

Review Essay

Reinterpreting Antebellum Art

George Ehrlich

THE MAGISTERIAL GAZE: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape (1830-1965). By Albert Boime. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.

AMERICAN GENRE PAINTING: The Politics of Everyday Life. By Elizabeth Johns. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

Two new books on antebellum American painting are indicative of the increased interest in interdisciplinary research by art historians. A greater variety of concerns and questions now drives research in art history, and it is linked to an increased professionalization of the discipline. The number of historians has grown, as has their scholarly output. That is certainly true for American art, and today the quantity, quality and diversity of publications in that field make staying abreast of the literature a truly Sisyphean task.

Within the recent literature on American art one finds material which can speak to both specialists and generalists, even when closely argued. The two books under review fulfill these characteristics. That is not to say, however, that their arguments are completely persuasive, at least to this reader. But more on that later.

Each author has written on an aspect of antebellum American painting: Boime on landscape, and Albert Johns on genre. Boime makes clear that he intends to reach past the established American scholarship that “grounded the

landscape tradition firmly in the literary, scientific, and political currents of the nineteenth century.” What is now needed, he believes, “is a comprehensive examination of the landscape from a theoretical perspective that can pull together the diverse strains of previous studies and establish a fresh synthesis.” (2)

Boime, however, does not take on the full spectrum of antebellum landscape painting. Rather, he concentrates on works which enable him to explore a theme dealing with the American will to hold mastery over the environment rather than to live in harmony with it, which Boime feels may well prove to be our undoing. Thus, he focused his book on “how that mastery was articulated in landscape painting at the moment when it seized the imagination of the privileged elite.” (ix)

Johns, who concentrates on genre painting (scenes of everyday life), seeks to find an explanation for the shifting fortunes of that type of painting in the history of American art. Central to her research are two questions: whose everyday life is depicted, and what is the relationship of the characters in the scene to the lives of the intended viewers?

Though this seems a long distance from the concerns of Boime, Johns (who acknowledges his influence) decided that genre painting is best studied “as a systematic cultural phenomenon that develops in certain economic and social circumstances and meets social needs peculiar to a specific audience.” Thus, she also analyzes how systems of social and economic relationships operating in antebellum United States influence painting. Her goal is to replace the “consensus model of American history with a conflictual model that emphasizes citizens’ differences and conflicts.” (205, note 1)

Both authors use new insights based on considerable research to construct arguments which are substantive (and presumably superior) alternatives to traditional views. This movement away from an established position, re art, is rooted in a concern with new questions, and in more overtly interdisciplinary methodologies so as to link works of art more closely to the social, cultural and political context out of which they came. In doing so, the art object is discussed more as a document to be read within that context than as a work of high aesthetic significance reflecting it. The artists—through the work done—are placed in the hurly-burly of their times, which certainly removes them from aesthetic pedestals. Neither author discusses the artist as someone who can create a work of such power that it transcends its role as simply a piece of period-documentation.

However one might feel about the traditional art historical methods, with their emphasis on normative or qualitative values, that way of dealing with art remains firmly a part of the discipline. Consequently, an alternative approach which sets aside many traditional concerns appears to challenge established understanding rather than simply enlarging it: to be revisionist. Nevertheless, the new has grown out of the old.

Traditional art historians, in the past, frequently did extensive studies of documents or acquired bodies of technical knowledge to augment their close examination of the style and form of the art that interested them. When done with

rigor, and buttressed by solid university credentials, such scholarship tended to be quite persuasive. Even so, art historical prejudices afflicted the discipline. For example, forty years ago the arts of America were viewed by many as unworthy of serious scholarship, since they were deemed provincial when contrasted with the “high art” of Europe. But, even aspects of European art suffered disdain, such as late 16th-century Italian art (Mannerism).

We are more open now to new ideas and methods, with the leadership originating from individuals trained in traditional methodologies. As art history’s scope became more inclusive, American art finally achieved scholarly respectability by the early 1970s. The two books under review are indicative of one major trend in current scholarship, the detailed explication of the significance of the subjects depicted in paintings. Here we find a clear concern with American values and imagery. Boime and Johns seek to share with us, re selected portions of antebellum American painting, answers to such questions as: Why was the art made and for whom? What motivated the artist to select the subject and how was that subject perceived and received by the public?

While the questions are not new, the methodologies used and interpretations achieved are notably different from those on which a consensus had long ago formed, concerning the paintings being discussed. The traditional art historical approach has tended to concentrate on that art where a consensus existed as to its qualitative significance in the context of aesthetic and cultural values, a significance which transcends the time and place of origin. Toward the top of the scale, such art becomes treasure worthy of continued conservation for the delectation of the sophisticated public as well as the knowledgeable collector. Boime and Johns do not ignore aesthetically significant work, but they choose to rely principally on the content of the paintings, using insights drawn from cultural anthropology or political context.

Their emphasis on non-aesthetic data tends to give short shrift to the role of the “creative genius,” or to the technical ability of the artist, in producing notable art. Of course, social, political and economic matters have helped to shape the content if not the form of the piece. However, when a heightened concern over the ways social and political context affect artists and the subjects they depict leads the historian to select works which best illuminate the historian’s understanding of how the political, social and cultural milieu affected the choices made by the artist, aesthetic aspects tend to get shunted aside. At its worst, the process leads to paintings being selected to defend as well as illustrate the underlying hypothesis guiding the historian, with little attention paid to their quality as works of art. This process serves a didactic rather than an aesthetic objective, which not only leads to reinterpretation of the art, but of the goals that had governed art historical research. In some circles this has been a source of conflict.

In his comparatively small book, Boime argues the thesis that an American viewpoint exists in landscape painting, which provides an elevated position for the spectator—the Magisterial Gaze. “This peculiar gaze represents not only a

visual line of sight but an ideological one as well.” (2) He goes on to say that “far from being passive recorders [the landscape painters] participated in the very system they condemned and projected symbolically in their work.” (5) In other words, Boime places at least some landscape painters and their work in the role of both commenting on and supporting the 19th century view of the desired progress of civilization. For this end painters used the magisterial gaze—the gaze of command from the heights—along with appropriate imagery on the canvas, to provide a pictorial equivalent of the manifest destiny rationale that justified westward expansion in the 19th century.

“Relying on a few key monuments and texts, [Boime states that] I hope to demonstrate that the landscape view from the heights—from the simplest topographical description to the most grandiose machine—unites the Hudson River, Luminist and Rocky Mountain schools, revealing in their common structural paradigm the sociopolitical ideology of expansionist thought.” (5) And this he proceeds to do with care and detail using about fifty illustrations, of which half are what I would call landscape paintings.

Among the comparatively few painters illustrated, Frederic Church provides Boime’s best “case study of the artist-entrepreneur for whom the magisterial gaze constituted a blueprint for changing the world.” (75) Needless to say, his argument is heavily supported by a close reading of contemporary texts as well as of the images delineated.

Is Boime persuasive? Within his tightly knit argument and his chosen examples the answer is mostly “yes.” We do get some comparisons, but they are geared to support Boime’s emphasis on the special significance of the elevated viewpoint, the magisterial gaze. On the other hand, my own experience has made me aware that any attempt to delineate or photograph a landscape, for whatever reason, frequently encourages seeking an elevated point of view. Furthermore, to create an effective illusion of deep space or naturalistic scenery some mastery of painting techniques is needed, involving the use light and shade, colors and textures. Attention to scale-giving elements as well as compositional devices all contribute to enabling a painting to work *as a painting*, whether or not the canvas carries an ideological subtext. Boime tends to skim past that aspect of the art he discusses.

The better painters when making a painting—and Church was one of them—had much more on their minds, and presumably in their hearts, than the conveyance of a message. Fascinating as it is, Boime’s argument is weakened, in my opinion, by his narrow focus on “subtext” in a number of paintings which have been appreciated previously mostly for their aesthetic excellence. I submit the latter is what draws most of us to the paintings in the first place, and so also deserves consideration. The same problem exists, though on a lesser scale, in Johns’ more complex study of antebellum genre paintings.

She explores a set of themes and related ideologies connected to character typing, the process that contributes to stereotypes based on social, political and

economic differences among people. Two peculiarly American types are the New England Yankee and the Kentuckian or Westerner, characters who became targets for satire or condescension in story telling. Since genre painting in its very nature is a form of pictorial story telling, these and other stereotypes were used, and so the paintings can reveal values and perceptions held by the clientele for whom they were made. They also provide Johns a window through which the relationship of everyday material life and concurrent ideologic forces can be viewed, and then reported as the heart of her interpretive essay.

Five major type-categories are examined: the Yankee yeoman; the Westerner; the "Black"; Women; and the urban urchin. In each chapter Johns first summarizes the relevant portions of her prodigious research, in both contemporary and modern publications. Then, she analyses and interprets selected paintings in which the type is prominent.

For the most part her interpretations are thought provoking, and at times quite persuasive in linking antebellum text and ideology to the characters and the action depicted by some contemporary genre painters. However, the author has a tendency to slip in subjective comments in her descriptions of the cast or action in a number of the painted dramas she analyses. For me, these opinions add a discordant, late 20th century gloss to what is otherwise documented explications of the subtext in her selected antebellum paintings.

Even so, Johns has done an impressive job of pulling together a diverse body of material in order to reinterpret the meaning and significance for a body of art that previously has been treated rather superficially against this new standard. This is especially true in her chapters: "An Image of Pure Yankeeism," and "From the outer Verge of Our Civilization."

The principal difficulty I found with Johns' rather focused methodology is the proportional neglect of the aesthetic aspects of the genre works discussed. If we view genre paintings as if they are scenes in an actual drama, my concern is more easily comprehended. A play on stage is made accessible to an audience by means of stagecraft and dramatic technique. That is why two different productions of a given play can be two very different experiences for the audience. This makes us aware that the physical aspects of the production, in contrast to the text of the script, can affect the meaning or message of the drama, and thus we should pay attention to why and how that happens.

True, one can approach a play purely as a form of literature, but that changes the form of the art. The same is true for genre paintings. To extend the analogy, Johns has given us primarily program notes about the plot, the characters and their concerns. To appreciate the effectiveness of the "full production"—the painting with its genre subject—requires that we be given something more.

Art historians such as Albert Boime and Elizabeth Johns, with their questions and methodologies, have provided major assistance in the quest for greater comprehension of their chosen segments of American art. Did they have to slight formal and aesthetic factors? I think not. True, a synthesis in their arguments of

the two aspects of a work of art—form and content—may be difficult to achieve, and a fragmentation of points of view may become the order of the day and the art history of the future, but I doubt that we face an unresolvable paradox. Even if our efforts to be more inclusive and more comprehensive have made it ever more difficult to assume or to provide a magisterial view of American art past or present, nevertheless, the challenge should be met. We need the synthesis in order to fully understand the significance of the art.