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Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (August, 2023)

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J. Craig Thorpe's *Railroads, Art, and American Life: An Artist's Memoir* provides an engaging autobiographical account of the author's thirty-year career painting for the American railroad industry. Commissioned by such major companies as Amtrak and General Electric, Thorpe's oil paintings, pencil sketches, and graphic renderings show locomotives and landscapes throughout the past, present, and even future of American rail. His work can be found adorning promotional material from posters to catalogues to calendars and even mugs. However, far from merely describing the railroad and its environs, Thorpe's paintings argue for the forgotten and latent potential for the railroad in the United States to directly serve the “common good” of American society (p. 6). Asserting the power of the railroad to boost the stability, integrity, and connectivity of our communities, Thorpe makes a convincing case, through word and image, not only for the centrality of the railway in American history, but also its importance in American culture moving forward. Gesturing toward Asian and European systems as examples, Thorpe shows how the railroad in the United States can operate as an equitable, efficient, and environmentally safe entity that transcends a mere form of conveyance to serve as a pillar of communities nationwide. Filled with sumptuous prints of numerous paintings and drawings by Thorpe, this cogent, humorous, and self-reflexive meditation on an artist's career is a must-have for any lover of trains or rail art.

Thoughtfully divided into six chapters and an epilogue, *Railroads, Art, and American Life* makes a persuasive argument for the importance of trains in contemporary American society—highlighting what has been lost, what can be gained, and the power of rail art to fill that gap. Thorpe begins with a discussion of the evolution of his interest in art and trains throughout his youth and adulthood. Touching on the people and events that led him to a career in painting, he explains how his formative experiences laid the groundwork for his ideas regarding the place of the railroad in American society. Following this first chapter, Thorpe reviews several artists who served as influences. Their work, despite commercial applica-
tions, “unashamedly and naturally encouraged a connection with people, landscapes, and cityscapes of America” and helped inspire the notions of integration that undergird Thorpe’s oeuvre (p. 5). Over the three subsequent chapters, the author addresses his own artwork and organizes his discussions according to groups of paintings that depict the past of the American railroad, its present state, and its imagined future. Each chapter begins with an overview outlining the author’s thoughts and influences regarding each chronological distinction, before opening up to a series of short descriptions of individual paintings and the stories behind their creation. Like extended museum wall labels, these vignette discussions offer unique insight into the development of individual works and the ways in which they pertain to the author’s larger thesis. Beyond mere advertisements or promotional pieces, Thorpe’s paintings for the railroad industry stand as astute and picturesque meditations. They contemplate the benefits that the railroad offered American culture and society earlier in the twentieth century, what elements of infrastructural beauty and societal integration have been lost with the decline of rail mileage since then, and the railroad’s potential future contributions to a nation facing a period of increasing environmental change and societal division. Chapter 6 proves a particular highlight of the book. Here, Thorpe leads the reader through the process of creating a painting—from its earliest inception to its preparatory sketches to the final product. This highly informative and interesting section offers fantastic insight for any reader unfamiliar with the process of commissioning a painting, collaborating with the patron, and planning the work’s composition according to its content. Filled with humorous anecdotes, unique artistic insight, and conscious consideration of his own work and its larger meaning, each chapter of Thorpe’s *Railroads, Art, and American Life* clearly explicates the artist’s creative vision and the life experiences that led to formation of that perspective. Offering an intimate window into the artist as a person, Thorpe’s writing brings to life the book’s many vibrant prints.

At multiple points throughout the book, however, certain discussions and language feel either out of place or somewhat vague. First, the author establishes himself and his work in direct opposition to photography, going so far as to imply that photography is more a form of documentation than art. At one point, Thorpe distinguishes “rail art” from “rail photography,” and posits the opinion that photography’s primary, if not sole capacity is documentary and not artistic—which, as history and museums around the world have shown, is not the case (pp. 30, 183). Given the threat that photography poses to painted or illustrated advertising, and considering the number of short-sighted corporate executives he encountered who failed to see the immense value of handmade renderings, Thorpe’s aversion to the medium is understandable. However, to say that photography cannot convey deep meaning, or cannot have an emotional impact akin to painting, feels unnecessary or perhaps inappropriate. In addition, the reader would have benefited from more specific definitions of certain phrases used throughout the book. For example, Thorpe explains that the rehabilitation of the railroad in contemporary American society would benefit the “common good,” without explaining exactly what he means by this phrase. While it might be easy to assume what he intends here, Thorpe repeats the phrase several times without providing a deeper consideration of what defines the “common good.” Adding to this, Thorpe laments the decline in commissions for railroad paintings—which, among other more concrete examples, he ascribes to “cancel culture” and changes in the social and cultural fabric of the United States (pp. 39, 96). Without defining what he means by cancel culture, Thorpe fails to point to specific, citable instances of how “cancel culture” might have directly affected the decline in rail art. Deeper discussion of such ideas would have helped the reader
understand better the artist's perspective and empathize with his position.

With that said, J. Craig Thorpe's *Railroads, Art, and American Life* proves a remarkable memoir thanks to the author's clarity and depth of discussion regarding the histories and philosophies behind his artwork. The reader can easily comprehend the artist's outlook upon reading intimate and enthralling stories from both his childhood and career. As I pored over his words and images while riding Amtrak's Acela southbound from Boston to New York, I could not help but perceive in the railroad the elements of communal integration, stability, and equity for which Thorpe so convincingly argues. Filled with entertaining anecdotes, good humor, and measured reflection, this book proves a worthwhile addition to the library of anyone with an affinity for trains and the railroad, or even for the process of artistic creation.

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