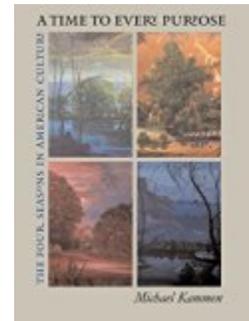


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Michael Kammen. *A Time to Every Purpose: The Four Seasons in American Culture*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 400 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2836-6.

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A Syllabus of Seasons

As in earlier works by Michael Kammen, the Newton C. Farr Professor of American History and Culture at Cornell University, has again seized on a sweeping topic to explore and elucidate.[1] In this current work he undertakes to explore and elucidate the uses of seasons and seasonality as tropes and as armatures often exploited by thoughtful and creative men and women in order to speak to a people's conditions and their concerns. He tracks signs of seasonal structure (usually four seasons) and tone (nostalgic, hopeful, etc.) through ancient scriptures, belles lettres, inspirational essays, natural histories, plastic arts, art glass, painting, monuments, statuary, lithography, advertising, popular culture, and even the contemporary science of human cycles.

"The seasons have always been with us," Kammen writes, "but with variable meanings for diverse people at different times in human history" (p. 11). The sweep of his introductory, a seventy-three-page exploration of the "social constructions" and deployments of seasonal images and practices in cultures predating the American expressions, takes the reader from the origins of seasonal imagery in antiquity, through Grecian, Biblical, Roman, Medieval and Renaissance works in stone, tiles, statuary, biblical prose and verse, and secular poetry, especially James Thompson's seminal "The Seasons." Kammen's central interest, however, is in the ways the meaning of the seasons has changed under the influence of an American setting (wilder and often novel), the threats of industrialization and mechanization, the advance of urban life, and the "shrinkage" of seasons in post-industrial

culture.

The fullness and variety of his sources can be intimidating even while a contribution to scholarship on this topic. His thirty-eight pages of endnotes allow readers to follow him into sources both humble and famous, in short, into the documents he and his students commonly submit to analysis and comparative study. He pulls into this virtual syllabus authors and painters and artisans new to students of nature writing. And his exploitation of popular cultural works adds substantially to his claims for the changing uses of the seasons and the continuities of tone in the iconography of seasonality in modern America. He has abundantly illustrated his history with sixty-eight halftone figures in the text, but the glory of the book lies in the forty-eight color plates of striking murals, paintings, art glass, fountains, and mosaics. My own favorite is the vibrant, virtually vibrating painting by Charles Burchfield, "The Four Seasons" (plate 29).

A degree of coherence is established amidst the scatter of his discoveries by his frequent returns to memorable and familiar touchstones like Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, John Muir, John Burroughs, Edwin Way Teale, Joseph Wood Krutch, and Rachel Carson. In their words and struggles he finds the clearest articulation of some of the tensions and ambiguities in America's attention to seasons and our likening them to the stages of human growth and decay. Especially in Chapter Five, "Nature Writers, Reader Response, and the Ambience of Urban America," Kammen reveals his bias for the excel-

lence of these best of American nature writers. But to his credit and in the mode of American Studies practice, he integrates into his argument both giants of popular art such as Currier, Ives, and Norman Rockwell as well as the most humble essays of school children.

As much as Kammen's reach back into antiquity is to be valued as a kind of prelude to this study, and as useful to a following generation of students his many finds and citations surely are, the work as a whole lacks the simplifying and memorable shape which are to the point in the many works by authors he studies for his book. Seasonal arrangement lends a simple shape to the plethora of natural details and attached musings on nature and life of *Walden*, or Teale's seasons, or Leopold's. But Kammen arranges his displays by date or genre or author instead, and thereby favors a kind of serial shape to the whole. His paragraph-by-paragraph treatments of one after another author or painter gives the whole a feeling not unlike that encountered in exhibition cat-

alogues. The assemblage is impressive, even instructive, but it leaves the viewer in the end on the outside of the presence each work evokes. And with a catalogue so full of wonders, it is inevitable to notice odd absences, such as Gary Paul Nabhan, Gary Snyder, Francis Lee Jaques, Sally Carrighar, or Theodora C. Stanwell-Fletcher. Perhaps future works will be able to build upon Kammen's truly huge beginning, adding complicating instances, following up on leads treated briefly here. Such, after all, is one of the chief missions of the scholar.

Note

[1]. *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991); *Selvages and Biases: The Fabric of History in American Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1986); *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

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