have examined it to wonder how anybody not utterly debased can enter the filthy dens and indulge in a smoke from pipes which have undoubtedly been used by leprous Chinese, and run the risk of contracting contagious diseases.” The dens were “loathsome sinks of pollution,” and the Chinese were alternately pushers, dealers, or diseased addicts. Even William Speer, a Presbyterian minister who founded a school in Chinatown and was pro-Chinese, came to much the same conclusion, declaring the drug was like a serpent, winding “around [the Chinese] its slow and fatal coil and strang[ling] them to death.” Where liquid-opium was consumed as a treatment for diarrhea, in the scare-writings smoking-opium produced diarrhea; in fact it was said to produce nearly all the uncomfortable ailments that liquid-opium was supposed to address. In some instances, in a kind of schizophrenic discharge, it was said to both produce and treat the ailments. The user “becomes unable to control himself and to attend to his business. He
sneezes, he gasps. Mucus runs from his nose and his eyes ... pains seize him in his bowels. ... Diarrhea sets in of a dreadful and most painful description. ... Few, comparatively, recover after diarrhea has become virulent, unless they have access to opium.”

Hysteria surrounding smoking-opium set in, manufacturing an image about Chinatown in which a visit to the den—even to take photographs—could not be anything but a descent into hell, or so one could thrillingly imagine.

The reasons opium smoking became the receptacle for so large a social anxiety are many. First, by the early 1880s US suppliers of opium to the Chinese of China had witnessed their exports trickle to a halt. By then, the Chinese were growing their own in such large quantities that British and US opium chests, once extraordinarily profitable, were no longer needed. There was no longer an imperial reason to justify and explain away domestic opium use; in fact, quite the opposite: the fury for prohibition among the anti-Chinese could be let loose.

Second, the existence of the dens signaled the tenacious existence of a Chinese community supposedly being eradicated with the passage of the 1882 Anti-Chinese Exclusion Act and the official refusal of any new Chinese laborers. Because of the Act, the numbers of Chinese were slowly declining, true, but instead of eliminating the community or, at the least, encouraging laborers to return home in large numbers, it seemed to many observers only to entrench them. The underground den, dug deep into the earth, seemed the physical embodiment of resistance. Third, Chinatown’s supposed filth, most concentrated in its underground, became increasingly the abject example for an American reform movement bent on health and cleanliness as key aspects of an American identity. And fourth, there was an unsettling suspicion that the gatherings underground, ever growing, had to be attributed to something other than the drug’s psychotropic appeal. The dens suggested not only a cult-like sensibility built around stupor but also something oddly cultivating and built around a culture.

It was this last factor, the acculturating aspects of the dens, that journalists, reformers, and illustrators obsessively noted, as if an alien conviviality was being nurtured underground. Take a Harper’s illustration from 1888 (Figure 33.4), where the den is imagined to harbor not only the fog of smoking in the bunks along the walls but a whole range of behaviors organized around the musician in the background. In the call and response of the music, men lean forward to get a better earful, some sip tea and have a bite to eat, others sing softly. The drug’s social effects were not simply limited to the Chinese and seemed, beyond all bounds of comprehension, to attract huge numbers of non-Chinese. The raw numbers told the story. During the 1880s, the first decade after the Act was in place, the amount of opium imported into the United States increased by 60,000 pounds and in the next decade by another 500,000 pounds, bringing the total legal import to a staggering 1.5 million pounds (the smuggled imports were probably twice that amount)—all this at a time when the Chinese population decreased by almost 20 percent. Unless the remaining Chinese were smoking night and day like locomotives, someone else was consuming the enormous excess. A visit to most any den revealed what everyone suspected. “Already the ‘opium joint’ for the use of white slaves to the habit is becoming common in San Francisco, and the ‘opium fiend,’ as he is known here, may be met everywhere,” Farwell observed in alarm.

With hordes of “white slaves” haunting the drug-stores, it seemed to men like Farwell that they were after more than simply the narcotic. “It may sound strange,” a baffled police officer reported to the San Francisco Chronicle about the den’s new inhabitants, “but I have had men who could easily buy their own outfit and the purest opium tell me that when the longing comes on them they cannot satisfy it...
except in a low Chinese den; that the idea of smoking good opium in a clean pipe and in their rooms don’t seem to fill the bill.”

This recognition of the den’s allure—that it somehow “fill[ed] the bill”—cut at least two ways. While opium smoking was interpreted as Chinese in origin and therefore confirmed the degeneracy of a race, smoking for a non-Chinese brought about quite the opposite—not a representation or confirmation of one’s identity but, in fact, an effacement of it. “When a [white] man or woman falls under the bondage of opium, self-respect is lost,” an observer wrote in 1887. “I have seen a man, who was very fastidious before he acquired the opium habit, lying side by side with a dirty coolie, each taking alternate puffs at the same pipe, while the next bunk was stretched, in the deep sleep that opium brings, a wretched outcast of the street, who once claimed to be a woman.”

Addicted, the man becomes like the dirty coolie, the woman, having already alternated puffs with a Chinese, loses her identity altogether and can only “claim” to be white. Such beliefs help us understand another Taber photograph (Figure 33.5), in which two women are captured in the fog of the drug, the one on the upper bunk unconscious, her face deep in her pillow, the other in the lower puffing on the big pipe, her eyes closing into the sweet dream. In the den, their bodies have disappeared into a crumple of cloth (and made available for sex, as the picture hints); their faces are hardly recognizable. Among its worrisome effects, opium seemed to level social differences. Or perhaps more accurately it confused them. By the time of the raiding party’s visit, the opium dens came to harbor an impossibly large anxiety among non-Chinese about the borders of difference, the spaces in which yellowness and its opposites were seemingly dissolved, the means by which the integrity and superiority of white men and women became undone.
There was nothing in smoking procedures that an individual couldn’t perform alone, as Ah Kwai showed, but the process invited a sharing of the labor and a conveyance of skill. And then there was the generosity of the offer—offering the pipe first to an older smoker or perhaps to a novice, a gesture of respect or welcome. View a photograph by another policeman, Jesse Cook, in which two men straddle a single tray and in the preparations converse and share an elaborate pipe (Figure 33.6). We cannot tell whether the man on the right prepares the pipe for himself or his companion. The habit does not seem to produce a selfish addict. “Unlike other forms of the opium-habit,” wrote the physician H.H. Kane, “that by smoking finds a special inducement in companionship. … [Its users] enjoy that state that comes as near as it is possible for an American to come to the dolce far niente of the Italian.”

The convivial nature of the den and the manner in which that sweet and communal idleness seemed part of the allure for non-Chinese smokers were most troublesome for observers, for conviviality had a perturbing way of sliding quickly into community and the organization of community was seemingly based on Chinese social and cultural values. To the non-Chinese, opium represented not only the teeming Chinese resettled on American shores but also the supposedly “Oriental” qualities both loathed and desired in that arrival: the habitual surrender of reason and clarity, the happy acceptance of physical and psychological escape without fear or guilt, and the impassive, even
pleasurable way of confronting the chaos of a port city with a waking indolence. To make matters worse, opium seemed utterly foreign and backward because it simply out-competed money and Western goods in the primitive insatiability to have it. Or, in a variant of that argument, it was the most extreme commodity and turned capitalism on its head because the desire for smoking it outstripped everything else. When used in the den, it leveled, if not rearranged, all the social hierarchies so carefully achieved by the industrializing West. It even positioned its users on the bunks in fetal positions, as if all its adherents, no matter their walk in life, returned to an infantile state of being, longing, and knowing. To the West’s clarity and logic, it offered the irrational and sensual. To the West’s demand for progress, it offered a collective withdrawal to a dream-space seemingly outside of time. No amount of prodding could push the smoker out of his dream; no amount of legal hectoring deterred him from pursuing it. In the depths of the drug, the opium smoker, Chinese or non-Chinese, was happily numb.

In 1892, the year of the raiding party’s visit, the American Medical Association had had enough. It coined a new term, “opiokapnism,” meaning opium smoking and its uncontrollable effects, and called upon Congress to put an end to opium imports altogether.22

* 

To the Chinese, the dens could represent the surrender of reason, true, or the escape from boredom, or the pleasures of lethargy and indolence; for some it could be a stimulant for sex. But by the late nineteenth century opium had so thoroughly
penetrated Chinese society and was smoked by so many Chinese, of all classes, that no single set of reasons could account for its widespread use and social meanings. It could be smoked to seal negotiations among merchants, for example, or viewed on par with tea and taken during and after dinners as part of the diet. In Guangdong, the region in China from which most of San Francisco’s Chinese immigrants came, it was mixed with caterpillar fungus and ginseng to strengthen the lungs and kidneys. Young students who traveled to Beijing to take their examinations smoked on the evening before the first exams in order to promote acuity. In contrast to the claims that smoking brought about a debilitating lethargy, Chinese workers—cooler laborers, chair bearers, boatmen—used it to replenish their energy so as to continue their back-breaking work. “It is a mistake to suppose that when a man begins to smoke the drug, he begins to lose strength and waste away,” observed Frederick Masters, a Methodist missionary in San Francisco, in 1892, “I made a journey of 35 miles in one day borne in a sedan chair by three strong Chinamen who took nothing but opium till they got to their journey’s end. They would carry me at a rapid pace for three hours till they came to a town, then dump me down in the crowded market place and deaf to all remonstrance, rush off to an adjoining opium house, have a quarter of an hour’s smoke, and start again with lightness and elasticity in their tread.”

The dens, that is, carried a variety of uses and meanings for the Chinese. Of the many that we may enlist as counterproposals to those offered by the non-Chinese reformers and exclusionists, let me pursue two of relevance for our photograph of Ah Kwai.

The first concerns the fallout of the mid-century Opium Wars, in which the British simply refused to stop importing the drug into China, despite entreaties by the Qing, and, with battleships, foisted opium onto the population in even more enormous quantities. The wars were brief but deeply humiliating for the Chinese, the result being that drug use, already common, seeped into every social corner and began to dictate a nation’s entire economy. The historian Jonathan Spence estimates that by the 1870s the increased imports, along with domestic production, finally brought about smoking among the peasantry on a massive scale. The effects on the rural population, like that in Guangdong, were devastating. “The disaster spread everywhere as the poison flowed into the hinterlands,” the poet Zhang Changjia wrote in the late nineteenth century. “It was like a flood, conflagration, and rampaging armies all at once, making no discrimination between rich and poor, high or low. … Heroes drown themselves in the depths of a mere length of pipe.” Under these conditions, the dens could also be tinged with melancholy and represent a sadness for, and accommodation of, the Chinese fate in relation to the West. Opium, after all, was still understood in China as a Western drug, even though it had been cultivated in the remote southwestern portions of the country since at least the late Tang dynasty. In 1892, it was still known as “yang yan,” or “foreign smoke” or sometimes “western sea smoke,” a reference to the importing of the drug through Pacific ports, and was part of a class of objects known as “yanghou re,” the Chinese obsession with foreign things.

In this alternative history, opium smoking was not a symbol of a deep Chinese racial character but instead of cultural contact, even foreign imperialism. It represented the destruction of Qing China in the face of Western powers, and its insidious history among the people was an allegory of the nation’s ruin. Far from divine enjoyment, the condition of the addict was tinged with helplessness. Westerners, not the Chinese, were the beneficiaries of addiction. Their pockets were filled with Chinese tael, their...
storehouses packed with Chinese goods, while the Chinese had in return merely the small opium pill that soon went up in smoke. The Chinese confronted in the Western drug not an empowered sense of self but collective loss and devastation.

Where the non-Chinese saw the den as backward and primitive, the Chinese could just as easily see it as modern and all too Western. Where the non-Chinese saw its underground station as evidence of criminality, the Chinese could see it as the proper venue for an imposed habit—subterranean, tucked in the bowels of the earth, pushed into the darkness where just above, at street level in the bright light of day, the colonialsists held sway. The den was like an import of a colonial situation across the Pacific, and in this sense, it suggested that Chinatown, like China, was at the service of the West. Where the non-Chinese interpreted the drug as the most primitive of commodities that disrupted all others, the Chinese could just as easily interpret it as the most modern of commodities that disrupted all ancient forms of fantasy and desire. And where the non-Chinese interpreted the den as a place of outlaw sexuality, the Chinese could interpret it as a place of monumental impotence.

The second counter-story concerns the extraordinary market for opium. In contrast to those contemporaries who deemed the drug an “Asiatic vice” and resistant to the West’s forms of modernity, we might suggest that it was not merely a product of capitalism but, in fact, facilitated its development among the Chinese. The distribution of opium in Qing China was a thoroughly capitalist affair, with the big import houses delivering Patna or Bengali chests to the eastern ports like Shanghai or Hong Kong, where it was further distributed by a network of buyers, sellers, and traders. With the introduction in 1853 of lijin, a tax on goods traveling in the interior, the network expanded to include smugglers, pirates, and black marketeers. Lubricating the network meant countless duties and small brokerage house fees and, more frequently, bribes for the government officials and local functionaries who took a cut—sometimes a ball or, in certain cases, a pikul of opium to use or to try to sell or barter. The legions of sub-distributors knew their markets. If their buyers were wealthy merchants or government officials, they sold the opium pure; if laborers or migrants, they cut it with domestic opium (obtained via yet another network) and sold it cheaper; and if poor, they mixed it with the ashes from used opium (let us recall the small brush hanging on the wall in our picture of Ah Kwai) and sold it dirt cheap. The precise mixture mattered because the profit margins were slim; the retailer had to keep an eye on the amount of Patna opium in any single ball and advertise accordingly. By the time a smoker received his small tin of opium at a joint, the drug had passed through dozens of hands, been measured, cut, balled, and boxed, sometimes several times; the local dealer, a man who was probably no higher up the social ladder than his buyers, upon receiving a coin or two was trying to recoup the money he had already put out on speculation.

What characterized the Chinese market did not stay there; when the Chinese migrated around the globe, they took the market with them and adapted it to local conditions. There were at least six large import houses in San Francisco and Oakland, with the largest directly connected to a Hong Kong supply. From the Bay Area ports, the opium blocks were repackaged and then sold as No. 1 and No. 2, the first being pure Patna, or some compound that could pass for it, and the second being any number of dilutions. Because Chinatown’s dens were becoming increasingly outlawed (though in 1892 importing opium was still legal, and the US government received a handsome tax on it), the cutting and repackaging were best done
elsewhere. Processing houses were set up all around and sometimes outside the city, including as far away as the banks of the American River near Sacramento. The outer houses were safer but of course meant more fees and bribes. Chinese retailers were accustomed to paying off local officials; it was no different in Chinatown. None other than the policeman Cox got his weekly cut; no wonder he knew the dens so well.28

The structure of the opium market took other, more insidious forms abroad, too. In Southeast Asia the Chinese arrived as laborers for the opium farms.29 The migrants not only grew opium for the big Chinese companies but also bought and consumed it, usually from the company store. In these instances, the logic was similar to that of the American factory town, where workers’ wages were continually recycled through the store or on a voucher system, and the companies kept the migrants in a perpetual state of debt. If it was the case that the migrants smoked opium to regain their strength for the daily backbreaking labor—for renewed “lightness and elasticity”—the companies were only too happy to supply pipes, bowls, indeed all the utensils and bunks in the dens. Rather than simply import more workers, they maximized the migrants’ bodies and, in effect, used them up in a calculated assessment of labor costs.

There seem to be no surviving records to suggest how Chinatown’s factories may have been connected to the dens, but there is no reason not to suspect that a similar company structure existed. Importing or smuggling opium was simply too expensive or risky an undertaking for individuals to try alone and could best be handled by the big Chinese companies with enough capital, connections, and manpower—that is, by the wealthy merchants and factory operators of Chinatown. The dens’ keepers were perhaps small dealers but increasingly, given the climate of anti-Chinese sentiment, front men for companies, which could afford the countless bribes, payoffs, and harassment. The opium balls were sometimes sold to smokers in tins, usually five or so ounces of No. 2, at about $8; but in tough economic times or when a smoker was on the dole, he could get a single pipeful for 25 cents or, with ash mixture, even less.30 The single pipes were not necessarily more economical; few smokers found a single pipe of ash mix sufficient: they bought more, and could spend up to $2 a session. Considering that the average daily wage was about 90 cents, some could easily consume their day’s pay in a single session and end up owing large amounts of money. That is, for the Chinese migrants, who frequently arrived in Chinatown in some form of servitude, usually a labor obligation in order to repay the money fronted for their passage across the Pacific, they continued to remain in debt to the companies. Indeed, opium kept them that way.

* 

The opium den, it is clear, was an extraordinary site of conflict—at the very least, it was a focal point for a divergence of anxious opinion and imagination—and of course would attract a photo-entrepreneur like Taber. If the dens had been difficult to picture before and were resistant to the casual cameraman, he would organize a small army to get a snap. The ambition was typical of him.31 Chinatown’s “streets, stores, and restaurants can safely be visited by ladies in daytime,” he explained in a guidebook, “but for [a] night visit,” shudder at the thought!32 He knew most ladies would not partake of the evening adventures, but they could buy photographs.

One way to view such a photograph is to see it as belonging to a network of pictures concerning opium. Indeed, Davey’s pictures prompted other cameramen to get to the
dens and deliver more images (Figure 33.7). The result was, between 1892 and 1906, an avalanche of photographs where virtually none had existed before. Taken together, they established an iconography and narrated the processes and effects of the underground habit, the better to understand, medicalize, criminalize, and police it. Photographers took their cues from Davey’s example, usually making sure to frame and emphasize the cramped, low-ceilinged environs to help characterize the den’s subterranean nature. They were often struck by the clutter and dishevelment. They tried to capture smokers in the act of smoking, in rapture, or simply comatose. And they worked in dim light, with only a lamp or two providing any kind of visibility, and so brought an artificial powder or magnesium flash. Its sudden glare was always apparent in the pictures and, combined with the quality of abruptness and intrusion, gave the scenes something of a criminal air. Among the ramifications, Davey’s photograph and others like it provided evidence for more stringent rules against Chinese immigration, including the 1892 Geary Act, passed the same month in which the photograph of Ah Kwai was first published, which not only renewed the country’s policy of exclusion but also required the Chinese already in the United States to carry identifying cards and photographs. They were officially criminalized, and the day for their total exclusion was not far off.

But another way to view the photograph, as this chapter has been suggesting, is to see it caught within contradictory meanings. The picture does not resolve them but finds a way to figure them; or, to use my earlier formulation, it momentarily freezes an array of social relations and makes them visible. Indeed, what Taber and
others saw as success is another way of saying how the photograph revealed the
den’s extraordinary ambivalence—the uncertainty and fluctuation brought about
by simultaneous imperatives.

Take another look at the photograph. The “excellent position” assumed by Ah
Kwai is a combination of him being captured in the act of preparing an opium pipe
and also, having been coaxed back into position by the raiding party, displaying the
utensils and his procedures to the camera. He is at once doing and showing, smoking
and performing. The “act” he commits is both illegal and yet, with the policeman
Cox managing the scene, obedient to the presence of the law. We might say that it is
an act of breach and compliance, transgression and deference. Or consider the pres-
ence of the keeper. In one sense he belongs to the den and, like Ah Kwai, represents
the “Asian vice.” But in another sense he is distinct from the smoker and facilitates
his exploitation. Indeed, the distinctions are broadcast across the photograph in the
contrast between the men: standing and reclining, shoed and shoeless, alert and
relaxed, entering through the backroom door and riveted on the bed, framing the
scene and central to it, one is even tempted to say trimmed in white and swathed in
black. Or perhaps it is better to say, in the comparisons, that the two men are pictured
as both belonging and not belonging together in a tense and fraught bond. They
need each other—they give the photograph a certain social complexity that others of
the dens lack—and invite an assessment of their relationship.

In these many ways and more—the banners in the background with competing
injunctions to smoke and to obtain wealth; the contrast between the darkened pipe, a
prized specimen, and the brush to capture the leftover dregs; the open bed that beck-
ons alternately to male and female viewers, and so on—the photograph of Ah Kwai
represents the predicament of the Chinese in the opium den. It is poised delicately
between competing meanings about the place and the people who frequented it,
suggesting how pictures can braid incommensurable histories into discordant dia-
logue, both marking the madness of cultural encounter and marked by it. Such a
picture certainly represents the complex social relations in a port city. But more, it
suggests how historical photographs—dare I say, the good ones—are shot through
with a doubleness (of self and other, of power and loss, of agency and tractability, and
of difference and desire) that is the lifeblood of modernity.

Notes
2 Anon., 1892a, p. 627.
3 Anon., 1892a, p. 628.
4 Anon., 1892a, pp. 628–630.
5 For an example of the photograph’s early London distribution, see Anon., 1896. It was
retitled Hitting the Pipe for the British publication. On Taber’s lists and marketing
strategies, see Kurutz, 2004, pp. 7–16. To my knowledge, the photograph has not been
discussed in the scholarly literature, with one exception: Lau, 2008, pp. 27–28, makes
brief mention of it but mistakenly says the picture was taken “shortly after the Gold
Rush.” McCauley, 1981, pp. 9–17, has written about two of the other photographs
from the evening’s session.
6 Anon., 1892a, p. 627.
A provisional version of this chapter has appeared (Lee, 2010). The present version pursues some of the larger arguments of that earlier version but also serves as a correction to two errors. I previously misidentified the sitter in *Underground Opium Den, smoker caught in the act by the flash light*, and I misdated the picture as being made around 1901.

Gunn, 1861, p. 338.

Farwell, 1885, p. 94.

Cobbe, 1895, p. 125; Anon., 1879.

Anon., 1879.

De Quille, 1877, p. 295.

Speer, 1870, p. 635.

Doolittle, 1865, pp. 353–354. To be fair, Doolittle was not a “scare-writer” but a missionary who tried to describe Chinese customs as he saw them during his travels.


Ahmad, 2007, p. 77.

Farwell, 1885, p. 103.

James Mahoney, as quoted in Kane, 1882, p. 12.

Fitch, 1887, p. 356.

Kane, 1882, p. 43.

Anon, 1892b.

Zheng, 2005, p. 49.

Masters, 1892, p. 638.


Mullen, 2008.

On the phenomenon of the opium farms, see Trocki, 2000.

Ahmad, 2007, p. 30. These numbers are estimates, though probably on the low side. Masters, 1892, p. 636 claimed that a little box containing four pipefuls could be obtained for 20 cents, but that is the lowest estimate I have encountered. He also suggested that the hardest smokers spent $4 to $5 a week and one particular smoker $9 a week (by his reckoning 180 pipefuls a week or about twenty-five a day).


Taber, 1901, n.p.

References


Value in the Vernacular
Leo G. Mazow

In his widely read text, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, historian Lawrence Levine traced the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century evolution of drama and music from popular to elite art forms. The transformation Levine outlined was complex, far from orderly, and did not proceed in a neat, linear fashion. But the trend is nonetheless apparent: in myriad public venues, productions in the fine and performing arts morphed from relatively accessible, participatory events to rarefied, “dress-up” affairs demanding etiquette, education, and dutiful absorption. In his chapter on Shakespeare on the American stage, the author notes that the early productions could be loud, interrupted, ad-libbed, and improvised as audiences adjusted the plays to meet their needs and expectations. In the decades after the Civil War, however, well-heeled audiences sat still, behaved, and marveled at how closely the script followed its source—a process Levine called “sacralization.” No longer did theaters present an immediately familiar and self-consciously comprehensible bard who was homespun and user-friendly for American audiences. No longer did they present the vernacular bard. But if vernacular characterizes the content and speech patterns of the antebellum (and earlier) Shakespeare, the term applies equally to the audiences’ approach in the first place—to their physicality before the stage, to the freedom with which they took Shakespeare as their own.¹

Shortly after the publication of *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, art historian Henry Sayre’s very different book, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970*, appeared. In contrast to modernism’s aversion to subject matter in general, and to the political and the diaristic in particular, Sayre located a refreshing vernacular stance in postmodernism’s embrace of narrative, ritual, speech, and text. Surveying the oral poetry of Yvonne Rainer, the electric signs of Jenny Holzer, and the performances of David Antin, Sayre found in multi- and alternative media art a “fluid and free” antidote to contemporaneous antiseptic, Greenbergian formalism. Unlike the
latter, the vernacular underpinnings of Sayre’s postmodernism—and the corrective to formalism provided in performance art—offer up a shared, public space in which beholders of literature and the visual and performing arts come to understand always-shifting meanings. Although these books may not have much else in common, *Object of Performance* and *Highbrow/Lowbrow* both take it as implicit that the vernacular is as much an approach as a classification of subject matter.

The study of American art history benefits from a similarly dual understanding of the vernacular as both methodology and content. Some definitions of the painted, built, and literary vernacular are offered in the following paragraphs. What most of us take for granted is that the term connotes the popular, local, prosaic, and informal (as opposed to the elite, universal, poetic, and rarefied). But, perhaps paradoxically, the method I have in mind does not call for popularizing, localizing, or debunking; it suggests a worldview, a mindset, and even a physical approach that I hope is as useful for understanding “highbrow” cultural productions as it is for interpreting the more common, even abject, subject matter typically designated as vernacular. In other words, works of art need not be vernacular in content in order to benefit from a vernacular approach. A vernacular approach enriches our understanding of works by, say, John Singer Sargent, as much as our engagements with pieces by self-taught and so-called folk or outsider artists.

It is my hope that, in underscoring this time-honored concept as both classification and methodology, I might point to some of the benefits, for Americanists in particular, of finding value in the vernacular and culture in the commonplace. After an inquiry into prevailing connotations of this admittedly slippery term, I will outline its methodological promise in three case studies: Robert Arneson’s ceramic facsimiles of bathroom objects and scatological themes; Wright Morris’s and Ralston Crawford’s grain elevator imagery; and Edward Hopper’s painted edifices and the literature engaging them. In other words, I am exploring a vernacular sensibility simultaneously in selected subject matter, history, and historiography in American art. Finally, it bears stressing that methodology in this context concerns three fields of inquiry: physical approach and sensory engagement in general; measures of value by which we select and define our subject; and the more traditional sense of the term, concerning the interpretive apparatus—as in feminism, Marxism, and so on—that governs the questions we pose in the first place.

**Defining the Vernacular**

The entries for vernacular in the *Oxford English Dictionary* apply the term to matters of language, with the word designating those speech and linguistic patterns that evoke the speaker’s native land. Students in art history will be familiar with the phrase “vernacular architecture,” which typically denotes, as *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms* tells us, indigenous materials. But the latter source also defines vernacular architecture as having no “pretensions to architectural grandeur.” Indeed, in scholarly literature and lay parlance, the term connotes less the geographically local or idiomatically colloquial than the absence of “grandeur.” Like some other concepts in art and cultural history, vernacular is often defined by what it is not. One might define a dogtrot or shotgun house, for example, in terms of what it is not—say, a cathedral or...
a mansion. In this case, whether the builder used local materials or the building fit a regional style is less the point than the size, plan, and structural integrity of the edifice, as well as whether the architect is self- or academically trained.

Literary critic Sieglinde Lemke is the latest in a long line of observers to note, in perusing writers as disparate as Leo Marx, Henry Nash Smith, Henry Louis Gates, and Houston Baker, that “vernacular literature is consistently antihierarchical and antiexclusionary,” as well as “inherently political.” Lemke points out that that Marx’s classic 1957 essay on *Huckleberry Finn* took strides to posit regional, polysemous, and racial identities as identifiably American archetypes—which is at odds with the consensus-forcing tendencies for which Marx, Perry Miller, and other early scholars in American studies have on occasion been faulted. Marx’s take on Twain, no less than Baker’s interpretation of blues music, points to patterns worth reconsidering in American art history, notably that the vernacular concerns not only a set of meanings or significations, but also the *use* of those meanings and the *process* whereby signifying transpires.5

Taking cues from the literary and architectural vernacular, we can outline what a dual vernacular—as subject matter but also methodology—might look like in American art history and visual culture. As we will see in the examples of Arneson’s bathroom imagery and Morris’s and Crawford’s grain elevators, a newly physical or corporeal approach would mandate that we look down as much as we look up. The sheer fact of physicality can remind us that experience can be haptic as well as optic, that ways of knowing and understanding may begin in the visual but ultimately evoke and rely on other senses, notably that of touch. This is of course not unique to the vernacular; one finds such calls to sensory awareness in many other contexts as well. But the dual vernacular may be an especially productive jarring from reassuring truisms; it may discombobulate and make us question our knowledge bases and skillsets instead of sanitizing, ordering, and elevating the world around us. With an emphasis on physicality, a downward gaze, and a collapsing of high–low hierarchies, a new vernacular methodology would reckon with things public. The approach has its rewards but is not for those looking for epiphany or quick aesthetic gratification; in the most literal of senses, meaning and unity are spread across time and place. The vernacular bridges the gap between the monumental and the seemingly inconsequential; otherwise unremarkable things can have the most momentous consequences.

A few additional introductory remarks about the proposed vernacular approach may be in order here. In addition to its emphases on physical engagement and on prosaic subjects, a vernacular methodology can also encourage and facilitate the gravitation to, acceptance of, and appreciation of sameness (by the latter I mean the repetition of formal and thematic characteristics, often paradoxically within a modernist framework that privileges singularity). Like much non-vernacular art, it often demands an active, not detached, encounter. Although anti-climactic by its very nature (no quick sensory appeasement here), the vernacular can yield surprise, if not awe—it unsettles as much as it reassures. Although often formed of subjective sensibilities and private musings, the vernacular subject frequently propels the beholder out into a larger environment. Finally, the following case studies address twentieth-century American art, yet it is my hope that they may offer interpretive strategies as well for both older and contemporary work.
Robert Arneson, Up and Down

A long tradition in art and cultural history equates the elevated gaze with the elevated, hallowed, exalted subject, as if the more we peer upwards the more we demonstrate deference, etiquette, and the understanding necessary to engage visual monuments and the sacred service to which they are put. We are encouraged to do so, for example, in Gothic cathedrals where elongated interior ribbing leads our eyes aloft. The light flooding through clerestory windows and oculi directs our attention upwards, where apexes or domes might symbolize a heavenly realm. Further identifying the “above” as divine, as opposed to the “down here,” the site of the everyday, myriad early Christian, medieval, and Renaissance vaulted ceilings in paint and mosaic also equate the dome form with the heavens.

Airborne imagery and soaring sensations in Baroque art work toward similar effects, as do contemporaneous religious paintings whose figures literally look up to those individuals in the panels installed above them. The placement of history paintings high upon the wall in the Salon also associated elevating subjects with the elevated gaze. In nineteenth-century America, morally uplifting “ideal” and neoclassical sculpture on high pedestals protected statuary from pedestrian touching and pedes-

trian associations alike. From Donatello’s niche statues like St. Mark (1411–13) at Orsanmichele in Florence to Rodin’s Three Graces atop his Gates of Hell (1917; posthumously cast), the elevated gaze has long elevated painting, sculpture, and architecture, transforming art into Art.

A good bit of later twentieth- and twenty-first-century artwork, however, demands that we look down, not up. Robert Smithson’s non-site installations, Carl Andre’s floor tiles, and Mark Dion’s natural history floor assemblages are among the many works that redirect our gaze downward and conspire with other senses to guide us to the dominion of the ground. As the art historian Alissa Walls has observed, the mycological subjects of John Cage and Cy Twombly serve as potent reminders of the promise of the downward gaze. Because of the type of material we may find—notably, dirt—upon looking down, such a gaze might mistakenly be conflated with “looking down upon” something. The art of the influential twentieth-century ceramicist and educator Robert Arneson rewards close study in this regard. More than exploiting the uncanny similarities between high and low, and the misleadingly arbitrary separation of popular and elite, Arneson’s drawings, bronzes, and clay facsimiles of everyday household goods suggest the bounty of a vernacular approach, one that engages the world at our feet in critical and circumspect fashion. We may encounter filth and muck, but we also find a rich world of experience: a realm of life we stand to miss by physically and metaphorically tilting our head upwards, or looking the other way. Although figuring in a very selected history of American art (California, ceramics, late twentieth-century), Arneson’s oeuvre, broadly considered, provides a helpful foil against which to imagine the possibilities of a vernacular method in material far removed from his immediate context. Arneson’s Funk Art merged acute social, personal, and political issues with whimsical visual puns, underlining the constructedness of high art’s tradition, seriousness, and legibility, and thereby mocking the slickness and hierarchies of what he and his cohorts viewed as over-civilized institutions of American art.

With his ceramic likenesses of dirty dishes, half-eaten pastries, guns, lamps, telephones, and broken cups, Arneson exposed, and often lampooned, the false dichotomy between the refined and the functional, calling into question preconceived notions of
finish and polish in an increasingly dematerialized modernist art world. He embraced the very stuff that Clement Greenberg and his formalist protégés such as Michael Fried and Hilton Kramer deemed kitsch. Arneson’s anti-formalism did not go unnoticed by Kramer, who in a 1981 review remarked that the artist did not understand the finer points of “satire,” and that his “provincial” art was “limited in ambition.” Yet Kramer’s assault went deeper, arguing that Arneson’s prosaic, jokey attitude violated the sacrosanct realm of art and that, in doing so, he represented the largely degenerate culture of California. The latter was a slam at the self-consciously unrefined Funk movement, inaugurated by Arneson at the University of California, Davis, in the mid-1960s. Kramer’s review prompted Arneson to make what is probably his best-known work, *California Artist* (1982; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). Here, the laid-back, jeans-jacket-wearing artist transformed himself into a sort of object situated atop a pedestal, flanked at bottom by marijuana plants, exposed bricks, and tossed-aside beer bottles. With its appeals to touch, taste, and smell, the world at his feet competes with his frank gaze for our attention.

Some of Arneson’s most renowned pieces concern the world encountered at waist level or lower. Notable here are his leitmotif toilets and urinals, but also his shoes, urns, scales, and rose-stuffed flowerpots. From Van Gogh to Warhol, from Joseph Beuys to Sherrie Levine, artists have used shoe imagery to heroicize the abject, to comment on the banal and easily commodified, and to probe their own identities. Loosely drawn and containing a pasted reproduction of a Jackson Pollock drip painting, *Boots of J.P.* (1987; Estate of Robert Arneson) is one of several dozen works by Arneson simultaneously celebrating and critiquing the Abstract Expressionist’s contributions and premature death. He also enlisted pedestrian imagery in works regarding living artists, such as *Scale* (1965), featuring his student Bruce Nauman’s footprints on the instrument, his toes retained in the imprint at left (Figure 34.1). The shoe and foot imagery evokes the physicality of Pollock’s and Nauman’s enterprises, and in a literal sense puts the beholder

![Figure 34.1](image-url)
in their footsteps. Sweaty, stinky, filthy shoes are vernacular subject matter; their popular and physiological associations are the payoff of a vernacular approach insofar as they both expand sensory experience and the canon of acceptable subject matter. Engaging Arneson’s largest and most formally sumptuous shoe work, *Homage to Philip Guston, 1913–1980* (1980; private collection), also requires that we look down. But the reflecting, seemingly refracting, brilliant pink glazing rewards our trouble in doing so. Where the natural light of a dome or cathedral leads us to the celestial, the intense gleam of the pink shoes keeps us grounded in the terrestrial. Like an ancient grave stele (Arneson inscribed Guston’s life dates on the work), the pair of shoes dominates the ground, as if to be seen by standing, walking observers.

More than Arneson’s bricks, shoes, scales, and flowerpots, his scatological subjects—such as *Bowee Wowee* (1982; estate of the artist), his self-portrait as a dog, replete with bronzed feces—force a reconsideration of the vernacular as not only subject matter but approach, one that invokes touch, taste, and smell as much as it relies on vision. The approach reminds us, as Caroline Jones has observed, that “eyesight alone” can fail to yield a full understanding of art and visual and built environments. Where *Bowee Wowee* insists that we look downward, works like Arneson’s toilet series (1964–65) invite us to imagine sitting down (Figure 34.2). The oft-repeated story about the genesis of Arneson’s similar toilet piece *Funk John* (1963; destroyed) is relevant in this regard. One day, while using the restroom at his studio at the University of California, Davis, it dawned on him that he was sitting on the “ultimate ceramics in Western civilization,” later adding that “You can’t reflect on

![Figure 34.2](image.png)

art in any way on this thing.” Arneson’s vernacular reminds us to not allow the glare of our “artistic reflections” to blind us to more important matters.

**Meditations on a Grain Elevator**

If Arneson’s potty humor and shoe narratives have us looking at the world below, that which transpires near our feet, grain elevator imagery has us doing the opposite, looking up in a vertical-visual reconnaissance mission. In *A Concrete Atlantis*, architectural historian Reyner Banham compared grain elevators to modernist monuments by Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, demonstrating the European architects’ indebtedness to the American silos. The author lamented that elevators and related industrial monuments “have practically no part in the records of architectural history and have yet to draw a critic worthy of their austere virtues.” Banham’s book sparked interest in grain elevators, even spawning a few essays correcting his knowledge of art, architectural, and industrial history. On the face of it, *Concrete Atlantis* restitutes the built—and supposedly banal—environment by way of its affinities to canonical European modernist works. More than this, however, the volume foregrounds the visual power and intellectual resonance of one the most common sights within the American landscape. There is, Banham reminds us, value in the vernacular and culture in the commonplace.

Grain elevator imagery recurs in modernist American art beginning in the early twentieth century, and is famously found in works by Ansel Adams, Thomas Hart Benton, Charles Burchfield, Ralston Crawford, Charles Demuth, Walker Evans, Louis Lozowick, John Marin, and Charles Sheeler. Its presence stems in part from its ubiquity in the common landscape. Emerging in the late nineteenth century as a means by which to get newly harvested crops to wholesalers and other vendors, grain elevators receive shipments from farmers, then unload the grain—or rice, barley, beans, corn, even nuts—in railroad cars bound for markets. Three distinct grain elevator types dot the American and European landscape and are found in modernist and other art: so-called *country elevators*, typically along railroad tracks and trucking routes, deliver product from area growers to *terminal elevators*, from which the crop is sold to regional, national, and international vendors and wholesalers. Serving as intermediary storage facilities, *subterminal elevators* occasionally appear along these routes as well.

Although it is hard to avoid them on any automobile drive of more than about 20 miles beyond a city’s limits, and although, as a motif, they occasionally find their way into modern literature (e.g., Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*), grain elevators, for all their ubiquity, rarely enter humanities discussions high or low. The vernacular, as I am discussing it, bridges the gap between the monumental and the seemingly unimportant, and it frequently does so through an appeal to monetary value. Grain elevators fit into this equation because the most infinitesimal cost differential among crops, as well as the smallest percentage change in fees charged by railroads to elevators, have enormous and keenly palpable consequences for farmers. This market relevance and its obvious effect on urban and rural lifestyles point to the intricate web of symbolism carried by this deceptively simple emblem in the landscape.

Grain elevators are also monumental in the paradoxes they pose. Even the most remote, rickety elevator represents a connection to national and global markets. The early three- and four-story wood-frame elevators—what we see in Wright Morris’s
**Gano Grain Elevator, Western Kansas (1940)**—could hold 35,000 bushels of a given grain at any time. With the constant turnover—grains in, grains out—a single elevator could service the storage and transport needs of an area of 20 square miles. In most cases a farmer would not have to travel more than 5 miles to the nearest elevator. In this way, grain elevators reflect the industrial settlement of the landscape, and, conversely, offer something like a map legend to the geometric configuration of rural America’s tens of thousands of square miles. Endlessly repeating and easily overlooked, these prosaic towers inform the grid aesthetic afforded by aerial views of prairie we have from planes and skyscrapers. In the most direct of ways, grain elevators have transformed the vast landscape into a built environment.

In both urban and rural settings, then, grain elevators determine physical terms of motility. More than this, because they have everything to do with checkbook and diet alike, they impact our decision-making and physiological processes. The frank and direct vernacular approach I have in mind is well represented by the somatic associations and bodily consequences of the grain elevator. Much as our stomachs will digest the raw products stored in and shipped via grain elevators, so the elevators themselves enact a sort of gestation or metabolizing process, preparing and distributing food in the most literal fashion for the body politic. As a matter of thought it may be, our bodies take in and expel food in a manner analogous to grain elevators. The equation between the commercial transformation of grains and the biological (and ultimately gastrointestinal) metamorphosis of foods is not as abstract as it might initially seem; as elevators carry foodstuffs, so our bodies carry those very foodstuffs—and use all the nourishment and toxins they may carry—as we imagine, utilize, and circumnavigate the elevators. As compositional and literary devices, grain elevators tap into physical and biological realms and function in a manner paralleled by few if any other motifs.

In 1860 the English traveler Anthony Trollope, searching for an oral metaphor for American capitalist greed, envisioned the grain elevator as a “devouring” organism that “swallowed, masticated, and digested.” Simultaneously appealing to our senses of touch, taste, and sight, grain elevators spark consideration of commercial, optical, and alimentary trajectories. Bearing resonance with nutritional and commercial sustenance alike, these monuments may be rooted in the visual, but they suggest ways of knowing steeped in and dependent upon other bodily functions.

Announcing the corporate ownership of the elevator, the bold lettering on Morris’s Gano Grain Elevator joins similarly adorned elevators in photographs by Jack Delano, Frank Gohlke, Russell Lee, Larry Schwarm, and Marion Post Wolcott, which likewise demonstrate the icon’s hovering between homogenous and differentiated. However, the large inscriptions ultimately approach a state of cultural sameness (the illusion of a more or less uniform height owes to the fact that, since their inception, elevator manufacturers built up instead of outwards because of the high price of land along railroad lines, ports, and municipal thoroughfares). Many such edifices, including several of those photographed by Lee, are emblazoned with “CO-OP,” referencing the combined (or cooperative) efforts, beginning in the late nineteenth century, of farmers to sidestep so-called line chain elevator companies increasingly monopolizing ownership and control of the silos (see Figure 34.3). Concrete terminal elevators reinforce the indistinguishability of the icons in the landscape because they almost always use the same slip-form concrete construction method. Here, the arched metal molds are stacked one on top of the other—permitting one casting on top of the previous casting, reinforced with metal rods. Therefore, whatever separates the style
and subject matter, for example, of Ralston Crawford’s *Buffalo Grain Elevators* (1937) from industrial, urban landscapes depicted by other artists, the edifice’s presence links them all within a subgenre of elevator images, with structural uniformity offsetting many of their identifying distinctions (Figure 34.4).21

Crawford’s canvas is one of several dozen paintings, drawings, and photographs by the artist depicting this monument and surely relates to his early sight of wheat-carrying vessels along the waterways of his native Ontario.22 His interest in dockside grain elevators probably stemmed from his family’s involvement in water travel and maritime commerce—the artist was sailing on tramp steamers as late as 1926–27. Yet the interest in lines, rigging, masts, and other structures that we find in *Buffalo Grain Elevators* and elsewhere may relate to an increasingly deep-seated formalism, in which he first immersed himself as a student of collector Albert Barnes, as much as it does to industrial ports he would have seen as he sailed along the Great Lakes.23 Throughout his artistic career, he was attracted to and most likely to paint subjects that moved him—both literally and metaphorically. “Certain subjects have done things,” he commented in 1941, “to my eyes and to my head. I have painted them.”24 He recognized that vernacular landmarks often achieve and demand an active, not a passive, engagement. That we are to take the Buffalo images seriously is announced by the chiaroscuro modeling that grants them a psychological bearing in a way that would likewise animate a human face.25 The painting’s manner of blocking our view of the skies similarly forces us to contend with its presence. With Crawford, as with so many painters who literally foreground their vernacular subjects, we are forced to think about that which is immediately before us (we are often denied access to much else).

As both Crawford and Wright Morris recognized, the grain elevator makes demands of its beholders. A “subject” that “do[es] things” to us, the tall, vision-dominating emblem is a force to be reckoned with, and then some: it simultaneously explains and responds to the contiguous vista punctuated by its verticality; it requires looking

---

**Figure 34.3** Russell Lee (1903–86), *Grain Elevators, Caldwell, Idaho*, 1941, color photograph. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. LC-USF35-207.
at and beyond. Its massive presence calls for ambulatory, metaphorical, and optical circumnavigation—and, perhaps obviously, a sort of intellectual triangulation to wade through its metaphorical associations. It may be telling that in one of the most insightful meditations on the visual properties of grain elevators—Banham’s *Concrete Atlantis*—the author recounts his physical, pedestrian encounter with them. Banham provides a no-nonsense, step-by-step literary journey into the elevator-environment that mimics his own journey, by foot, among the concrete behemoths. This is one of the more striking examples of vernacular as not only classification of subject matter but as corporeal approach and scholarly methodology as well.

Artists, architects, and visual theorists have been far from alone in finding culture and sacrosanct meaning in the most commonplace and often defunct grain elevators. The British poet and playwright Gilbert Cannan once mused,

> It is annoying that there is nothing Gothic about a grain elevator since we have been taught that Gothic architecture is beautiful. It is distressing that the man in the subway in New York is not at all like a Shakespearean or a Rabelaisian or a Cervantian character. But is there any reason to be so angry that we refuse to look at the grain elevator or the man in the subway?26

Like the anonymous man in the subway, the elevator in the landscape rewards close scrutiny. Maybe, as Cannan suggests, a new measure of value, something on the order of a Gothic cathedral, can be evoked by the most prosaic grain elevator. This is the

---

**Figure 34.4** Ralston Crawford (1906–78), *Buffalo Grain Elevators*, 1937, oil on canvas, 40¼ × 50¼ in. (102.1 × 127.6 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. *Source:* Photo: Smithsonian American Art Museum / Art Resource / Scala, Florence.
case with Morris’s *Gano Grain Elevator* and several other wood elevators, in which the façades mimic somewhat the elevation of a church. The photographer once commented, “There is a vein in my taste, we might call it classic, which seeks for an ordered, harmonious resolution of all pictorial elements.” A similar sense of a rational, all-compassing environment, of a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, informed the efforts of railroad officials and agri-businessmen in constructing the very elevators he photographed. Ultimately, the object itself—its quiddity, or thing-ness—demands our visual and physical attention. For Morris, the grain elevator was one of those “object[s]” that somehow “stands there, ineluctably, irreducibly visible. The thing-in-itself has my respect and admiration.”

**Erasing Edward Hopper**

Empty mansions, deserted thoroughfares, dingy hotels, abandoned retail outlets, poorly lit offices, suspiciously under-populated diners, bored and uptight tourists, hackneyed commercial signage, individuals ignoring one another, anachronistic architectural styles, dowdy spectators perpetually waiting, and roads and bridges leading nowhere in particular. The subject matter of much of Edward Hopper’s oeuvre presents a vernacular litany, touching on many of the prosaic qualities that have come to define vernacular as a motif and a mindset. More often than not, even his more buoyant pictures—including most of his sun-drenched watercolors and his later Cape Cod scenes—present all-too-recognizable sites and quotidian activities unfolding in common landscapes marked neither by historical allusion nor personal attachment. Like that of Arneson, Crawford, and Morris, his subject matter falls into this category. But more than for these individuals, indeed more than for most American artists, the literature on Hopper—the scope of research, the theses argued, the attention to form versus subject matter, and to ethereal, “American mind” strains as opposed to historical precepts—presents a case-study warning of the effects of an anti-vernacular approach.

The Hopper usually presented to students and lay audiences alike looms profound and thematically poetic and is anything but vernacular. Hopper monographs—usually titled simply *Edward Hopper*, as if the immanence speaks for itself—are sizeable, with the heft having implications for an artist about whom, apparently, enough can never be said. Measuring almost 3 feet wide when opened, an enormously popular volume written by Lloyd Goodrich, published in 1971 and reprinted in 1993, may have started the trend. Similarly, in contrast to equally renowned artists such as Thomas Hart Benton, Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, Eastman Johnson, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Jackson Pollock, with only a few exceptions museums eschew the sustained, concentrated view of Hopper that might be afforded by a focus exhibition, opting instead for expansive, monographic blockbusters.

From his champions Guy Pène du Bois and Lloyd Goodrich to more contemporary writers, observers have not shied away from the adjectives “drab” and even “ugly” to describe his prosaic and awkward subjects. Yet his critics have long mitigated that designation by insisting that Hopper infused the banal with the beautiful. The trend began early in Hopper’s career, with a 1921 review of an exhibition of his etchings praising his “genius for finding beauty in ugliness.” In 1923 Helen Appleton Read found in his work evidence of “what can be done with the homeliest subject if only
one possesses the seeing eye.”

Again rationalizing what might otherwise seem unsightly and depressing, three years later a contemporary used a similar vocabulary in summarizing Hopper’s painting *Sunday* (1926; Phillips Collection, Washington, DC): “Out of such commonplaces has Hopper created beauty as well as injected humor and an astute characterization of place and type.”

The de-vernacularizing trend in studies of Hopper continues to the present day, with some of the most insightful scholarship on the artist nonetheless sacralizing the most unsacred subjects he depicted. At its best, this impulse leads to astute formal insights and recognition of the artist’s consonances with renowned modernists—such as Mark Rothko—whom one might not normally think a fruitful point of comparison for an American scene painter such as Hopper. At its worst, however, it leads to a sort of Hopper-hagiography, a hyper-formalist hero-worship that deals largely in terms of aesthetic rarefication. Much Hopper scholarship attends to biography and psychology as the explaining factors for the art. These do indeed explain a good bit, but surely Hopper’s art is more than a mere outgrowth of his mood and official statements. Psychobiography and formalism often muddle and play down differences in the wide range of Hopper’s subjects and even his adeptness as a fine artist, treating his mature output as one monolithic, static thing. By briefly attending to Hopper’s art and critical fortunes, then, we get more than a productive field against which to measure the promise of the vernacular. We also get a realm in which to trace its manipulation and suppression.

If quiddity, broadly conceived, is a recurrent theme in Hopper’s oeuvre, we might do well to admit that many of the unremarkable things, objects, and edifices in the fore- and middle ground of his compositions block our view, presenting obstacles to navigate visually and—were we to encounter the tableau before us—physically. It is of course difficult to think of many artists whose landscapes and genre pieces do not occasionally require an imaginary leap beyond interfering, obfuscating objects in order to understand the whole of the composition, the expressive potential of the vista pictured. More so than most contemporary figurative works, however, Hopper’s landscapes, urban views, and genre scenes obstruct our views with barriers formed by rocks, cars, dunes, curtains, concrete walls, chimneys and smokestacks, commercial architectural façades, and blinding glares on windows (according to my count, about one-third of his oeuvre exemplifies this tendency). In a literal sense, Hopper foregrounds the vernacular; he forces us to reckon with the world immediately before us—as opposed to that which other artists might invoke by way of the seemingly accessible iconographies of halcyon horizons and straightforward narratives.

A vernacular-friendly approach to Hopper, however, requires more than simply reckoning with ordinariness; it also necessitates reconciling the less heroic aspects of his artistic formation with the mature style and themes for which he is best known. Otherwise helpful biographies tend to treat the artist’s considerable body of commercial illustration as separate from the later oil paintings and watercolors, an unfortunate impasse Hopper overcame to get to a career as an exhibiting fine artist commanding enough sales from which to make a reasonable living, a pot-boiling episode from which his success rescued him. For his own part, the artist registered ambivalence about such enterprises; he criticized the mercenary advertising work promoted by Reeves Lewenthal’s printmaking firm Associated American Artists but was quick to defend “advertising art” as a worthy genre of professional endeavor. Hopper stopped short of his former classmate George Bellows’s statement in 1924 that illustration
constituted “a noble order of form,” but he clearly recognized its intellectual validity. Too much has been made in the Hopper literature, I believe, of the artist’s denigration of commercial work; to the extent that he would rather have spent his time painting, he nonetheless took the medium seriously and pursued formal and thematic aims akin to the painting he produced at the time and shortly thereafter. Instead of simply asserting that he did not like illustration and advertising, it may be more accurate to recognize his later statement acknowledging “the difficulties in adapting a personal point of view to the needs of advertising.”

Even if he loathed such work as much as some observers have suggested, that antipathy does not negate the impact of illustration on his work after 1926, when he ceased accepting commercial commissions. Gail Levin, Hopper’s principal modern biographer, has astutely outlined the manner in which selected paintings echo forms and subject matter first explored in his drawings for posters, advertisements, and books and serialized literature. Yet for some of this work, and for his many magazine covers, the artist may have looked to the magazines’ content for inspiration, or, at the very least, responded to vernacular built environments similar to those described in the periodicals’ pages.

A case in point is the trade journal Hotel Management, for which Hopper provided eighteen cover illustrations in 1924–25 (Figure 34.5). His covers and later hotel subject matter elaborate on and in some cases seem to respond to the magazine’s advertisements and frequently illustrated articles on bedroom furniture, lobby decorations, window treatments, paint and wallpaper, and athletic and social activities. Hopper’s Hotel Room (1931; Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza) is a composite of furniture and fabrics discussed and advertised in the December 1924 and January 1925 issues of Hotel Management; the flapper on the May 1925 cover bears a strong resemblance to the seated woman in the 1931 painting. The carpet and desk design in Hotel Lobby (1943; Indianapolis Museum of Art) match several illustrations in Hotel Management (March 1924 and May 1924 especially) and other hospitality trade periodicals. This is not to deny Levin’s valid point that several of the artist’s illustrations repeat elements found in the works of Edgar Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and other Impressionists, which he likely saw on three previous trips to Paris. It is rather to suggest that Hopper merged popular and rarefied sensibilities in his paintings. I hope it is by now obvious that the vernacularizing trend I would like to encourage among historians of American art is not just a case of recognizing prosaic subject matter; it is equally an issue of letting that subject matter help frame the questions we ask and the mindset we possess when considering it in the first place. Trade magazines are as helpful as the artist’s carefully crafted, treatise-like statements in analyzing his art.

In understanding Hopper’s hotel and selected other subjects as vernacular, we can go even further—or, one might say, in the opposite direction. Instead of looking to illustrations for antecedents to the paintings, we can look to the latter to help explain the former. The paintings can guide our attempts to understand a body of visually stunning, culturally beguiling work for which, as Levin observes, we have frustratingly few primary sources. Hopper’s canonical paintings of lighthouses, locomotives, automobiles, service stations, ships and boats, and hotels, motels, and boarding houses shed critical light on his modernist transportation imagery in myriad magazines and on the covers he designed for such periodicals as Wells Fargo Messenger (1917–18), The Dry Dock Dial and The Morse Dry Dock Dial (1918–21), Tavern Topics (1920, 1921, 1923), and Hotel Management. Hopper’s later depictions of the
same subject matter concern the alternately banal and disorienting rituals of arrival and departure, illuminating his earlier, equally sophisticated meditations on travelers’ attitudes toward waiting, leisure, race, fashion, gender roles, and mobility in general.

It seems fitting that an artist so steeped in a vernacular dialectic should have produced an intriguing body of hotel, motel, and boarding house imagery, and that he should have illustrated for two leading periodicals covering these industries. Such lodging is of course marked by the forever changing, transient clientele, staying for indefinite periods—a night, a week, a month, more sometimes; the rituals of arrival and departure overlap and scrape acquaintance in the space of lobbies, elevators, and

Figure 34.5  Edward Hopper, illustration for cover of Hotel Management, May 1925, offset color lithograph. Source: Courtesy of Hotel Management, Questex Media Group.
front desks. The anonymity and ubiquity of interaction in hotels reminds us that the vernacular is not only a class of subject matter but an attitude, an approach.

Within hours, and sometimes minutes, of a guest’s departure, beds are made and floors are vacuumed in the endlessly repeated process of crafting the not-yet-lived-in look, perpetuating the illusion that this space was made with the guest of any moment in mind. Regardless of the new arrivals’ identities, origins, and destinies, they each get a room made for them—or so the mythology and sloganeering go. Whatever knowledge the guest may have of a process whereby a previous occupant’s presence has been bleached out, a good hotel minimizes evidence of the good and the bad, the dirty and the dignified, that may have transpired in her or his room. By suppressing the vernacular, we do the same—an erasure of meaning—in our interpretations of Hopper’s art and the environments it depicts. Understanding and appreciating the value of the vernacular is contingent upon our willingness to engage the world before us—hotels, motels, and even the mass-produced trade magazines in which they are marketed.

A discussion of a hotel’s tidying efforts is surely a strange way to conclude an essay seeking to push the limits of the vernacular as it often understood. I am endeavoring to reassess my engagements with the most ubiquitous elements of the visual and built environments and to see things like hotels, lobster shacks, anonymous crowds, plowed fields, and desolate roads as sites of meaning and vital experiences—as opposed to demonstrations of exquisite modernist form, or heuristic fictions that corroborate a thesis in a paper I may be writing. I am aware that some of the preceding paragraphs might be usefully augmented by bringing related concepts into the fold (the roles of physicality and directness in the vernacular, for example, have their share of overlap with strains in phenomenology and pragmatism). I have tried to keep focus in the present chapter on the more mundane, but still critical, aspects of this concept, and to impress that it is not only a classification but a methodology in its own right.

Notes

1 Levine, 1988.
2 Sayre, 1989; quotation from p. 207.
3 Attending to matters of language, the entries for “vernacular” in the Oxford English Dictionary emphasize the local, native, and indigenous.
4 Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms, s.v. “vernacular.” This sense has been carefully attended to by such scholars as Henry Glassie, Bernard L. Herman, and Dell Upton. For an introduction, see Glassie, 2000.
5 Lemke, 2009, pp. 5–6, 14. It is of course tempting to qualify Lemke’s assertions here; insofar as the literary vernacular is political, it surely must deal with, and at times perpetuate, hierarchies and exclusionary tendencies. Brooks, 2011, has written thoughtfully on the time-honored traditions—dating at least to Cicero—of the politicized vernacular.
6 von Simson, 1974, pp. 4, 156n.
7 Lehmann, 1945.
10 Walls, 2010.
I first discussed a few portions of this Arneson material in somewhat different form in Mazow, 2004.


Jones, 2005.

Quoted in Mayfield, 2002, p. 27.


See Steiner, 1986.

Hudson, 1992, pp. 89–90. For yet other kinds of grain elevators, see Brown, 2009, pp. 3–6.

Hudson, 1992, pp. 89–90.


Quoted in Brown, 2009, pp. 246, 262.

Hudson, 1992, pp. 92, 93, 97; Kowsky, 2006, pp. 38–41. Modernism’s recurring reductionist treatment of form also of course accounts for some of the formal same-

Haskell, 1995, p. 137.

Quoted in Levin, 1995, pp. 197.

Quoted in Levin, 1995, p. 137.


Quoted in Levin, 1995, p. 197.


Levin, 1980, p. 6; Levin, 1995, pp. 72, 204. An exceptionally strong exhibition, *Hopper* (Museo Thiessen-Bornemisza [Madrid], Grand Palais [Paris], 2012–13) is exemplary in showcasing examples of the illustrations, although the Paris installation (I did not see the show in Madrid) isolated these in a separate room.

Hopper to Rehn (Hopper, 1942); Hopper to Myers (Hopper, 1940).

Quoted in Brock, 2012, p. 18.

The myth of Hopper’s supposed disdain for illustration stems in large part from his wife’s repeated characterization of illustration as something he had to do as a matter of routine, likening it to “washing the dishes,” and to the artist’s own disparaging comments in a revealing interview with Brian O’Doherty late in life (quoted in Levin, 1979, p. 3). Levin points out that the more successful Hopper became as a painter, the more derisively and antagonistically he would remember early work in illustration (Levin, 1979, p. 8).

Hopper to Myers, 1940.

Levin, 1979, pp. 17, 28, 33, 44.


Levin, 1979, pp. 1–2.
References

Realism under Duress
The 1930s
Andrew Hemingway

Postmodern canards that realism is merely a form of naive and deceptive illusionism deserve to be contested in relation to the visual arts as in relation to literature. Realist art generally was not presented as providing transparent access to social realities, and its practitioners were anything but unreflective about the representational and symbolic strategies they used. Rather, realism implied an attempt to extend the social range of art and displace other modes of art making judged inadequately real, thereby entering into a moral dialogue about the nature of the society in which it was produced. As such it involved an epistemological claim that was also an evaluative one. Over time realism’s assumed prerogative on the truths of social reality has been challenged, in part by modernist artists and their critical defenders. But this is in some degree because similar claims have been advanced in modernism’s name. This chapter explores debates around realism in 1930s America that responded to the challenge of a newly minted Socialist Realism emanating from Soviet Russia. Through analysis of works by Reginald Marsh and Philip Evergood, I show that the realist distinction between surface and depth in social representation remains illuminating—although not in the way it was commonly understood at the time. The chapter also illustrates how historically mutable and politically invested the concept is.

Earlier American Realisms

The realism of the 1930s differed from earlier modes of American realism in both critical outlook and form. Although Eakins served as an exemplar of native achievement in the realist mode, his quasi-scientific conception of pictorial truth was already obsolete before 1900; the middle-class culture that had formed it had largely disappeared and the positivist ideology that underpinned it was increasingly discredited.
A measure of this is the fact that Hamlin Garland made no mention of the eleven paintings Eakins exhibited at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893 in his review of the art section or in the other essays on realism that make up Crumbling Idols, instead recommending the outdoor effects of Dennis Miller Bunker and Dodge MacKnight. In contrast to Eakins’s systematic and methodical painting of representative types, Garland asserted vaguely that, “Realism is not a theory, it is a condition of mind, of sensibility. The realist has only one law, to be true to himself; only one criterion, life.” Instead of the truths of positivistic science, he advocated relativism; reality was in a condition of constant change, and literature (and art) must change with it: “The business of the present is not to express fundamentals, but to sincerely present its own minute and characteristic interpretation of life.” In their insistence on the primacy of individual vision and sensibility, these statements illustrate vividly the corrosive effects of the spread of aestheticist doctrine on the model of art as knowledge Eakins’s work represented.

Although the realism of the Ashcan School is rightly understood to represent a critique of the American Impressionism Garland favored, it too was marked by aestheticist assumptions; this is evident in the intuitionist conception of pictorial expression and insistence on individualism central to Robert Henri’s teachings. The Ashcan School represented that more distanced perspective on social life associated with the literary naturalism of later nineteenth-century writers such as Flaubert and Zola at the same time as it distanced itself from pictorial naturalism in the narrow sense of truth to the contingencies of observed appearances.

Both aestheticist and naturalist tendencies are evident in the work and theory of the School’s most sophisticated artist-thinker, John Sloan, who immersed himself in the writings of Flaubert, Maupassant, and Zola from an early age. In his main theoretical statement, Gist of Art, Sloan refers repeatedly to the impact that the “ultra-modern art” he saw in Stieglitz’s 291 Gallery and the Armory Show had on his thinking. Since Gist of Art was not published until 1938, it has to be used cautiously in interpreting his output as an urban realist, the bulk of which dates from 1904 to 1914. On the one hand, without the example of pictorial modernism and the critical discourse that surrounds it, it is hard to imagine Sloan being so insistent that visual art was grounded in “plastic consciousness,” that “the subject is of no aesthetic significance,” that mathematical perspective has no truth, that paintings are “ideographs” or “graphic signs,” and that “imitation of superficial effects has nothing to do with art, which is and always has been the making of mental concepts.” On the other hand, given Sloan’s accomplished work in the art poster mode during the 1890s, he was probably aware of early modernist theory well before he moved to New York in 1904. This, together with the essentially fictive nature of his illustrational work for the Philadelphia Press, makes credible his claim that his early street paintings were all done from memory in the studio. Yet a nebulous notion of authentic experience governed his vision, and Sloan rejected the idea of “art for art’s sake,” regarding the artist as “the custodian of life consciousness.”

The Ashcan School was a cultural formation of a modern type that was simply not present in the United States when Eakins returned from Europe in 1870. There were no American socialist or anarchist groupings of any significance in the early years of Eakins’s career; the Ashcan School’s heyday coincided with the peak of both the American Socialist Party and the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World. The mass radical politics of these organizations partly made possible the bohemian
subculture of Greenwich Village that nurtured the Ashcan artists; small socialist and anarchist magazines such as *The Masses* and *Mother Earth* contributed to the idea of an oppositional artistic identity and politicized the concept of realism in a new way. But this politicization rubbed against the individualist strand in the thinking of Henri and Sloan.

Sloan’s active involvement with socialist politics in the years 1909–16 overlapped with his most productive phase as an urban realist. In retrospect he felt his early work was “socially conscious,” but unconsciously so; at the time he gravitated to socialism he was determined not to subordinate his paintings and etchings to “any Socialist object.” His later collision with the editors of *The Masses* over the subordination of art to propaganda confirms that this remained his view. Socialism, Sloan later said, disturbed his “thinking as a painter” and put him off his urban subjects, which he had been drawn to by “interest in life and the poetic beauty of things seen when I moved about the city.” In a radio interview of 1938, he dismissed contemporary proletarian art as an imagery of “the working man bulging with muscles … or bowed down under his burden.” Drawing on a repeated distinction in his writing between imitative art and the form of the pictorial ideograph, he observed that “the realism of modern proletarian art is realism based on subject-matter and has not enough to do with realization,” “realization” being Sloan’s word for plastic order. In essence, Sloan noted that a new conception of realism had become associated with the left that did not recognize the interrelated values of aesthetic autonomy and individual freedom so central to his own.

**Soviet Socialist Realism**

The emergence of Socialist Realism marked a rupture with earlier notions of realism and reinforced crude conceptions of the instrumentality of art among the communist left. Although the term was in currency from 1932, it was given substance as a concept and received the imprimatur of officialdom at the Soviet Writers’ Congress of 1934, where the writer Maxim Gorky drew a clear line between it and the “critical realism” of bourgeois literature. The latter had helped forge the technical means for socialist literature and was valuable as testimony to the “process of the bourgeoisie’s development and decay,” but was now obsolete. Present-day bourgeois society had “completely lost the capacity for invention in art”; writers who defended the bourgeois order sank into a despairing individualistic Romanticism, the antithesis of the revolutionary optimism of those who identified with the proletariat and were oriented to changing the world. While the Congress defined the method of Socialist Realism for the literary arts, organization for the visual arts lagged behind. Even so, Soviet policy direction in the arts was clear enough before it took place.

In December 1933, Clara R. Mason of the Philadelphia Art Alliance reported in the College Art Association’s magazine *Parnassus* on the “Exhibition of Fifteen Years of Soviet Art,” held in Moscow that summer and comprising nearly 3,000 works. Sounding like an official policy statement, she observed blandly that modernist tendencies in Russian art had been “curbed by what the Soviets call ‘natural means’,” while “the will to battle for socialist construction” had been roused among creative workers. No “art for art’s sake” was on view, but only paintings and sculptures “used as chronicles to define and interpret a varied new life to an untutored illiterate
people.” Realism—“largely documentary and nationalistic in form and socialistic in content”—was the keynote; “gloomy, dreary, morbid subjects” were notable by their absence.\(^{23}\) Describing the traveling exhibition organized by the Pennsylvania Museum of Art working with VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations) in 1934–36, *Fortune* struck a similar note, observing that “the principal preoccupation of the artists is not revolution but utopia. Canvas after canvas is filled with the cheerful laughing faces of workers … the cheerful wholesome Russian world where everyone laughs at his work, everyone sings in his rest.”\(^{24}\) Not surprisingly, faced with the ravaged landscape of American capitalism in the Depression era, most American leftist artists felt they had nothing to learn from the “revolutionary romanticism” of Soviet art in formulating an effective realism. But how to picture social life in a way that penetrated beneath surface appearances to apprehend the underlying forces of historical and social change was an intractable problem.

### Reginald Marsh’s Baroque Realism

In the early years of the Depression, the artist who represented the most sophisticated image of the American city—the fulcrum of capitalist modernity—was Reginald Marsh. The child of artist parents who lived off inherited wealth, Marsh was Yale-educated and “upper-class,” although in the words of his close friend Lloyd Goodrich, “his attitude was that of one who was of it but not with it.”\(^{25}\)

In the 1920s Marsh worked as an illustrator for magazines such as *Harper’s Bazaar*, the *New Yorker*, and *Vanity Fair*, as well as spending three years as staff artist with the sensationalist tabloid, the *Daily News*. He became a relentless documenter of New York City, of which he made countless drawings and numerous photographs.\(^{26}\) Successive critics and scholars have emphasized the selectiveness of Marsh’s vision, his obsessive preoccupation with the proletarian female body, burlesque, homeless men, and drunks.\(^{27}\) But Marsh’s typology of urban life should not be reduced to the quirks of an individual personality; there was a larger ambition behind it. A contrast between imageries of social abjection and vulgar pleasures structures his art and echoes that of Hogarth, perhaps his most important exemplar.

By his own account, Marsh passed through a phase of modernist enthusiasm in the early 1920s.\(^{28}\) During a long trip to Europe in 1925–26 he began to study the Renaissance tradition seriously and in 1927 fell under the spell of the conservative painter and ideologue Kenneth Hayes Miller.\(^{29}\) By 1933 he was complaining that “many able talents of today are committing artistic suicide on the artificial gas piped commercially into America by the Ecole de Paris,” and describing modern artists as “the great deniers.”\(^{30}\) In contrast to Sloan’s receptivity to modernist devices, Marsh increasingly structured his compositions through formal tropes borrowed from Renaissance and Baroque art that enabled him to impose order on the chaotic experience of the contemporary crowd and gave his art an increasingly formalist character.\(^{31}\) After struggling to translate his graphic conceptions into oil paint, in 1929 Marsh discovered in egg tempera a medium that seemed perfectly adapted to his needs; he used it for most of his major pictures for the next ten years.\(^{32}\)

In Marsh’s hands familiar Ashcan School themes were recast and given a new iconography for the Depression era. For instance, in *Chatham Square* (1931; Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin), one of a series of paintings of destitute...
men loitering on the Bowery, Marsh refashioned the motif of Sloan’s *Wet Night on the Bowery* (1911; Delaware Art Museum) so that in place of a few solitary figures we see a conglomeration of bedraggled men in lumpy overcoats idling disconsolately before illuminated store windows displaying women’s fur coats and dresses. This conjunction emblazoned the way male unemployment had become associated with the idea of inadequacy and sexual impotence. The iconography of destitution was also developed in images of the breadline, a quintessential symbol of the Depression, as in *Holy Name Mission* (1931; private collection). The title of the related etching, *Bread Line—No One Has Starved* (1932), made quite clear the artist’s opinion of president Herbert Hoover, whose glib comment “no one has starved” even *Fortune* criticized.

The Ashcan School had taken up the working-class beach scene at Coney Island, Rockaway Beach, and Staten Island as a riposte to the decorous Impressionist imagery of bourgeois leisure by Chase, Benson, and others. However, the embracing couples in swimwear in Sloan’s *South Beach Bathers* (Figure 35.1) belong to an era before “skin-tight bathing suits” appeared at Atlantic City’s first bathing-beauty contest in 1921, before what was perceived as the revolution in manners and morals of the 1920s. Marsh, who lived through the extraordinary transition in attitudes to public display of the body in the first three decades of the century, quoted the oft-cited statistic that at Coney Island “a million near naked bodies could be seen at once, a phenomenon unparalleled in history.”

This spectacle was made possible through the transformation of Coney Island into a working- and middle-class resort in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, facilitated by the new trolley line opened in 1895 and then by the extension of the subway in 1920, which finally made Brooklyn’s weekend getaway easily accessible to day-trippers from other boroughs. On Sundays especially, huge crowds flocked to the amusement parks (Steeplechase Park [1897], Luna Park [1903], and Dreamland [1904, destroyed by fire in 1911]), the beach, and the Riegelmann Boardwalk inaugurated in 1923. What struck commentators about the great heaving panorama of humanity on the beach was the exposure of the nation’s racial and ethnic diversity. In 1925 an Italian American writer observed:

> When you bathe at Coney Island you bathe in the American Jordan. It is holy water. Nowhere else in the United States will you see so many races mingle in a common purpose for a common good. Democracy meets here and has its first interview skin to skin.

But representatives of white Protestant groups were acutely aware of a sense of difference. The Midwestern hero of Homer Croy’s 1929 novel, *Coney Island*, was struck by how many people “seemed to be foreigners”: “sometimes, when an eddy of people swirled about him, he heard no word of English. He hardly seemed to be in America.” Writing eight years earlier, the liberal writer Bruce Bliven was more specific: “Coney Island is one more place from which the native Yankee stock has retreated before the fierce tide of the southern European and Oriental [i.e., Jews].” While Marsh’s beach scenes (Figure 35.2) seem like a celebration of plebeian energies, there is a feeling of frenzy and excess about them that speaks of an underlying anxiety around the accumulation of desire and diversity absent from the Ashcan School precedent. Marsh also extended the iconography of Coney Island by picturing the sideshows and seems to
have been particularly drawn to the Bowery—the sleazy thoroughfare of diversions jammed between West 16th Street and Jones Street—where the crowds were especially intense and the notorious overload of sounds and smells was most overwhelming. Goodrich aptly observed that Marsh’s “first temperas of the early 1930s had a quality of coming directly out of reality. They were a continuation of his reportorial illustrations, on a much larger scale.” The coloring of paintings such as *Wonderland, Circus Side Show* (Figure 35.3) is far more garish and gaudy than that of the artist’s works from a few years later, giving them an almost Expressionist quality. The crowd in this painting is racially differentiated, but proximity does not translate into community. Women clutch kewpie dolls or devour hotdogs—Coney Island’s signature food—and ice creams. The girl left of center with exposed thighs and arms leans back into the embrace of the man behind her, whose hand lies just under her breast. Another girl, in high heels, to our right, catches the viewer’s eye with a provocative look. Meanwhile, her male companion tries to sell a wristwatch to a disinterested soldier. Over the whole the barker, with his curvaceous companions, one of whom is tied up as if crucified, gestures fruitlessly against an inky sky in which a single streetlight stands in for an absent moon. The pyramidal structure—a compositional device conceived to project subordination and hierarchy—produces no psychological unity beyond a common mood of aimlessness. Litter covers the foreground. In *Wonderland*
Circus Side Show, Marsh took the theme of Rubens’s Kermesse (1635–38)—a painting he copied in the Louvre in 1925 or 1926—and reworked it for modern times, converting its wholesome rural revelry into something sickly and discordant.

One contemporary critic described the figures in such images as “distorted to gain intensity, but an intensity of emptiness, this mental underworld of people whose brains have been shot to hell by the radio, the moving pictures and the press, shows the strains of modern life affecting it in its lowest strata, depicted in the vacuous expressions of shop girls, clerks and their families on a holiday.”

Marsh’s paintings play on this fear of the mass for their moral frisson, a fear grounded in a sense of social distance that had been a *sine qua non* of his work as an illustrator for fashionable magazines. In Croy’s *Coney Island* a rube from the Midwest must choose between the alluring tightrope walker Queenie Johnson, the “queen of Coney Island,” and a refined daughter of the bourgeois Charmian De Ford, who plays classical piano and sings on the radio. For all her fine qualities Queenie is “bizarre and showy,” sometimes chews gum, and says “ain’t,” while Charmian is “a stable, dependable, cultured girl.”

The socially aspiring hero is fascinated by Coney Island but in the end chooses the bourgeoisie. Through the increasing conservatism of his pictorial style Marsh made the same choice, or at least aligned himself with a cosmopolitan liberal fraction of that class.

Goodrich acknowledged that Marsh was attracted to socialism and contributed drawings to the communist magazine *New Masses*, insisting at the same time that “as a painter he was completely apolitical.” However, Marsh’s concern with the theme
of unemployment in the early 1930s when he dallied with the communist left belies this claim. If he did not sign the call for the American Artists’ Congress in 1935, it was perhaps because by then he was alienated by communist criticisms of his work such as a review of December 1934 that complained “he seldom tells you what he thinks of his material” and confined himself to “the surface aspect of the people and things he paints.” Marsh was caught between communist friends such as Jacob Burck, who ardently endorsed Soviet denunciations of “naturalism” and “formalism,” and liberals such as John Steuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton, who were the objects of such attacks and whose works he also respected.

In *The Park Bench* (Figure 35.4) Marsh positions three sleeping men with bundles and an African American woman next to a bareheaded man reading the Communist
Party’s *Daily Worker* in Union Square.\(^{51}\) The reader is the antithesis of the man to his left, hunched over with head on hands and hat over his eyes; an emblem of alertness is contrasted with one of apathy. For a while Marsh may have hoped that communist organization offered a solution to the fragmented hedonistic crowd of *Wonderland Circus Side Show*, but if so the message was obscured by the structural harmonies of his style. A review of the artist’s 1934 one-man show observed perceptively that his increasingly “adequate technique” had led to “mellowness,” so that in *The Park Bench* “the usual group of dirty loungers and job-hunters … have been looked at as a compositional unity against a dusky sordid background and … are related to each other by the surrounding air and a flowing rhythmical line.”\(^{52}\)

Another newspaper in a 1935 painting implies a different political direction. In *Coney Island Beach* (Figure 35.2), a heaving throng of robust men and women engage in good-humored play under the banner of the Brooklyn Roosevelt Club. In the left foreground lies a copy of the tabloid *Daily News*—then the largest-circulation paper in the United States—with the banner headline, “U.S. THREATENS SOVIET RUSSIA.”\(^{53}\) This refers to the Roosevelt Administration’s complaints to the Soviet government over speeches on US domestic politics by American communist leaders at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in Moscow in August 1935, which were taken to violate Ambassador Litvinov’s promise to Roosevelt at the time of US diplomatic recognition of the USSR in 1933 that his country would not interfere in American internal affairs.\(^{54}\) Given that Marsh himself had been a high-salaried employee of the *Daily News* from 1922 to 1925, the positioning of the paper opposite his signature on
the far right seems significant. Further, the painting suggests that the rambunctious crowd of American proletarians, united under the Roosevelt banner that tops the pyramidal scheme, are behind the president and indifferent to the promises of the coming People’s Front. Just as the Roosevelt Administration responded sharply to a perceived attempt to import Soviet-style politics into the United States (partly with its eye on the right-wing maneuverings of the National Civic Federation and the Liberty League), so Marsh responded to the challenge of Socialist Realism, perhaps thinking of Nina Kashina’s vapid holiday beach scene, *Sunshine and Sea at Koktebel, Crimea*, in the Pennsylvania Museum’s traveling *Art of Soviet Russia* exhibition. But Marsh had also engaged in romanticization, substituting ideal bodies with bland faces for the emphatic ethnic and racial diversity of *Wonderland Circus Side Show*.

To Marsh’s left-wing detractors his art represented a form of surface naturalism that avoided the gritty realities of the factory and picket line. For his critical admirers, his perceived non-judgmental stance was intrinsic to the value of his work; the fact that “he does not pretend to be a judge of existing conditions” was admirable and constituted his realism. Such commentators found in Marsh’s works confirmation of their view of mass culture as vulgar and tawdry, the working class as pleasure-seeking and individualistic, and the unemployed as degraded and impotent. In brief, liberal critics discovered in Marsh’s imagery symbols of the times that accorded with their ideological preconceptions. Although his iconography was novel, the form of his work—with its many allusions to Renaissance and Baroque precedents—was essentially conservative, and became increasingly so, representing the type of realism that Roman Jakobson labeled “the conservative tendency to remain within the limits of a given artistic tradition.”

**Philip Evergood’s Expressionist Realism**

What Jakobson saw as the opposite form of realism, “the tendency to deform given artistic norms conceived as an approximation of reality,” is best represented by the work of Marsh’s sometime friend Philip Evergood, whose background was also bourgeois—if perhaps more bohemian. Evergood was educated mainly in England, including spells at Eton and Cambridge, before a two-year stint at the Slade School of Art in 1921–23. From 1923 to 1931 he divided his time between the United States and Europe, developing a cosmopolitan knowledge of modern art. Evergood returned to the US for good in 1931, and in 1933 began to attend the John Reed Club. He was friendly with Marsh, whom he met in 1932; they shared an interest in themes of street life and popular entertainments but diverged over the question of didacticism in art.

Formally speaking, the basis for Evergood’s aesthetic was laid in the 1920s when he painted chiefly biblical subjects. At his 1933 show at the Montross Gallery, works such as *Hagar and Ishmael* mixed with others with titles like *Negro Communist*. The *New York Times*’s critic suggested the artist was “playing a game of European pastiche” and associated his style variously with those of Delacroix, Cézanne, and Picasso. Another commented on the strident color of some of the works on view. However, if the foundations of a broadly Expressionist style were already there, it was utilized to new effect at Evergood’s 1935 Montross show, where the central work was the imposing *Thousand Dollar Stakes*, painted in 1934, and now known as *Dance Marathon* (Figure 35.5).
Dance marathons began as one of the record-setting fads of the 1920s when Alma Cummings danced for twenty-seven hours at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City in April 1923 to best earlier English feats. They quickly turned into a potentially lucrative business in which endurance tests became a highly structured form of theatrical spectacle organized by promoters. Milton J. Crandall’s “Dance Derby of the Century,” which ran for nineteen days at Madison Square Garden in June 1928, epitomized the

Figure 35.5  Philip Evergood, *Dance Marathon*, 1934, oil on canvas, $60\frac{1}{16}\times 40\frac{1}{16}$ in. (152.6 × 101.7 cm). *Source:* Blanton Museum of Art. The University of Texas at Austin. Gift of Mari and James A. Michener. 1991. Photo: Rick Hall.
Contestants, who needed no dancing talent, competed for monetary prizes; regular rest intervals protracted contests for days or even months, while a vaudeville component was introduced to maintain the audience’s interest. The tone of marathons changed in the Depression, when economic desperation drove many young people to take part and a cheap entertainment of melodrama and romance appealed to those with time on their hands. By 1935 it was estimated that 20,000 people were employed in the business and almost all cities with a population of over 50,000 had hosted a marathon. Rebranded as “walkathons”—as in Evergood’s painting—dance contests were increasingly dominated by professional dancers and fixed by their promoters.

In 1935, a National Endurance Amusement Association was set up in an attempt to regulate dance contests and rid them of their association with fly-by-night promoters, sexual license, and crime. It scarcely got off the ground, and concerted opposition from middle-class morals organizations, public health officials, and movie theater owners led to bans in an increasing number of states and cities. By October 5, 1935, twenty-four states were enforcing statutes against endurance contests.

The unsavory reputation of the business is well illustrated by the 1933 Warner Brothers comedy *Hard to Handle*, in which James Cagney plays a small-time con artist who co-organizes a crooked dance marathon in which his girlfriend is to win the prize money. Further testimony is the novelistic depiction of marathons as squalid spectacles in Horace McCoy’s *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* and James T. Farrell’s *Judgment Day*, both of which appeared in the year Evergood’s painting was exhibited. In 1934, Farrell—who had earlier produced a report on dance marathons for University of Chicago sociology students—also wrote a short story representing the dance marathon from a participant’s standpoint, with the ironic title, “The Benefits of American Life.”

Although I have found no direct evidence that Evergood knew about this, he and Farrell both moved in the circle of the New York John Reed Club in 1934 and personal contact between them is not improbable. Moreover, there are striking parallels between *Dance Marathon* and Farrell’s story, in which an impoverished Greek immigrant, Takiss Filios, enters a marathon because he yearns for enough money to escape from menial jobs and return to Greece a wealthy man. Like Evergood’s swarthy male protagonist, Takiss is partnered with “a beautiful blonde American girl of the type he had always dreamed of as a possible wife.” Farrell also describes the dance hall as a “ring”—as it appears in Evergood’s painting—whereas most marathon halls were quickly constructed rectangular affairs.

The novelty of Evergood’s conception becomes evident by comparison with Marsh’s painting, *Zeke Youngblood’s Dance Marathon* (Figure 35.6). In the latter work we view the dancers from within the floor space as a frieze of women, some exhausted and supported by their male partners, others talking nonchalantly; at far left a woman combs her hair in a vanity mirror while behind her a bizarrely costumed partner reads a newspaper. The coloring of the figures has numerous bright accents, but the hall behind them recedes into a darker shadowy space, and the figures flow together like a group by Poussin.

By contrast, Evergood’s composition is all disjunctions and awkwardness, reminiscent of Max Beckmann, whom he discovered in the mid-1920s and greatly admired. Marsh’s coloring has an almost Rococo softness about it; Evergood’s contrasts of red, blue, and yellow are jarring and unmodulated. His elongated and disproportional figures wear absurd hats and, as in Farrell’s story, the women all wear beach pajamas.
Women were normally permitted to wear trousers only late at night, which matches the glaring lights and the clock’s hands indicating two o’clock.) At lower left, the awkward posture of the solo male dancer in striped sweater bottom is probably adopted to avoid the disqualification incurred if both knees touched the floor. Above him a couple is reprimanded by the floor judge, with cigar and drink in hand; floor judges often played villains in the spectacle. The overgrown hands of the central male figure support the woman who sleeps on his shoulder; contestants learned to sleep while walking as well as in their break periods. To their right a female contestant supports her partner. The fulcrum of the composition is the blonde woman’s small breast at the center of the canvas, resting on her partner’s forearm; above that their limp embrace echoes the grip of the web that contains them.

Dance contests forced men and women into intimate contact in public. Romances, jealousies, and staged marriages were regular features of the show, but the passions involved could be real. Farrell writes of Takiss and his partner Marie Glenn, “Again and again their bodies were jolted, shoved, pushed against each other, and he began wanting her so that her very nearness became excruciating.” In some contests participants—among whom there could be prostitutes—had sex in a so-called snake room. Promoters pretended concern for the welfare of the contestants, but the skeletal hand in the upper left of Evergood’s design, close to the nurse and first aid station, points to the shallowness of such claims. After a while Takiss’s Marie “became haggard and blousy and looked like a worn-out prostitute,” she “used more and

more cosmetic, and her face became like a ghastly caricature of the pretty girl who had entered the contest.” The scarlet lips and rouged cheek of Evergood’s central figure contrast with her unwholesome pallor. The event is on its fortieth day and a speed grind—a type of race designed to eliminate competitors and maintain audience interest—is promised for that night. The early morning crowd at walkathons often included a criminal element; Evergood’s leering man with a stogy at lower right and the woman opposite him, with her pointed red thumbnail and knuckleduster bracelet, may be intended to suggest this clientele.

In Farrell’s Judgment Day the radio announcer tells his listeners that the Silver Eagle Ballroom—where the dance has been going 367 hours—“is one place these days that is always open, always interesting, always exciting, with thrills and humor and pathos galore.” The main character, Studs Lonigan, persuaded to go by his girlfriend Catherine, initially dismisses the idea of “watching a bunch of damn fools sleeping on their feet.” “When is something going to happen?” he asks—a question he repeats two pages later. Catherine too cannot see “anything interesting” to begin with. But both become absorbed by the interactions between the contestants and the spectacle of their collapses. “It is kind of interesting, though. It gets you interested without you realizing it, once you get to know who they are,” Catherine says when they finally leave.

Dance marathon contestants and audiences alike entered a liminal space in which normal time was suspended and real suffering turned into a form of theater. The stasis of Evergood’s composition captures this perfectly. Whereas Marsh generally used Renaissance and Baroque forms as devices to suggest movement, Evergood thought within the surface structures of modernist painting, which tend to exclude or reduce markers of time. His contestants are pinned down like insects on the picture surface just as they are stuck in the spider’s web of the floor pattern. The ring of the space is a serpent biting its own tail.

Writing in the New York Sun, Henry McBride likened Dance Marathon thematically to Toulouse-Lautrec, but also noted that the drawing was closer to Grosz or Jules Pascin in its calculated naivety. An emphasis on the element of grotesque humor in the painting runs through the reviews, but McBride and others found it uncomfortable viewing. Only one critic used the term “realist,” and he saw Evergood’s work as a “coarse and disturbing commentary on contemporary life.” The most effective characterization came from Robert Godsoe, director of the Uptown Gallery and a proponent of modernism who later supported The Ten:

Of the many anecdotalists showing about town these days Evergood has infinitely more strenuous concern with his exceptionally gruesome story. His composition shatters itself, his colour is viciously incisive, his joke is a complete blasphemy. He never snickers but likes the decisive guffaw and plays about with an imagination that is convincingly and burningly morbid with the debris of our civilization, obsessed with putrescence and vulgarity and conveying his imagery with an acute technique which is extraordinarily well-subjugated to the matter at hand. Like Cadmus he laughs and blasphemes but unlike Cadmus he never swathes his indictment in the velvet of a popular technique.

That is, Evergood eschewed that ingratiating sheaf of tradition in which Cadmus, like Marsh, clothed his subjects. It is not surprising that John Sloan advised the artist to “smooth” his conception; Evergood declined.
As Raymond Williams has shown, the concept of realism is shot through with a distinction between surface and depth, appearance and reality. For Marsh’s critics on the left, his art remained “primarily … epidermal,” too concerned with pleasures of observation from a comfortable social distance. By 1934–35 the edgy qualities in his work that discomfitted some critics at the beginning of the decade were being ironed out. At the same time, “realists of the Coney Island stripe,” who looked to the street only “for an exciting spectacle,” were criticized for failing to make “a definite alignment … with the working class as a progressive force,” failing to represent “the will for struggle.” In some works of the 1930s—and notably American Tragedy (1937; private collection)—Evergood depicted figures that might be seen to embody this quality; but not in Dance Marathon or most others. This was not where the substance of his realism lay.

Realism did not consist in packaged truths to be handed over to the audience like moral homilies as more simple-minded communist critics assumed. The ugliness and disharmony of Evergood’s art by comparison with Marsh’s was jarring; his pictures prohibited simple enjoyment or absorption, refusing the spectator the familiar comfort of perspectival space, with its illusions of distance and omnipotence. Like Brecht’s ideal audience in the epic theater, the spectator was invited not to identify with the characters depicted but to “observe them as interested outsiders,” who would be prompted to reflection and action. “The artist-innovator must impose a new form upon our perception, if we are to detect in a given thing those traits which went unnoticed the day before,” Jakobson observed. It is the jolt of the unfamiliar and unexpected in Evergood’s art that raised it above the depiction of surfaces, inviting the spectator to a fresh understanding of familiar experience. As was frequently observed, Marsh’s art depicted kitsch and the vulgar, but he represented them in the forms of High Art. By contrast, Evergood assimilated these qualities into the very form of his art. This was a far more risky strategy, as his numerous failed pictures show. But such risk-taking—which often involved playing with the popular and grotesque—was necessary to modern “artist-innovators” as Jakobson defined them and is the quality that distinguishes critical realism from conservative realisms such as Marsh’s, socialist or otherwise. Marsh’s example illustrates the exhaustion of traditional modes; Evergood points to the far more uncertain character of realism in art after modernism and its dependence on the “vulgarity” Robert Godsoe recognized.

Notes
2 My argument here is indebted to Denith, 2007, pp. 33–34.
4 For Eakins’s reputation in the early twentieth century, see Troyen, 2001. For the relationship between science and pictorial vision in Eakins’s work, see Leja, 2004. I use “middle-class” in the sense of Blumin, 1989; Eakins did not belong to the bourgeoisie. The most useful account of Eakins’s ideology is Braddock, 2009, though in my view Braddock assumes too neat a consonance between Eakins’s outlook and that of the bourgeoisie.
5 On types in realist theory, see Wellek, 1963, pp. 242–246.
7 Garland, 1960, pp. 64, 63.
8 Henri, 1923.
9 For the realist/naturalist distinction, see Lukács, 1972, pp. 85–96, 140–147.
11 Sloan, 1944, pp. 16, 21, 41, 68, 18, 12.
12 Loughery, 1995, pp. 28–32.
13 Sloan, 1944, pp. 12, 42, 20.
14 On formations of this type, see Williams, 1981, pp. 71–86
17 Zurier, 1988, pp. 52–57.
18 Quoted in Brooks, 1955, p. 99 and n.
19 Despite their differences over editorial policy Sloan and Masses editor Max Eastman were united in marking a clear-cut distinction between art and practical concerns—see Eastman, 1913, ch. 1. Eastman denounced the instrumentalism of Soviet thinking on the arts in Eastman, 1934.
20 Such instrumentalism had been a defining feature of the proletarianism current in communist artistic circles since 1928—see Hemingway, 2002, pp. 13–16.
21 Gorky et al., 1977, pp. 41–42, 44.
23 Mason, 1933, pp. 24, 25.
27 For example, Cohen, 1983, p. 2; Todd, 1993, pp. 108–120.
30 Marsh, 1933, p. 188, quoted in Blossom, 1933, p. 264.
31 “[H]e presents to us an ordering of chaos”: Salpeter, 1935, p. 46.
33 Louis Adamic gives a vivid description of the effects of the Depression on the standing of men in many families in Adamic, 1938, pp. 283–287.
35 For Hoover’s statement, see Dawley, 1991, p. 335.
37 Quoted in Goodrich, 1972, p. 38.
39 Cautela, 1925, p. 283. The same point is made in Federal Writers’ Project, 1982, p. 473.
40 Croy, 1929, pp. 35–36.
41 Bliven, 1921, p. 374. Jews owned many Coney Island properties—see Snyder-Grenier, 1996, p. 194. In Croy, 1929, a Jew is the mastermind and effective “king” of the place.
Supposedly invented by the German immigrant Charles Feltman, whose restaurant was a Coney Island landmark. After 1916, the hot dog was particularly associated with Nathan’s, which from 1920 stood opposite the Stillwell Avenue subway terminal.

Edward Laning—another of Marsh’s close friends—also claimed he was “aloof from every sort of politics.” See Laning, 1973, pp. 12–13. Both Goodrich and Laning were writing during the Cold War, and in Laning’s case he had his own flirtation with the communist left to disavow. In 1922 Marsh contributed eight works to The Liberator, precursor to New Masses.

Marsh was not a signatory to either the 1935 or 1936 versions of the call. He was listed as an exhibitor in ACA Galleries, Exhibition: American Artists Congress, November 10–23, 1935 (AAA D343: 88–91). Marsh’s desk calendars of 1931–34 reveal him attending classes at the Workers’ School, watching Soviet films, mixing with communist and socialist artists, and teaching at the John Reed Club. In January 1932 he exhibited at the club with Jacob Burck, one of the leading communist cartoonists and a model proletarian artist. In July 1933 he made a brief visit to the USSR. His first contribution to New Masses was in November 1926; as late as July 1935 he contributed a caricature of the Secretary of State for Labor, Frances Perkins. His painting A Box at the Metropolitan (whereabouts unknown) was illustrated in New Masses’ “Revolutionary Art” issue of October 1, 1935.

Burck accused Benton of practicing a superficial naturalism.

Marsh reportedly traded a picture for a subscription to the Daily Worker and read it daily. See Salpeter, 1935, p. 49.

The headline was carried by the late edition of the Daily News of Monday, August 26, 1935, and accompanied an article by Joseph H. Baird, “U.S. Threatens Soviet Break.”

Illustrated in Anon., 1935, p. 65.

Marsh’s main images of manly labor are in his series of paintings and prints of railroad locomotives such as Locomotives, Jersey City (1934; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC).

Blossom placed Marsh “alongside” Curry, Benton, and Hopper (p. 265).

Calabria, 1993, ch. 3; Martin, 1994, ch. 3.

70 Martin, 1994, chs 6 and 7.


73 I have not been able to discover whether the story was published in a magazine in 1934, as many of Farrell’s stories were.

74 George Ruty and Zeke Youngblood promoted the Second Annual Boardwalk Marathon Dance Contest at Young’s Million Dollar Pier in Atlantic City between May and October 1932: Calabria, 1993, pp. 20, 30, 43.

75 For Evergood and Beckmann, see Taylor, 1987, pp. 149, 150, 151.


77 Calabria, 1993, pp. 73–74; Martin, 1994, pp. 73–81.


80 Calabria, 1993, p. 142, notes the serialized and fragmented character of time in the walkathon contest.

81 McBride, 1935.

82 Burrows, 1935.

83 Godsoe, 1935.

84 Taylor, 1987, p. 82.


86 Benson, 1934, p. 61.

87 Klein, 1935.

88 On Evergood in the later 1930s, see Hemingway, 2002, pp. 140–144.

89 Goldbeck, 1935, p. 27.


91 This is a distinction that parallels Max Horkheimer’s opposition of “traditional” and “critical” theory. See Horkheimer, 2002.

References


Anon. (1933). “Philip Evergood Has One-Man Show at Montross’s.” New York Sun, March 15.


Index

Page references which include illustrations are in italics.

9/11 (destruction of the World Trade Center), 300, 310, 313n

Abigail Adams Smith Museum, 556
abstract art, 18, 352n
Abstract Expressionism, 25–31, 37, 45n, 62–63, 78, 284, 292
Ackerman, Gerald, 148
Adamic, Louis, 632n
Adams, Henry, 81n, 156, 160n, 250
Adams, Joseph, 510–512
Adamson, Glenn, 99, 100, 130–131, 134
Adorno, Theodor, 18, 169
affect theory, 129–141
African Americans, 49–64, 90, 156, 161n, 395–408, 419–425, 430n, 499, 529
civil rights movement, 120–123, 133–134, 135–136, 138
civil rights movement, 120–123, 133–134, 135–136, 138
emancipation, 9, 395–408, 409n–411n, 419–421, 515–516
post-blackness, 59–63
Agassiz, Louis, 124n
Agee, William, 614n
agency, 43, 174, 179, 180n, 183–184, 529–534
Aguinaldo, Emilio, 232
Ahmad, Diana, 596n
Alcott, William, 383, 391n
Aldrich, Thomas Bailey, 545
Alemberg, Jean le Rond d’, 108n
Alexander, Archer, 402
Alpers, Svetlana, 103
America China Manufactory (ACM), 100–102
American Art (journal), 18, 35, 81n, 345
American Artists’ Congress, 624
American Impressionism and Realism (exhibition, 1994), 570
American Indian art see Native American art
American Medical Association, 590
American Sources of Modern Art (exhibition, 1933), 7, 284, 289–292

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
Americanist methodology, 4, 17–31, 32n, 34–45, 321–323
anatomy, 404–406, 410n
Anatsui, El, 456
Anderson, Benedict, 303, 375n
Anderson, Jennifer, 103–105
Anderson, Rebecca, 207n
Andrade, Oswald de, 285–286, 296
Andre, Carl, 61, 602
Anfam, David, 577
Anglicanism, 489–502
animals, 424–425, 430n, 452, 460–462
antebellum period, 371–373, 378–391
Anthony, Edward, 509–510
anthropocentrism, 457–459
anthropology, 106–108
anthropophagism, 285–287
anti-abolitionism, 424–425
Anti-Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), 587, 594
anti-communism, 76, 77–78, 81n, 313n, 529
antimodernism, 266–267, 275n
Anzaldúa, Gloria, 418
Appleton, William Sumner, 556
apprenticeships, 102–103
archaeology, 106–108
architecture, 6, 211–223, 456, 457, 544–558
churches, 10, 233–242, 489–502
housing, 219, 501, 551, 552–554
skyscrapers, 216–218
Architecture Research Office (ARO), 457
archive-based analysis, 90, 146–159
area studies methodology, 332, 333n, 348
Armory Show (1913), 288, 530, 618
Armstrong, Elizabeth, 59–60
Arneson, Robert, 600, 601, 602–605
art, market value of, 91, 157, 270–271, 274, 278n, 526–527, 528, 536–537
Art Bulletin (journal), 71, 76, 78
art history
canonical works, 507–508, 509–512
research questions, 1–3, 4, 38, 64, 108, 206, 222–223, 292–293, 296, 300
teaching methods, 6, 193–206, 207n–208n
translation of sources, 8, 329–330, 336–351
see also methodology
Art in Translation (journal), 350
artists, status of, 8–9, 270, 359–373, 374n–375n, 404–406
Arts and Humanities Citation Index, 31n
Ashcan School, 571, 573, 618–619, 620–621
Associated American Artists, 610
Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), 448
Auslander, Leora, 351n
authenticity, 3, 187, 252
Azoulay, Ariella, 133–134
Aztec, 289–291, 305
Bacon, Francis, 493
Baker, Malcolm, 103
Baker, Steve, 461, 462
Ball, Thomas, 9, 395, 397, 399, 400, 401–403, 407
Banerjee, Subhankar, 453, 454, 455
Banham, Reyner, 605, 608
Bank of Canada (Ottawa), 307–308, 309
Bannister, Edward Mitchell, 50–51
Barbizon School, 51
Barnes, Edward Larrabee, 555
Baroques realism, 620–626
Barrett, Ross, 78
Barry, James, 324–325
Barthes, Roland, 32n
Bataille, Georges, 456
Baudrillard, Jean, 528
Baur, John, 77
Baxandall, Michael, 103, 352n, 534
Bayliss, Charles, 494
Beauchamps, Claire, 73, 74
Beaupre, Gloucester (MA), 556
Becker, Howard S., 533
Bergdoll, Barry, 456
Berger, Martin, 5, 50, 55–56, 61, 128, 129, 130, 133–134, 135–138, 141n, 155
Berger, Maurice, 49–50, 55
Bergner, Gwen, 396, 399, 404, 407
Berkeley, George, 370, 375n
Berkowitz, Julie, 161n
Berlo, Janet, 1, 7, 277n
Best, Stephen, 134, 135, 142n
Beuys, Joseph, 461–462
Beveridge, William, 493
Beverly Hillbillies (TV series), 477–478, 479
Bhabha, Homi, 416
Bhattacharjee, Yudhijit, 349
biblical paintings, 52, 53
bilingualism, 8, 329–330, 336–351, 352n–353n
birds, symbolism of, 452
Birmingham (AL), 120–123, 135–136
Bishop, John Peale, 563
Blackmar, Elizabeth, 219
Blair, Sara, 260n
Blesh, Rudi, 250
Blitt, Barry, 58–59
Bliven, Bruce, 621
Blodgett, William, 390
Blossom, Frederick, 633n
Blumin, Stuart, 631n
Boime, Albert, 51–52
Bois, Yve-Alain, 19, 24, 32n, 39, 40, 41, 45n, 46n
Bolger, Dorcen, 155–156
Bonin, Gousse, 100–102
Boone, Elizabeth, 353n
Boston (MA), 96–97, 102–103, 211–212, 557
Botar, Oliver, 456
Bourdieu, Pierre, 88
Bowen, Penuel, 499–500
Bowles, John, 55
Boyd, Richard, 207n
Bracken, Christopher, 276n
Braddock, Alan, 3, 9–10, 53, 133, 156, 161n, 339, 453–454, 456, 631n
Brady, Mathew, 381
Braque, Georges, 468
Brazil, 285–287
Brecht, Bertolt, 472, 631
Bregler, Charles, 146, 160n
Bregler, Mary, 146
Bregler Collection, 146–148, 150–159, 160n
Brey, Laura, 475
bricolage, 468
Brinton, Christian, 268, 632n
Broad, Eli, 525
Brook, Timothy, 596n
Brooks, Van Wyck, 11, 249, 562–563, 573, 577
Brown, Bill, 46n
Brown, Milton, 76, 77–78, 81n
Bruce, Patrick Henry, 253–254
Bryan, William, 241–242
Bryant, William, 213
Burck, Jacob, 624, 633n
Burdsall, Benjamin H.D., 23–25
Buffalo (NY), 310, 311
Buffett, Warren, 88
Buggeln, Gretchen, 500–501
Buick, Kirsten Pai, 223
built environment see architecture
Burchfield, Charles, 576
Burn, Ian, 310
Burns, Sarah, 1, 9, 53, 160n, 324, 350, 352n, 393n, 577
Burroughs, Alan, 148
Cadmus, Paul, 436–440, 441, 445, 630
Caffin, Charles Henry, 329
Cage, John, 602
Cagney, James, 628
Cahill, Holger, 289, 291
Calabria, Frank, 634n
California, 535
caligraphy, 341–342
Calo, Mary Ann, 53–54, 56
Camille, Michael, 528
Campbell, W. Joseph, 242n
Canadian art, 7, 277n, 300–305, 309–310, 312
Cannan, Gilbert, 608
Cannon, T.C. (Tommy Wayne), 274
capitalism, 22, 89–92, 305–309, 311, 535, 547, 606
Captain Blood (film), 480–481
caricature, 57–59
Carroll, Abigail, 552–553
Carson, Cary, 533
cartoons, 57–59, 526–527, 531
Cary, Thomas, 325–326
Cash, Sarah, 155–156
Cassell, Stephen, 457
INDEX

cross-dressing, 255, 261n
Crow, Thomas, 71, 79n, 142n
Crowell, Ella, 150–151
Croy, Homer, 621, 623, 632n
Cuddy, Lois, 430n
culture, 167–179, 183–189
border cultures, 300
Canadian culture, 7, 277n, 299–312
Chinese culture, 581–595, 596n
colonial period, 193–206
Dutch culture, 345, 367, 374n, 535
Latin America, 59–60, 193–206, 281–296, 300
music, 493–494, 495–496, 497
Native American cultures, 7, 264–275, 276n–278n
and religion, 10, 52, 53, 228–242, 243n, 489–502
Cummings, Alma, 627
Currier, Nathaniel, 510, 511
Curry, John Steuart, 624
Cushman, Charlotte, 406, 410n

Daily News, 625–626
d’Alembert, Jean le Rond see Alembert, Jean le Rond d’
dance marathons, 626–631
Danly, Susan, 152, 160n
Darwin, Charles, 449, 461
Dassel, Hermine, 388
Daughters of Bilitis, 435
Daughters of the American Revolution, 555–556
Davey, Frank, 581–585, 593–595
Davis, John, 1, 7–8, 23, 76, 113, 161n, 324, 340, 350, 352n, 393n, 421, 422, 454
Davis, Samuel, 328
Davis, Whitney, 435
Day, Gail, 74, 75
Dean, Carolyn, 196
de Andrade, Oswald see Andrade, Oswald de
Deas, Charles, 429
deconstruction, 24, 116–117
decorative arts, 4–5, 95–108
De l’Allemagne (exhibition, 2013), 322–323, 332n
delaroche, Paul, 515
Deleuze, Gilles, 265
Deloria, Philip, 286
Delpar, Helen, 288
DeLue, Rachael, 5, 39–40, 183, 184–185, 186–187, 188, 189n
democracy, 215–216, 219, 221
demuth, Charles, 253–254, 259
Denning, Michael, 77
derrida, Jacques, 116, 117, 185
determinism, 5
detroit Institute of Arts, 91
Dewey, John, 44
de Zayas, Marius see Zayas, Marius de
D’Harriette, Anna, 498
Diderot, Denis, 98, 108n
digressive thinking, 472–477, 483, 485n
Dillon, Diane, 46n
Dimock, George, 53
Dion, Mark, 602
disenchantment, 93n
DLANDSTUDIO, 457
Dockstader, Frederick, 278n
dominguez Torres, Mónica, 6, 206, 208n
Doney, Thomas, 509–510
Doss, Erika, 25, 26, 28–29, 30, 288
Douglass, Frederick, 396, 399, 402, 403, 408, 409n
Dove, Arthur, 56, 172, 248, 249, 250–252, 261n
Dow, Arthur Wesley, 341
Doyle, Jennifer, 156, 161n
Drake, Susannah C., 457
dream-work, 86–92
Dreiser, Theodore, 567
DuBois, Mary Ann Delafield (Mrs. Cornelius), 388
Du Bois, W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt), 90
Duchamp, Marcel, 253, 254
Dufresnoy, Charles Alphonse, 368, 370
Dunaway, Finis, 453, 454
Duncanson, Robert S., 51
Dunlap, William, 95, 371, 373, 525, 530
Dunn, Dorothy, 264–265, 267, 271, 274
Durand, John, 367
Durand, Levi, 492, 493
Dutch Americans, 345, 367, 374n, 535
Dyck, Anthony van see Van Dyck, Anthony
Dyer, Richard, 54–55

Eagleton, Terry, 532
Eakins, Susan, 148, 150–151, 159n, 160n
Eastman, Max, 632n
ecocriticism, 3, 9–10, 447–462
economy, 22, 89–92, 305–309, 311, 535, 547, 591–593, 596n
Edgerton, Samuel, 501
educational theory, 196–201
Eisenstein, Sergei, 261n
Ellet, Elizabeth, 388
Elliot, Charles Loring, 387
Elliot, William, 402
Ellison, Ralph, 143n
emancipation, 9, 395–408, 409n–411n, 419–421, 515–516
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 185, 187
Emma Lake Artists’ Workshops, 302–303, 304–312
Engels, Friedrich, 547
English, Darby, 61–62, 63, 139–140, 143n
English, Thomas Dunn, 378
Enlightenment, 499
epistemology, 186–189
Erickson, Arthur, 307, 308
Erickson, Michelle, 100–102
essentialism, 8, 44
eugenics, 428–429, 430n
Evans, Walker, 91, 605
Evergood, Philip, 12, 626–631, 633n, 634n
exceptionalism, 6, 7–8, 44, 113, 213–214, 248, 317–332, 455
Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts (1932), 7, 264, 265–268, 270, 275n, 276n
Expressionist realism, 626–631

Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940 (exhibition, 1990), 49
Faherty, Duncan, 208n
Fahlman, Betsy, 536
Fairbrother, Trevor, 156
Fanon, Frantz, 137
Farny, Henry, 588
Farrell, James, 628, 629–630, 634n
Farwell, Willard, 586
feather mosaics, 207n
Feltman, Charles, 633n
femininity, 257–258, 261n, 387–391, 392n
feminist theory, 9, 23, 87–88, 130, 161n, 222, 476–477
film noir, 37, 45n
First Nations art see Native American art
Fiske, John, 217
Fitch, James Marston, 220–221
Fitzgerald, Michael, 530
Flaubert, Gustave, 618
Follansbee, Peter, 98
foreign languages, importance for scholarship, 8, 329–330, 336–351, 352n–353n
form, 18–19, 25–28, 39–40, 45n, 168, 258–259, 450, 614n
formalism, 19, 23, 24, 26–27, 32n, 38–42, 46n, 115–116, 184, 290, 523n
Forman, Benno, 102
Fort, Ilene Susan, 161n
Fortune (journal), 620
Foster, Hal, 24, 32n, 142n, 160n
Foster, Kathleen, 5, 153–154, 160n–161n, 162n
Foster, Philip, 554
Foucault, Michel, 187, 188–189
Fox, Howard, 60
Francis, Jacqueline, 50, 54, 56
Frank, Adam, 132, 133
Frankfurt School, 37, 75–76, 529
Franklin, Benjamin, 366
Freer, Charles Lang, 529
Freestyle (exhibition, 2001), 59
French, Jared, 438–439, 440–443, 445
French Americans, 336–337, 348
Freud, Sigmund, 135, 188, 340, 395–396, 398, 407
Fried, Michael, 62, 149–150, 157, 603
Friedrich, Caspar David, 577
Frost, Robert, 414–415, 429, 430n
furniture, 5, 96–100, 102–108, 205
Gabara, Esther, 286, 287
Gallagher, Catherine, 37
Gallant, Gregory (“Seth”) see “Seth” (Gregory Gallant)
Galt, John, 364
Galton, Francis, 428
Garcia, Emily, 208n
Garland, Hamlin, 618
Garrison, William Lloyd, 410n
Gast, John, 418
Gaudio, Michael, 39
Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California, 433, 445n
Geary Act (1892), 594
Genauer, Emily, 443
Gérôme, Jean-Léon, 147, 148, 149
Gibbon, Edward, 362
Gibson, Ann, 62–63
Gifford, Sanford Robinson, 386
Gillooly, Walter, 556
Gilroy, Paul, 57
Ginzburg, Carlo, 37
Girodet de Roussy-Trioson, Anne-Louis, 406
Glackens, William, 571
Classic, Henry, 532, 613n
GLBT Historical Society, 433, 445n
global warming, 454–455, 456, 463n
globalization, 91–92, 331, 346–348
Gloucester (MA), 556
Godoe, Robert, 630
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 321
Golden, Thelma, 59
Gombrich, E.H. (Ernst Hans), 73, 320–321
Gonzalez, Riza, 60
Goodheart, Adam, 387
Goodrich, Lloyd, 146, 147, 148, 149, 151, 156, 159n, 160n, 609, 620, 622, 633n
Gorky, Maxim, 619
Gorman, R.C. (Rudolph Carl), 274
Gothic Revival, 550
Gottlieb, Marc, 71, 79n
Gottlieb, Adolph, 291
Gould, Eliza H., 195, 202, 206n
Gowan, Alan, 216, 217, 221–222
grain elevators, 605–609
Graves, Carlton H., 241
graveyards, 237–239, 489–490, 491, 496–498
Greek Revival, 549, 550, 554
Green, Frances, 409n
Green, Nicholas, 530
Greenberg, Clement, 62–63, 73, 78, 304, 305, 312n, 313n, 603
Greenblatt, Stephen, 37, 470
Greenhill, Jennifer, 5, 142n
greenhouse gases, 454–455, 456, 463n
Greenough, Horatio, 214
Griffey, Randall, 3, 9
Grijp, Paul van der see Van der Grijp, Paul
Groseclose, Barbara, 1
Group of Seven (Canada), 303, 304–305, 306, 310–311, 312n
Guadalupe (Philippines), 239–240
Guggenheim, Peggy, 530
Guilbault, Serge, 78
Guston, Philip, 45
Gutman, Nica, 154
Haecckel, Ernst, 449
Haidt, John Valentine, 345, 352n–353n
Hall, David, 503n
Halle, Hiram, 556–558
Halle-Salem House, Pound Ridge (NY), 556
Haltman, Kenneth, 345, 352n
Hamlin, Talbot, 214
Handlin, David, 217, 218, 222, 224n
Hard to Handle (film), 628
Hardin, Jennifer, 159n
Harman, Graham, 43, 458, 459
Harvard Illuminated and New Pictorial Bible (1843), 511–513
Harrington, Michael, 477–478
Harris, Neil, 391n
Harrison, Birge, 570
Harrison, William Henry, 381
Hartley, Marsden, 56, 248, 254, 259, 261n, 268, 276n
Hartmann, Sadakichi, 56
Harvard Crimson (newspaper), 92
Harvard University, 211–213, 214
Haskell, Barbara, 569
Hassam, Childe, 563–565, 570
Hauser, Arnold, 73–74
Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 247, 373, 576
Hays, K. Michael, 223
Heade, Martin Johnson, 323, 332n
Headley, Joel, 318
headstones, 489–490, 491, 496–498
Heckscher House, Mount Desert Island (ME), 555
Index

Heidegger, Martin, 9, 416, 458–459, 462
Hemings, Sally, 423
Hemingway, Andrew, 12, 75, 77, 632n
Henderson, Alice Corbin, 267, 276n
Hendler, Glenn, 204, 208n
Hendricks, Gordon, 152, 155
Henri, Robert, 570–571, 573, 618
Henri Circle, 288, 570–571, 573, 618–619
Herrera, Velino, 7, 272, 273–274, 275n, 276n
Hesselius, John, 193, 194
Hewitt, Edgar, 272, 276n
Hewitt, William, 510, 511
Hide/Seek (exhibition, 2010), 156
Hill, John, 99
Historicism, 11, 544–558
Hitchcock, Henry-Russell, 214
Hodgson, Godfrey, 317–318
Hogarth, William, 366, 374n
Holder, Ann, 423
Holland, Juanita Marie, 50
Hollinger, David, 57
Homer, Winslow, 147, 160n, 321, 516, 529, 415, 530, 609
Homoeroticism, 154–156, 161n, 255, 433–445
Homonyms, 254
Hopper (exhibition, 2012–13), 614n
Hopper, Edward, 346, 573–577, 600, 609–613, 614n
Horkheimer, Max, 634n
Horton, Jessica, 7
Hosmer, Harriet Goodhue, 392n, 405, 406, 410n, 411n
Hotel Management (journal), 611, 612
Housing, 216–217, 219, 501, 552–554
Housser, Frederick, 303
Howe, Oscar, 278n
Howe, Samuel Gridley, 550
How-to books, 98–100
Hoxie, Vinnie Ream, 411n
Hudson, Suzanne, 44
Hudson River School, 51
Humor, 57–59, 267–268, 276n, 366, 526–527, 531
Hunt, John Dixon, 130
Hunt, Richard Morris, 550
Hunter, Robert, 100–102
Huntington, Daniel, 384–385
Hurvitz, Jeroen van den, 345
Hutcheson, Francis, 495
Hutchins, Edwin, 11, 519–520, 521–522
Ibarra, José de, 193, 194
Iconoclast, 228–242
Identity
Artists, 8–9, 359–373
And class, 78, 81n, 89–92, 156, 161n, 188–189, 217, 221
Post-identity, 59–63
Sexual identity, 9, 154–156, 161n, 255, 259, 261n, 433–445
Illegal immigrants, 416–418
Illustration, 56, 511–513, 614n
See also
Commercial art
Immigrants, 310, 349, 416–418, 426–429, 545
Inca, 289–291
incest, 261n
Inco, 308–309, 313n
Indian art
See Native American art
Indian Hill (West Newbury, MA), 552, 553
Industrial landscapes, 305–309
Ingold, Tim, 106, 107–108
Inness, George, 39–40, 183
Intentionality, 184
Interdisciplinarity, 3, 6
Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (journal), 448
International Nickel Company (Inco), 308–309, 313n
Internet, 91
Interpretation, 53–54, 60–64, 135–140, 167–179, 183–189
intra-compositional writing, 341–342
Irmscher, Christoph, 453
Jackson, Andrew, 509
Jacobson, Oscar, 277n
Jaffee, David, 532
Jakobson, Roman, 247, 626, 631
James, Henry, 405, 410n, 566–567
James, William, 44
Jameson, Frederic, 37, 45n, 87, 89, 188, 484n
Jarves, James Jackson, 214, 215
Jaskot, Paul, 75
Jefferson, Thomas, 222, 348, 423, 535, 545, 548, 549
Jiménez, Luis Alfonso, 9, 416–418, 427
John Reed Club, 633n
Johns, Elizabeth, 81n–82n, 149, 152, 155–156, 418
Johnson, Eastman, 9, 130–131, 416, 419–423, 424, 425, 429, 430n, 532
Johnson, Malvin Gray, 54
Johnson, Phillip, 423
Johnson, Roswell Hill, 428–429
Johnston, Joshua, 51
Jones, Lindsay, 502
Joschke, Christian, 323
Judd, Donald, 44
Kabotie, Fred, 272, 276n
Kalter, Barrett, 546, 547
Kandinsky, Wassily, 251
Kane, H.H. (Harry Hubbell), 589
Kasson, John, 420
Katz, Jonathan, 156, 161n
Kauffmann, Angelica, 361, 362
Kauffmann, Thomas DaCosta, 345, 352n
Kazin, Alfred, 572, 577
Keats, John, 176
Kelsey, Robin, 4, 125n, 339
Kennedy, John F., 474, 477–480, 481–482
Kensett, John Frederick, 50, 391, 393n
Kepler, Udo, 526–527
Kimball, Fiske, 218
Kinkade, Thomas, 36
Kiowa Indian Art (1929), 277n
Kirkpatrick, Sidney, 156
kitchens, 552–553
kitsch, 271, 436
Klein, Melanie, 43
Klein, Peter, 74
Kleist, Heinrich von, 485n

directory
Knickerbocker (magazine), 327
Kochler, Sylvester, 329
Kochler, Wilhelm, 114–115
Kouwenhoven, John, 214
Kramer, Hilton, 603
Krauss, Rosalind, 24, 25–26, 27, 28, 29–30, 41
Kroiz, Lauren, 56, 288
Krugler, Barbara, 62
Kundera, Milan, 8, 322, 324
Kuniyoshi, Yasuo, 54
Kurutz, Gary, 595n
Kwakwaka’wakw (Kwakiutl), 291–292, 305

La Farge, Oliver Sloan, 268
Lafayette, Marquis de, 11, 545–549
LaFountain, Jason, 8, 46n, 124n, 333n
Lamarck, Jean-Baptiste, 429
Landau, Ellen, 288
Lander, Louisa, 406, 411n
Lane, Belden, 502
Lane, Fitz Henry, 50, 323, 332n
Lane, John, 77
Langenheim, William, 507, 508
Langston, John Mercer, 410n
languages, and scholarship, 8, 329–330, 336–351, 352n–353n
Lanier, Jaron, 91
Laning, Edward, 633n
Larkin, Edward, 207n
Larkin, Oliver, 76–77, 81n
Lasch, Christopher, 471
Lasser, Ethan, 4–5, 351n
Latin America, 6, 7, 59–60, 193–206, 281–296, 501
Latitudinarianism, 495
Latour, Bruno, 43, 142n, 523n
Latrobe, Benjamin Henry, 325–326
Lau, Grace, 595n
Lavoie, Catherine, 501
Learning from Las Vegas (Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour), 219
Ledbury, Mark, 347
Lee, Anthony W., 3, 11–12, 89, 532, 596n
Lee, Jean, 548, 555
Lee, Nikki S., 60, 429
Lee, Russell, 606, 607
Légaré, Mary Swinton, 388
Leibold, Cheryl, 152, 160n
Leibsohn, Dana, 196, 324
Leja, Michael, 10–11, 25, 27–28, 29, 30, 32n, 37, 40, 45n, 78, 124n, 288, 291, 292, 631n
Lemire, Elise, 424
Lemke, Sieglinde, 601, 613n
Leonard, Thomas, 428
Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, 176
Leutze, Emanuel, 418
Leverenz, David, 378–379
Levin, Gail, 611, 614n
Levine, Lawrence, 599
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 468, 482
Lewenthal, Reeves, 610
Lewis, Edmonia, 9, 223, 395, 398, 399, 403–406, 407–408, 410n, 411n
Lewis, R.W.B. (Richard Warrington Baldwin), 188
Leyland, Frederick, 530
Ligon, Glenn, 601, 613n
Lincoln, Abraham, 402–403, 409n
Lipiński, Filip, 346
Lochhead, Kenneth, 302, 313n
Lockridge, Kenneth, 345
London (England), 368–369
Lorenzetti, Ambrogio, 231
Lott, Eric, 188
Love, Heather, 134, 142n
Lovecraft, H.P. (Howard Phillips), 573
Lovell, Margaretta, 332n, 342–343
Low, Will Hicok, 329
Lubin, David, 10, 37, 51, 55, 161n, 470–484
Luks, George, 567–569, 570
luminism, 323, 535
Lynch, Kevin, 547
Lynes, George Platt, 438–439, 441–442, 444–445
Lyon, Phyllis, 434, 435
Mace, Thomas, 496, 497
Mackenzie, John, 497–498
Magazine of American Art, 268
Malvar, Mary, 232
Mancini, JoAnne, 3, 6, 203, 324, 530, 533
Manet, Édouard, 88
Manila (Philippines), 228–242
Manthorne, Katherine, 393n
Marcil, Christian, 470
Marcus, Sharon, 134, 135, 142n
Marin, John, 248, 249–250, 261n, 273, 571
Marley, Anna, 53
Marsh, Reginald, 12, 620–626, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632n, 633n
Marshall, Jennifer, 44
Martin, Ann Smart, 532
Martin, Del, 434, 435
Martinez, Crescensio, 266
Martinez, Maria and Julian, 266
Marx, Karl, 20, 72–73, 85–86, 135, 340, 547
Marx, Leo, 188, 565, 601
Marxism, 4, 20, 72–79, 80n–82n, 85–92, 116, 124n–125n, 529
masculinity, 9, 257–258, 261n, 378–387, 395–408
Mason, Clara R., 619–620
Masses, The (magazine), 619, 632n
Massey Commission, 303–304
Massumi, Brian, 132
Masten, April, 387
Masters, Frederick, 591, 596n
material culture, 42–43, 46n, 117–120, 130–141, 208n, 340–343, 351, 352n

ceramics, 100–102
furniture, 5, 96–100, 102–108, 205
religious art, 10, 52, 53, 228–242, 336, 337, 489–502
Mather, Samuel, 344
Maupassant, Guy de, 618
Maya, 289–291
Mayer, Lance, 95
Maynard, W. Barksdale, 545
Mazow, Leo, 12
McBride, Henry, 630
McCarthy, Kathleen, 529
McCarthyism, 76, 77–78, 81n, 313n, 529
McCaa, Anne, 152, 591n
McCausland, Elizabeth, 248, 250–251
McConville, Brendan, 229–230
McCoy, Horace, 628
McFeely, William, 156
McInnis, Maurice, 78
McKay, Arthur, 302, 313n
McKim, Charles Follen, 550–551, 552
McKinnon, William, 237, 241, 243n
McLendon, Arthur, 501–502
McLeod, Mary, 223
McRae, John, 230
Mestizaje, 285, 286–287
meta-criticism, 1–2
metaphor, 254–257, 261n, 483–484, 606
methodology, 3–5, 12, 447–462, 468–484
Americanism vs. modernism, 4, 17–31, 32n, 34–45, 321–323
anthropology and archaeology, 106–108
archive-based analysis, 90, 146–159
area studies, 332, 333n
close looking, 5, 29, 98, 113–124, 125n, 128–141, 340, 474
cognitive science, 11, 519–523
collage, 468–484, 485n
cultural history, 31n
dissemination, 32n, 483–484
philosophy, 44, 457–462
psychoanalysis, 24, 149, 151–152, 160n, 188, 395–408
social-historical methodology, 5, 21, 28–29, 71–79, 80n–82n, 85–92, 116, 124n–125n, 474–484
surface reading, 5, 129, 132–138, 142n
terminology, 5, 21
translation and philology, 8, 329–330, 336–351, 352n–353n
world history, 6, 228–242
metonymy, 258–259, 260n, 261n
Metropolitan Museum of Art, 218, 415–416
Mexican American art, 300, 353n, 416–418, 427
Mexican School, 284, 288–290, 291, 292–293, 300
Meyers, Richard, 3, 9, 436
mezzotints, 509–510
Michaels, Walter Benn, 252, 261n
migrants, 310, 349, 416–418, 426–429, 545
Miller, Angela, 1, 3, 6–7, 45n, 323–324
Miller, George Amos, 234, 243n
Miller, Kenneth Hayes, 620
Miller, Perry, 447
Mills, Robert, 214
Milroy, Elizabeth (Lily), 146, 148, 160n
Mimbres pottery, 266
“Mind the Gap” conference (Stanford University, 2004), 17
modernism, 10–11, 54, 77–78, 217–218, 246–259, 260n–261n
architecture, 553–558
Latin American art, 281–296
modernist methodology, 4, 17–31, 32n, 34–45, 321–323
modernity, 87, 93n, 546–547
Moll, Herman, 196, 197
monolingualism, 336–351
Monticello (VA), 222
Montrose, Louis A., 37
monuments, 409n, 548–549
More, Hermon, 270
Morgan, John Pierpont, 309, 526–527, 529
Morris, George Anthony, 100–102
Morris, Robert, 44
Morris, Wright, 600, 601, 605–606, 607–609
Mortimer, John Hamilton, 369
Morton, Timothy, 450–451, 453–454
Mosse, George, 248
Mother Earth (magazine), 619
Mount, William Sidney, 321, 383, 387, 391n, 419
Mount Vernon (VA), 548–549, 555–556
Moxon, Joseph, 99, 100, 102
Mozier, Joseph, 411n
Muensterberger, Werner, 528
multilingualism, 8, 329–330, 336–351, 352n–353n
Mumford, Lewis, 214, 216, 437, 456
Murphy, Gerald, 253–257, 259
Murphy, Kevin, 11, 530
Murray, Dereck Conrad, 63
Murray, Freeman H.M., 403, 409n
Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), 7, 289–291, 297n
museum studies, 533–534
music, 493–494, 495–496, 497, 499–500
Muybridge, Eadweard, 535
Myers, Gay, 95
Myers, Kenneth, 392n
NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement, 1994), 311, 312n
Nagel, Alexander, 341
National Academy of Design (New York City), 211–212
National Endurance Amusement Association, 628
INDEX

Peña, Tonita, 7, 264, 270–272, 274, 275n
Penfield, Henry, 517
Pennell, Joseph, 566
Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement (exhibition, 2008), 60
Philadelphia, 100–102
Philadelphia Sketch Club, 151
Philippine-American War (1899–1902), 6, 228–242, 243n
Philips, John Edward, 348
Phillips, Ruth, 203
Phillipson, Robert, 348
philosophy, 44, 457–462
nudes, 152, 153, 155, 161n, 438–439, 442, 444–445
Picasso, Pablo, 468
picklestands, 100–102
Piero della Francesca, 321
Pinckney, Eliza Lucas, 493, 498
Pinder, Kymberly, 50, 55, 60
place/space see space/place
Plekhanov, Georgi, 72, 73
Pohl, Frances, 1, 7, 81n, 288–289, 299, 454
politics
border security, 300, 310–311, 313n, 417–418
communism, 76–77, 81n, 293, 313n, 547, 619–620, 623–626, 631, 632n, 633n
democracy, 215–216, 219, 221
and the economy, 305–309, 311, 547, 591–593, 596n
Marxism, 4, 20, 72–79, 80n–82n, 85–92, 116, 124n–125n, 529
regionalism, 300, 304
Pollock, Griselda, 88
Pollock, Jackson, 24, 25–30, 78, 456, 530, 603
pollution, 308–309, 452–453
Poore, Ben: Perley, 552
Popenoe, Paul, 428–429
Porter, Cole, 253
Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting (exhibition, 1964), 49
post-blackness, 59–63
post-humanism, 43
post-poststructuralism, 37
Pound Ridge (NY), 556–558
Poussin, Nicholas, 321, 362
Power, Ethel, 554
Powers, Hiram, 318, 319, 516
“Practicing American Art History” conference (Clark Art Institute, 2007), 347
pragmatism, 44–45
Pratt, Mary Louise, 346
Pratt, Matthew, 368–371
Prazniak, Roxann, 231
pre-Columbian art, 7, 207n, 266, 284, 289–292, 304–305
Prettejohn, Elizabeth, 534
Prieto, Laura, 388, 389
Prince William’s Church (SC), 495
provincialism, 8, 283–284, 317–318, 322, 323–324, 330, 332
Prown, Jules, 4, 20, 72–79, 80n–82n, 85–92, 116, 124n–125n, 529
psychoanalysis, 24, 149, 151–152, 160n, 188, 395–408
public culture, 10–12
Pueblo Indian Painting (1932), 273–274
Pueblo painting, 264–275, 276n–278n
Puritan theology and art, 46n, 343–345, 501–502, 503n
Pyle, Howard, 480–481
Pyne, Kathleen, 90
Quakers (Society of Friends), 501
Queen Anne architecture, 551–552
queer theory, 9, 154–156, 161n, 433–445, 532
civil rights movement, 120–123, 133–134, 135–136, 138
emancipation, 9, 395–408, 409n–411n, 419–421, 515–516
post-blackness, 59–63
Raengo, Alessandra, 129, 137
Ranlett, William, 550
Ranney, William Tylee, 415, 418
Raphael, 85–86, 361–362
Raskin, David, 44
Rather, Susan, 8–9
Ray, Man, 253, 254, 257–258, 259, 261n
realism, 12, 148, 156, 158–159, 259, 617–631
Reason, Akela, 148
reconstruction, 100–102
Reed, Alfred, 427
Reed, Helen Appleton, 609–610
regionalism, 300, 304
Reinhardt, Ad, 530, 531
religious art, 10, 52, 53, 336, 337, 489–502
iconoclasm, 228–242
Rembrandt van Rijn, 367–368
Rensselaer, Mariana Griswold van see Van Rensselaer, Mariana Griswold
Representations (journal), 128
reproductions, 273–274, 509–512, 517–519
RETNA, 341, 343
revisionism, 20–22
Reynolds, Joshua, 364–365
Rich, B. Ruby, 348
Richardson, H.H. (Henry Hobson), 211–213, 214, 551
Richmond (VA), 439–443, 445n
Rieg, Alois, 330
Riis, Jacob, 9, 426–429, 430n
Rising Currents: Projects for New York’s Waterfront (exhibition, 2011), 456, 457
Roberts, Jennifer, 1, 4, 130, 141n, 333n, 352n
Robertson, Bruce, 321
Robins, W.T. (William Todd), 440
Robinson, Betty, 207n
Robson, Joanne, 530
Roche, Claire, 430n
Rockefeller, John D., III, 527
Rockett, Perley Fremont, 234, 235, 236, 237
Rockwell, Norman, 429, 436
Rogers, John, 513–516, 517–519, 522, 530
Rogers, Randolph, 409n
Romanticism, 167–179, 260n, 447–451, 549
Romney, John, 369
Rose, Barbara, 44, 287
Rosenberg, Eric, 91, 160n
Rosenberg, Jakob, 114, 115
Rosenfeld, Paul, 248, 250, 251, 253, 259
Rothermel, Peter Frederick, 378
Rothko, Mark, 291
Rotondo, Anthony, 379
Roussy-Trioson, Anne-Louis Girodet de see Girodet de Roussy-Trioson, Anne-Louis
Rowan, Edward, 440–441, 445n
Rowland, Benjamin, 115
Roybal, Alfonso (Awa Tsireh) see Tsireh, Awa
Rubens, Peter Paul, 623
Ruscha, Ed, 62
Ryman, Robert, 44
Saaachi, Charles, 187, 525
Said, Edward, 339
Saint-Gaudens, Augustus, 409n
St. George, Robert Blair, 501
St. James, Goose Creek Church (SC), 492
St. Michael’s Church, Charleston (SC), 489, 490, 492, 494–497, 499–500
St. Philip’s Parish (SC), 489–490, 491
St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, Charleston (SC), 491, 495
Salingar, J.D. (Jerome David), 472–473
Sample, Paul, 284
Sandler, Irving, 296n
Sandmeyer, Elmer, 596n
San Francisco, 11–12, 581–595, 596n
San Francisco Chronicle (newspaper), 587–588
San Ildefonso (NM), 266
Sanger, Martha, 528
Santa Fe Indian School, Studio School, 264–275, 276n–278n
Sappho, 435
Sarony, Napoleon, 511
Saskatchewan (Canada), 7, 302–314
Sasowsky, Norman, 632n
Savage, Kirk, 400, 402
Saxton, Alexander, 596n
Sayre, Henry, 599–600
Schaible, Robert, 207n
Schjeldahl, Peter, 156
Schreiner, Mark, 161n
Schuyler, Montgomery, 214
Scott, Charlotte, 402
Scully, Vincent, 216, 217, 219–220
sculpture, 9, 395–408, 409n–411n, 416–418, 513–523
Seabrook, Benjamin, 489–490, 491
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, 132, 133, 434
Sekula, Allan, 7, 302, 305–309, 310–312, 313n
self-criticism, 339
Seligmann, Herbert, 260n
Selvidge, Sarah, 289, 297n
semiotics, 186–189
“Seth” (Gregory Gallant), 57–58
Sever Hall, Harvard University, 211–213, 214
Severini, Gino, 572
Sewell, Darrel, 154
Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of, 495
Shakers, 501–502
Shannon, Joshua, 4, 34–36, 38, 39, 41, 43, 333n, 345
Shaw, Gwendolyn DuBois, 39, 50–51, 529
Shaw, Richard Norman, 551, 552
Sheehan, Tanya, 4
Sheeler, Charles, 573
Shell, Marc, 346, 347, 348, 351, 352n
Sherman, Penoyer Levi, 240
Shinn, Earl, 527, 571
Shklovsky, Viktor, 39
Shore, Stephen, 460
sign painting, 366–367, 368, 370–371
Simpson, Marc, 154
skyscrapers, 216–218
Sleeper, Henry Davis, 556
Slifkin, Robert, 37, 45
Sloan, Dolly, 269, 270, 276n, 277n
Sloan, John, 268, 269, 270, 271, 567, 570, 571, 618, 619, 621, 622, 630, 632n
Smith, Adam T., 229
Smith, Cherise, 60–61
Smith, Jonathan Z., 502
Smith, Pamela, 95, 98–99, 100
Smith, Robert, 493
Smith, Shaw Michelle, 90
Smith, Terry, 533
Smithson, Robert, 450, 602
Smithsonian American Art Museum, 79
Snyder-Grenier, Ellen, 632n
social exclusion, 161n, 222, 387–391, 410n, 499
social-historical methodology, 21, 28–29, 71–79, 80n–82n, 85–92, 116, 124n–125n, 474–484
social history, 4, 71–79, 81n, 85–92, 105–106
socially distributed cognition, 11, 519–523
Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 556
Society of Artists (London), 368–369
Society of Friends (Quakers), 501
Sollors, Werner, 346–347, 352n
South, Will, 53
South Carolina, 489–502
Southern architecture, 219, 221, 423, 489–502
Soviet Socialist Realism, 619–620
space/place, 3, 6–8, 193–206, 211–223, 246–259, 260n
Canada, 299–312
Latin America, 59–60, 281–296
Philippines, 228–242
sacred space, 233–242, 489–502
and social exclusion, 222, 499
Spanish empire, 193–206
Spanish-American War (1898), 232–233
species relations (animal studies), 91–92, 351, 460–462
Speck, Bruce W., 207n
Spee, William, 586–587
Spence, Jonathan, 591
Squires, Roy, 231, 242n
Stalker, John, 99
Stallabrass, Julian, 187
Stebbins, Emma, 411n
Stein, Leo, 248
Stella, Joseph, 571–573
Stieglitz, Alfred, 56, 248–249, 250, 252, 253, 259, 260n, 261n, 288, 530, 567, 568
Stimson, Blake, 45
Story, William Wetmore, 410n
Stowe, Harriet Beecher, 420
Strand, Paul, 248, 249
Strohmeyer & Wyman, 235, 238, 239
Strong, George Templeton, 383
structuralism, 19, 23, 24, 26–27
structure of feeling, 482
Stuart, Gilbert, 371–372, 373
Studio School, 264–275, 276n–278n
style, 341
subjectivity, 5, 8–10, 43
Sudbury (Canada), 307, 308–309, 313n
Sullivan, Louis H., 215–216
surface reading, 5, 129, 132–138, 142n
Surrealism, 292
Symbolism, 248–249, 256, 258–259, 260n, 261n
Syme, Alison, 347
synaesthesia, 252, 260n–261n
Taber, Isaiah West, 581–585, 588, 593–595
Tait, Arthur Fitzwilliam, 415
Tallack, Douglas, 571
Tallmadge, Thomas Eddy, 214, 218
Tamayo, Rufino, 292
Tanner, Henry Ossawa, 51–53, 59
Tanner, Jeremy, 534
team-teaching, 6, 193–206, 207n–208n
teapots, 130–132
terrorism, 300, 310, 313n
theology, 187, 489–502
theory, 3–5
affect theory, 129–141
eccocriticism, 3, 9–10, 447–462
education, 196–201
feminist theory, 9, 23, 87–88, 130, 161n, 476–477
Marxism, 4, 20, 72–79, 85–92, 116, 124n–125n, 529
queer theory, 9, 154–156, 161n, 433–445
“thing theory”, 43, 46n
Thomas, Greg, 453
Thompson, Richard, 58
Thoreau, Henry David, 108n
Todd, Ellen Wiley, 81n, 632n
Toomer, Jean, 250
Torres, Mónica Domínguez see Domínguez Torres, Mónica
trespassing, 9, 414–429 see also borders and boundaries
trickster humor, 276n
Trocki, Carl, 596n
Trollope, Anthony, 606
Troyen, Carol, 159n, 574, 631n
Trumbull, John, 370, 525, 509, 548
Tsirch, Awa, 7, 265–268, 272, 274, 275n, 276n
Tuan, Yi-Fu, 300–302
Tucker, Mark, 154, 162n
Tucker, Nichola, 293, 296
Tuckerman, Henry, 390
Tuthill, Louisa Caroline, 213, 214
Twain, Mark, 600–601
Twombly, Cy, 602
Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art (exhibition, 2000), 59–60
Underwood & Underwood, 234, 235, 237, 238, 239–240
Upton, Dell, 3, 6, 499, 500
urban life, 11–12, 562–577, 581–595
Van Buren, Martin, 381
Van den Hurk, Jeroen see Hurk, Jeroen van den
Van der Grijp, Paul, 528
Van Duzee, Kate K., 341, 342, 351n
Van Dyck, Anthony, 361, 363
Van Rensselaer, Mariana Griswold, 214
Vasari, Giorgio, 362, 371, 375n, 530
Veblen, Thorstein, 526, 527
Velarde, Pablita, 271
Velázquez, Diego, 158
Vendryes, Margaret Rose, 51, 57
Veneziano, Agostino, 436, 438
Venice Biennale (18th, 1932), 269–271, 277n
Verplanck, Gulian, 326–327
Virginia, 548–549
von Kleist, Heinrich see Kleist, Heinrich von
Wagner, Anne, 142n
Wakabayashi, Bob Tadashi, 596n
Walker, Kara, 61–62
Walker, Willie, 434
Wallach, Alan, 4, 85, 87–88, 90, 92, 125n, 340
Walls, Alissa, 602
Walton, Alice, 525
war, images of, 228–242, 243n
Index

Ward, John Quincy Adams, 9, 395, 396, 399–400, 407
Warhol, Andy, 45, 120–123, 135–136, 138, 142n
Washington, George, 548–549
Washington, Jane Charlotte, 549
Watts-Sherman House (Newport, RI), 551
Weber, Max, 54, 87, 289, 571
Wedgwood, Josiah, 400, 401, 403
Weems, Jason, 4, 34–36, 38, 39, 41, 43, 333n, 345
Weinberg, H. Barbara, 148
Weinberg, Jonathan, 90
Weiner, Lawrence, 61
Werbel, Amy, 161n
Werckmeister, O.K. (Otto Karl), 76, 85
West, Benjamin, 359, 360–364, 365, 366, 368–369, 374n
West, Cornet, 57
Westcott, Thompson, 380
Wexler, Laura, 242n
Wharton, Edith, 547
Whistler, James McNeill, 530, 568–569
Whitaker, Craig, 216
White, Cynthia, 509
White, Elizabeth Amelia, 274, 276n, 277n, 278n
White, Harrison, 509
White, John Blake, 491
Whitman, Walt, 156, 216, 218
Whitney, Anne, 405, 410n
Whitney Museum of American Art, 270, 436–437
Whittier, Charles A., 232
Whittredge, Worthington, 386, 387–388
Wierich, Jochen, 1
Wiggins, Guy, 570
Wilkie, David, 513
Williams, Raymond, 80n, 204, 482, 631
Williams, Thomas, 554
Williams, William, 366–368, 374n
Williams, William Carlos, 249, 260n
Williamson, Roxane Kuter, 222
Wilmerding, John, 81n
Wilson, Edmund, Jr., 563
Wilson, Richard Guy, 548
Wimsatt, William, 184–185
Winnicott, D.W. (Donald Woods), 43
Winter, Irene, 349–350
Winthrop, Theodore, 381
Wolf, Bryan, 1, 5, 37, 42, 167–179, 180n, 183–189, 340
Wolf, Cary, 460
Wolf, Tom, 471
Wolf, Janet, 277n, 534
Women collectors, 529, 532
Wood, John George, 414–415
Wood engravings, 511–513
Woodbury (CT), 105–106
Woodmason, Charles, 493
Woods, Naurice Frank, 53
Woodville, Richard Caton, 169, 171–172, 175–176, 188
Worcester, Dean Conant, 234, 236, 240, 241
Word play, 254–257
Wordsworth, William, 215
Workers’ School, 633n
World history, 6, 228–242
World Trade Center, 9/11 terrorist attacks, 300, 310, 313n
World War I, 474–475
World’s Columbian Exposition (Chicago, 1893), 216
Wreford, Henry, 410n
Wren, Christopher, 496
Wright, Alastair, 71
Wright, Frank Lloyd, 215–216
Wrigley, E.A. (Edward Anthony), 546
Wünsche, Isabel, 456
Yao, Kim, 457
Yarbrough, Fay, 423
Yarinsky, Adam, 457
Young, Ammi, 549
Young, Roddo, 228–230, 232, 234, 550
Zakim, Michael, 378–379
Zayas, Marius de, 249, 260n, 288
Zea, Philip, 102
Zižek, Slavoj, 86, 90
Zola, Émile, 618
Zorach, William, 289
WILEY END USER LICENSE AGREEMENT

Go to www.wiley.com/go/eula to access Wiley’s ebook EULA.