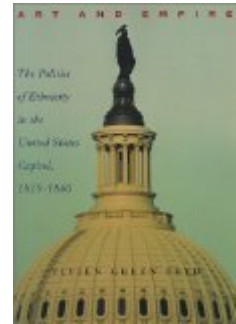


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Vivian Green Fryd. *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol, 1815-1860*. Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2001. xiv + 273 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1342-5.

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Almost from its beginning, Americans have taken the large, white and gleaming U.S. Capitol building as symbolic for the nation itself. Pamela Scott described and explained the Capitol's construction in her fine exhibition (with accompanying book), *Temple of Liberty: Building the Capitol for a New Nation*, displayed at the Library of Congress in 1995. A worthy companion to Scott's work, Vivian Green Fryd's *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol, 1815-1860* examines the art portraits, history paintings, sculptures and murals commissioned for the building between the end of the War of 1812 and the eve of the Civil War. Fryd (Art History, Vanderbilt University) contends that the integration of art and ideas within the building's visual landscape helped define and disseminate American nationalism. The book, originally published by Yale University Press in 1992, is republished this year by Ohio State University for the US Capitol Historical Society. Regrettably, all the illustrations selected for the new paperback edition are in black and white.

Fryd's main thesis is that the art selected for the Capitol during these years shares an "iconographic and thematic" similarity that, when taken together, "traces the course of empire" (p. 1). European-American subjects, including the continent's first explorers and the country's founders, were elevated to immortality on the Capitol's walls, while women and African Americans were omitted and Native Americans degraded. Fryd explains how government officials chose imagery that expressed or confirmed their ideologies, especially manifest destiny. Presidents too joined in the act of inscribing national myths into the Capitol's decoration. For instance, in 1825 John Quincy Adams rejected all thirty-six proposals for the design of the faade's central pediment because

they failed to tell the expected American story.

Fryd spends much of the book showing how the Capitol's early art reinforced prevailing biases and prejudices toward Native Americans, imagery which forecast the native population's destruction and relocation during the country's western expansion. Acting under direction from their federal patrons, artists rendered Native Americans as fiercely savage, wholly subjugated, or simply relegated them to the margins. Even when Congress contemplated buying George Caitlin's ethnographic Indian Gallery in 1846, one supporter of the purchase observed that the paintings "will form the most perfect monument of an extinguished race that the world has ever seen" (p. 168). While Fryd's characterizations of the themes in the art are convincing, her assertions that these representations strengthened congressmen's "beliefs in Anglo-American continental hegemony over the land and the people" is less persuasive (p. 89). Fryd might have strengthened her argument by including more precise evidence about the influence wielded by Capitol art works in the larger arena of American culture. Fryd states that her methodology "combines standard art-historical methods of formal and iconographic analyses with social and political history" (p. 1). The author's approach works most successfully in her discussion of the ways in which the absence of enslaved African Americans in Capitol art made manifest democratic contradictions as yet unaltered by the Civil War. During 1853-57, Montgomery Meigs, the engineer for the Capitol's extension, acted under direction from his supervisor, U.S. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis. Together the two men controlled the building's art commissions and rejected "any potential antislavery implications" (p. 189) put forth by artists. Furthermore, Meigs and Davis blocked all refer-

ences to slavery, including the Roman liberty cap. (This potent image from the American Revolution had taken on renewed significance in antislavery imagery). In an instance cited by Fryd, Davis objected to artist Thomas Crawford's incorporation of the liberty cap in "Liberty and Justice," his design for the cornice above the Senate Doorway. As Meigs explained to Crawford, "Mr. Davis says that he does not like the cap of Liberty introduced into the composition. That American liberty is original & not the liberty of the freed slave" (p. 188). Ironically, the Civil War failed to alter much in the way of the Capitol's visual subjects. Even Francis Carpenter's history painting, "First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation" (1864), presented during Reconstruction and still on display in the Senate wing, does not include any African Americans.

Little in Fryd's book will startle her readers. This is a straightforward but hardly groundbreaking study. The 2001 edition could have benefited from an updating that extended beyond the new but undated short preface con-

tributed by Fryd. *Art and Empire* covers mostly familiar ground, ignoring relevant material such as the analysis offered by the contested yet widely discussed National Museum of American Art exhibition, "The West As America" (1991) or, to a lesser extent, scholarship like Angela Miller's critically acclaimed *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representations and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (1993). The fact that the bibliography fails to list anything published after the early 1990s renders the book much less useful to its specialist readers.

*Art and Empire* does provide sorely needed guidance for visitors to the Capitol. Although, as Fryd herself observes at several points, a high percentage of the art she discusses is now banished to storage rooms for reasons of political incorrectness and is unlikely to reappear any time soon, other pieces fortunately remain on public view. Thus this book, now made more accessible in a paperback edition, can offer valuable interpretation to the many who tour the building each year and walk among its art.

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