Books

They Invented It, We Reinvented it

The Invention of Painting in America, by David Rosand ’59CC, ’65GSAS (Columbia University Press, 2004. 234 pages, $29.50).

By |
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“Over in Europe they had art for years,” said the early–20th-century American painter Stuart Davis. “Over here they hadn’t.” This was the New World artist’s predicament in a nutshell — a self-image problem that vexed American painters from colonial times until the middle of the last century. “A tense relationship with European tradition had characterized the situation of art in America from the very beginning, dooming it apparently to perpetual provincial status,” writes David Rosand ’59CC, ’65GSAS on the first page of his indispensable new book, which originated as the tenth annual Leonard Hastings Schoff Memorial Lectures at Columbia. Rosand, the Meyer Schapiro Professor of Art History at Columbia, goes on to illuminate the long path from the 1700s, when, as Ben Franklin wrote, “the invention of a machine or the improvement of an implement [was] of more importance than a masterpiece of Raphael,” to the mid-1950s, when abstract expressionism led to “the radical reinvention of the art of painting.” Rosand traces the steady change in the status of art as well as the concerns of artists, both stylistic and philosophical, that echoed from one century to the next.

Rosand is a historian of Renaissance art, but his interest in American art is longstanding. An art student in his youth, and the son of an artist, Rosand was engaged with 20th-century painting early on, especially that of the abstract expressionists. In l965 he agreed to teach Barnard professor Barbara Novak’s course in American art during her sabbatical leave to extend his view of the field back to its colonial origins. Rosand refers at one point to the kind of art history “that embeds art in history without ever forgetting that it is made by artists.” His writing, like that of his friend and mentor the late professor Meyer Schapiro, brings us into the company of the artists about whom he writes. “At issue are the identity of the artist

and of the work of art," he explains, and "the personal investment of the artist in his work and the recognition of his presence in it." As an art historian, Rosand does write formally; there are passages that may make the general reader want to skim for a page or two. But scholarship and warmth coexist comfortably in his prose, and we come away from these four tidy but teeming chapters with a sense of having participated in a long, fruitful search for significance.

Artless Bostonians

"Declarations of Independence," Rosand's first chapter, begins with John Singleton Copley's 1774 complaint that his fellow Bostonians were "a people entirely destitute of all just Ideas of the Arts." The lack of art, and of antecedents, all but crippled early American painters, who for the most part depended on engravings of the Old Masters as models and on portrait commissions for income. They lacked the patronage and other support that in Europe had long existed in royal courts, in the Church, and in professional academies. "The people generally regard [painting] not more than any other useful trade, as they sometimes term it, like that of a Carpenter tailor or shoemaker, not as one of the noble Arts in the World. Which is not a little Mortifying to me," Copely wrote. He eventually emmigrated to London, where fellow American Benjamin West had established a studio that was a beacon for expatriate painters who longed for the art and culture Europeans took for granted.

A century passed before Americans were encouraged to find inspiration at home, when Thomas Cole exhorted the American artist to look around him at "this vast continent . . . his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity — all are his." By the end of the 19th century, though, the primeval American landscape, which stood for the nation's pioneering, independent, forward-looking spirit, had become part of its past, broken and tamed by the railroad and industry. With the turn of the 20th century, the city was becoming the predominant environment for American artists, and the "aesthetic nationalism" of Cole and his compatriots was carried forward by realists such as Robert Henri and the ash can school. Despite a crucial shift in subject matter, Henri wrote movingly about "that patriotism of soul which causes the real genius to lay down his life, if necessary, to vindicate the beauty of his own environment."

With the 1913 Armory Show, American and European art finally bumped up against each other. Stuart Davis called it “the greatest shock.” His experience of van Gogh, Matisse, Cézanne, and the cubists, he said, compelled him to become “a modern artist.” But “Davis tried to have it both ways,” Rosand writes, “simultaneously to be a modern artist and an American artist. Was such double commitment possible under the laws of aesthetic patriotism? Was foreign style adaptable to the representation of the American scene?” Rosand calls Davis’s struggle “heroic, an internal aesthetic dilemma that assumed ethical dimensions.”

It was a dilemma that split American painting, as artists and critics divided themselves into two camps: the social realists and regionalists, such as Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry; and the abstractionists, such as Marsden Hartley, who was castigated for, among other things, numbering his works instead of giving them titles.

In the book’s epigraph are two questions posed by Emerson: “What is art?” and “Who is the artist?” Rosand returns to these questions, asked over time, in different ways, by the most thoughtful of America’s artists. He demonstrates the “ethical imperative” that “runs strong in American aesthetic thought, however tacit at times.”

“Whatever painting was, it carried responsibility: it was expected to . . . make a serious statement of genuine import.” Rosand sees in every age a “search for an art of meaning, for pictures that ‘have significance.’” His vision of American idealism culminates in abstract expressionism, when “at last, it seemed, American painting . . . achieved independence, nearly two centuries after the political declaration. . . .”

Beginning with John Singleton Copley’s portraits, created “with a nervous and forced intensity,” and ending with the “uniquely individual art” of painters like Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning, Rosand provides a unifying, and uniquely satisfying, view of painting in America. To that end he restates Emerson’s questions: “What is painting? What is an artist?”

“In search of answers to both, this generation used one question to respond to the other. . . . To paint is an affirmation of self, of the self as artist. ‘Painting is self-discovery,’ as [Jackson] Pollock confessed. ‘Every good artist paints what he is.’ . . . In finding their proper subjects, [the abstract expressionists] discovered both themselves and their art. And in that double discovery — having truly achieved its

independence and having overcome the formal obstacles of a puritan aesthetic — painting, finally, had secured its position in America.”

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All categories >