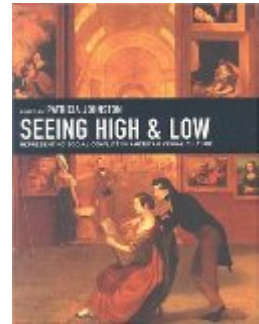


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patricia Johnston, ed. *Seeing High and Low: Presenting Social Conflict in American Visual Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. vii + 317 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24187-9; \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-24188-6.

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The Influence of Art on American Society

Most people can agree that artwork has long been used editorially to describe the social climate of the day. Artistic representations that portray religious, racial, gender, political, class, and other perspectives continue to serve as unique historical documents to help people better understand as well as see the world through the artist's eyes. Obviously, the works that typically come to mind are the paintings or sculptures on display at museums such as the Louvre in Paris or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. While these prominent works displayed in the Louvre, the Met and other famous museums around the world do play an important part in preserving the past, there is more to the art than the works and the museums themselves. For some, the value of art is beyond the visual images and their current surroundings; the value is the deeper sense of history in how works of art contributed to and affected society at the time of their creation.

In *Seeing High and Low: Presenting Social Conflict in American Visual Culture*, editor Patricia Johnston presents essays built on the premise that visual culture, including all mediums and encompassing both fine art and popular art, has played a critical role not only in showing the social conditions of the time, but also in molding the public's perception of those conditions.

Johnston opens with a thorough twenty-one page introduction which is just as integral to the essay collection as the essays themselves. This introduction serves as a key to help readers understand the purpose of the essays

by providing details on terminology, definitions such as high and low art, artistic rating scales, and more. Johnston also discusses how although art can be placed on the art scale of high or low, the classifications can become blurred. She describes how a visual created to be used commercially is low, yet can also be considered high because the person who created it is a skilled practitioner. While Johnston acknowledges today's view that high and low art are viewed as "tightly interwoven discourses," she still insists on foregrounding historical analysis (p. 2). This type of analysis helps to show that these hierarchies are deeply embedded in American society and culture, according to Johnston and the other voices in this collection.

Past the introduction, readers are taken chronologically through time to look at various visual pieces from high art forms such as oil paintings, sculptures, photographs, and drawings to low art forms such as *Harper's Weekly* and *Vanity Fair* magazine covers, a Shaker catalogue, and hand-crafted items. The fifteen essays compiled by Johnston "tackle how social tensions have been represented in high and low media" (p. 1) and explore the role visual culture has played throughout history. By compiling the book as a series of separate case studies, each focusing on different societal issues and art mediums, readers learn that all art, whether high or low, reveals societal values of an era and shows the influence art has had on those values.

All of the essays prove interesting as they intricately

show the barriers between the fine art world and popular culture, the impact both have had on society, and how some artists crossed the line, melding high art with low art. The essayists use images, descriptions, and details that pull the reader even if she is not an art scholar into the world of visual culture.

One essay that proves especially intriguing is “Cartoons in Color: David Gilmour Blythe’s Very Uncivil War,” by Sarah Burns. Burns first presents how artist-reporters depicted “ceremonial portraits of generals” or battle scenes that “emphasized landscape over action” (p. 66). Although tasteful to the high art palate, the art failed to show the hardships of the war such as pain, hunger, and death, and instead presented the war as essentially serene. One such example is Winslow Homer’s *Trooper Meditating beside a Grave* (1865). The soldier stands in a wooden setting, his head tilted toward a gravestone, arms on his hips, and his suit clean and free of the dirt and grime of war. Burns then moves on to the photographs that are more brutally honest, showing the dead out on the battlefield, bodies strewn about as motionless, faceless casualties of war. One would think these images would have been enough to show people the reality soldiers faced on a daily basis. Yet despite the images these

photographs conveyed, they did not impress on society the truth of the war itself because “contemporary writers provided written captions and commentary that insulated grisly battlefield images with layers of sanctification that exalted meaningless death to the level of holy martyrdom and instructed viewers on how properly to see what might otherwise undercut the lofty ideals of the cause” (p. 69).

According to Burns, the artist David Gilmour Blythe helped bring the brutality of the war to the forefront. Political caricatures such as *Lincoln Crushing the Dragon of Rebellion* (1862) incorporated odd, yet curious images that helped people visually relate to what was happening in the war. And when he brought these images to the canvass as oil paintings, Blythe was able to “broadcast messages that undercut the heroic fictions that ‘high’ art was dedicated to sustain” (p. 81).

Burns’s essay is only a small part of what makes this book a success. Similarly, Johnston does a fine job of bringing together art scholars to construct essays that present the influence art has on society just as society also influences art. This book serves as a great tool in a range of educational settings as well as one that can be picked up and pored over on a quiet Sunday afternoon.

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