H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kathleen Pyne. *Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996. xvi + 416 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-76571-9.

Reviewed by Gary Daynes (Brigham Young University)
Published on H-PCAACA (December, 1996)

Today the word "evolution" is bound to the legacy of Charles Darwin. It evokes Clarence Darrow battling William Jennings Bryan; it draws forth phrases like "survival of the fittest" and "natural selection." But as Kathleen Pyne makes clear in *Art and the Higher Life*, for American artists working in Darwin's wake evolution was more likely to inspire visions of ethereal women and moral uplift than the bloody battle to survive.

Pyne begins her explanation of evolution's impact on American painters by delving into the intellectual forms that evolutionary thought took in America. Following the work of Richard Hofsadter in his famous *Darwinism in America*, she argues that it was not Darwin but Herbert Spencer and John Fiske who made evolution matter for American artists. Spencer and Fiske preached a variant of evolution, more indebted to Lamarck than Darwin, that buttressed extant American notions of progress and mission. To this, they added a message of moral uplift–that by manipulating the environment, America's leading classes could change the evolutionary fate of the foreign and poor. For artists who accepted this message, the task ahead was clear–create inspiring public places to save others from the Darwinian struggles of the ghetto. Frank Lloyd Wright's interiors, the Arts and Crafts movement, the expansion of public parks, and the architecture of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago all shared this goal.

But while some artists drew inspiration from Spencer and Fiske's benign, progressive story, others found in evolution a more depressing message. Both Darwin's evolution and that preached by Spencer and Fiske posited a world that functioned without God. For those whose social position rested on cultural supremacy, a Godless world was one given over to materialism, a place without room for culture or cultural elites. Out of this problem grew an entirely different response to evolution. Rather than lift the masses, artists like John LaFarge, James McNeill Whistler, Thomas Dewing, and Theodore Robinson, sought to create art that re-asserted the importance of spirituality in American life while protecting their own place in the social hierarchy.

They, too, found hints at how to proceed in the evolutionary doctrines of Spencer and Fiske. Progress was a journey toward order and harmony–values associated with women. So, with increasing frequency, these American artists turned out muted paintings of women lost in quiet contemplation, set either in spare interiors or idyllic landscapes. This tendency was so strong that when impressionism made its way to America, American painters adopted its technique but dropped the harsh colors and working class subjects that characterized the early work of Monet and Degas. Instead they offered ordered, peaceful scenes of women, children, and rural New England. What in Europe had been revolutionary was, in America, nostalgic–paintings of gentility and order in an industrial, dynamic America filled with neither.

Among the works inspired by evolutionary thought are some of the best-known American paintings of the time, Whistler's "Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl" (1864), John White Alexander's "Repose" (1895), Dewing's "A Reading (1897)", and J. Alden Weir's "Upland Pasture" (1905). These works have generally been considered avant-garde. It is Pyne's substantial victory to re-interpret them as the result of deeply conservative forces in American society, to show how certain elites used the ideology of "progress" to defend their own historic privileges. As such, Pyne's book continues the examination of elite uses of progress associated with Christopher Lasch. It also goes a long way toward explaining why Darwinism has met with resistance in the United States. While fundamentalist Christians usually appear as enemies of Darwinian thought, Pyne shows that from the beginning, many American intellectuals have hewed to a rival version of change that more closely matches the social hierarchy and progressive ideology of the United States.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations.

It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Gary Daynes. Review of Pyne, Kathleen, *Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America.* H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. December, 1996.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=756

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.