

The Cityscapists' Legacy: Realism, Recreation, or Social History?

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This study traced the evolution of urban art from the works of Thomas Eakins to those of Ruth Gikow . The analysis focused on (1) stylistic variations with a range from Bellows to Feininger to Prendergast, and (2) an examination of thematic ranges. In brief, the research probed the background and motivation of artists who chose the city as their genre and attempted to present the principal thrust of their interpretations. In the process their works reflect the times, its triumphs and its failures.

From a survey of historical materials 52 sources emerged that were especially useful. Much of the research involved recording, via colored slides, examples from a variety of art galleries ranging from Washington, D.C. to Chicago. Sources utilized were found at the Library of Congress, Kalamazoo College, and at the universities of Michigan, Notre Dame, George Washington, and Western Michigan. In the presentation at Vancouver, 160 slides were used of the 400 + collection on urban oeuvres.

The urban setting was not a popular choice in early America. In the first third of the 19th century, America's love affair with the West and with the natural beauty of the countryside blossomed. This was represented by the efforts of the "Artists on Horseback," the Hudson River Landscapists, and, in mid-century, by the nostalgic views of rural life of genre artists like Mount, Bingham, and Johnson. By late century romanticized works, such as those of Homer and Sargent, joined with the memorialization of the wild West by Remington, Famy, and Russell. Throughout the 19th century, life in rural or frontier America dominated artists' canvases. When Cheret, in the 1880s, began using Parisian scenes in his vibrant posters, the shift to another artistic milieu began; namely, from romanticism to the realism of urban life. This theme became especially important to a group of moderists, many originally from Philadelphia, residing in New York City. Daring to examine the diverse life styles in the city, these artists became known as "cityscapists." Some referred to this as the "New York Realist Movement", the "Revolutionary Black Gang," "The Ashcan School," or simply "The Eight;" others applied to the maturing form the name Social Landscapists, Urban Regionalists, or socially conscious art. Whatever the moniker, life in the city became the focus for a significant sector of the American art community. They led the way in (1) an awareness of the contrasts of city living - ugliness and beauty, (2) capturing in their art the emerging recreation of city folk, and (3) dramatizing social reforms in liberal publications. Their efforts were complemented by a host of immigrant artists who brought special talents and perceptions to the scene.

In reviewing the contributions of artists such as "The Eight," Bellows, Marsh, Eilshemius, Feininger, Cadmus, Shahn, Evergood, Weber, Stella, and others, the "taste" of the city streets surfaces. The contrasts are clear, often blunt, and imaginative: institutionalized sport to simplistic recreation, dance hall to burlesque, tenement living to the escape to the beach, idyllic children's game to industrialized recreation, saloons to coffee houses and restaurants, alleys and gutters to Central Park and Washington square, from romanticized everyday life to frank eroticism - all are present in this genre. One of the most intense concentrations of a life's work was that of Reginald March; his genius was highlighted. Like Soan, Marsh and several others found earthiness, loneliness and beauty in daily life on the streets and in all seasons. Some like Grosz found despair as well as brutality. Stylistically the cityscapists approached their subject quite differently. Within this broad scope their works provide both social commentary and social history. Their view of urban America is tempered with honesty, humor, and love. The imaginative artistic mirror they provide represents a chronicle of the leisure pursuits of urban dwellers of the past 100 years.