

**François Mathey, *American Realism: A Pictorial Survey from the Early Eighteenth Century to the 1970s*. New York, Skira/Rizzoli, 1978. 191 pp., 170 illus., \$50.00**

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ture the incidental figures in the *Temple of Isis at Pompeii* are extremely Tiepolesque. Other examples, such as the attractive *Gondola*, probably executed in Venice, are very much in tune with the Italian 'rococo' both in concept and execution.

It might be supposed that Piranesi, who is mainly remembered for his *veduti* and his *Carceri* series, was not concerned with other subjects. It may therefore come as a surprise to learn of his interest in decoration and ornament. This is evidenced by the many sketches presumably intended for his book: *I Cammini e Vasi, Candelabri, Cippi, Sarcophagi, Tripodi, Lucerne ed Ornamenti Antichi*. These comprise the largest group in the collection, and are possibly, except for the specialist, the least interesting. This is not the only example of his departure from the highly structured architectural drawings which we usually associate with his name, and we could wish that there were more of this diversification in his finished work. For example, there is an *Assassination Scene* (A. 3) in which a powerfully drawn, sprawling mass of people is 'welded' into an impressionistic composition of great strength. One may wonder what form the finished drawing would have taken, and whether he could have sustained the feeling of spontaneity which we perceive in the sketch during the various stages it would go through in the process of engraving. Unfortunately Miss Stampfle makes no comment on this particular reproduction in her essay on Piranesi, which in other respects is most informative. It is unlikely that anyone will be able to resist the temptation to look at the reproductions *before* reading the text, but there is no doubt that her lucid style adds much to the appreciation of the book. It is to be hoped that if the group of early Piranesi drawings of 'beggars' and 'still life,' once in the collection of Senator Abondio Rezzonico, is eventually traced, it will receive the same careful attention.

Piranesi's work is essentially linear, and drawings of this type are liable to undergo subtle changes in character in the process of photographic enlargement or reduction. Obviously, to be reproduced in a format acceptable by modern

standards, reduction in certain instances is inevitable – especially as we are told that one of the original sketches folds out to approximately five feet! However, the reader may be assured that there is no *enlargement*, and in most cases the reproductions are actual size; in this connection it may be noted that the dimensions shown are not in metric but in good old-fashioned English inches.

The arrangement of the material for a presentation such as this must always be a matter for careful consideration. However it is to be organized – chronologically, or grouped according to genre – there are always the limitations imposed by the size of the page on which the exhibits must be displayed in a pleasing manner. Except for the rather long sequence of *cammini*, etc., which has already been mentioned, the layout is successful, and the reader (no matter how academic his purpose) will find his interest is sustained throughout. The drawings are so ordered that the 'plums' do not all fall together, but are nicely distributed through the book. Moreover, the exotic cover design (which is based on one of the drawings) is far from being the only spectacular work in the collection; in the hideous jargon of commercial advertising, there is all this, and much, much more.

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FRANCOIS MATHEY *American Realism: A Pictorial Survey from the Early Eighteenth Century to the 1970s*. New York, Skira/Rizzoli, 1978. 191 pp., 170 illus., \$50.00.

At a time when realism is enjoying a renewed vogue among North American painters and sculptors, a book on American realism seems especially timely. The present work, published in 1978, is not, however, to be confused with Mahonri Sharp Young's *American Realists: Homer to Hopper* (New York, Watson-Guption, 1977). A large, lavishly illustrated book of the non-portable, coffee-table genre, *American Realism* is practically synonymous with a survey history of American painting. It does not attempt to break any new ground, though, nor does it offer

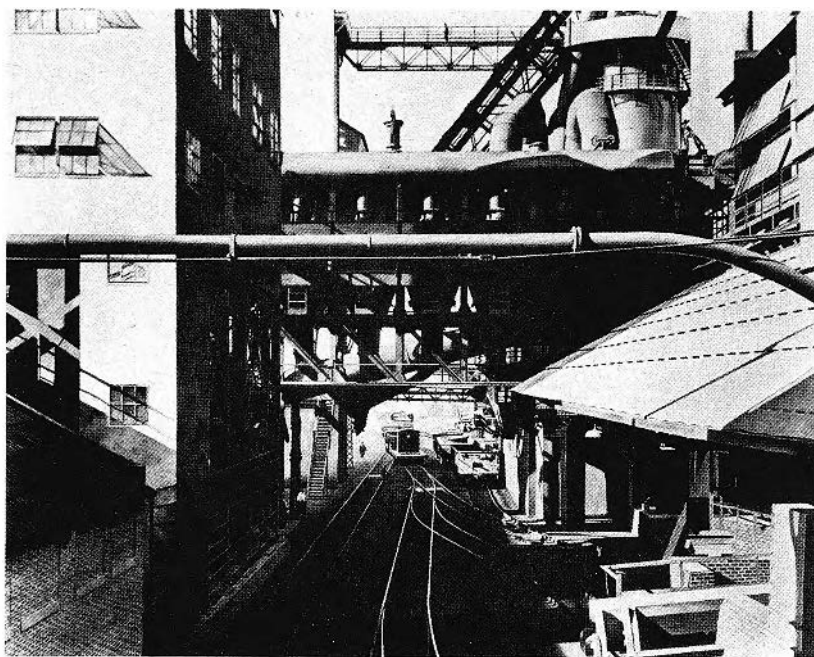
any new revisions of earlier scholarship on the subject. What it does do is present American painting from a slightly novel European viewpoint with the text and the illustrations having been furnished by François Mathey, Chief Curator of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

Beginning with the portrait-linners of Colonial New England and continuing through to the photo-realists of the early seventies, M. Mathey declares that 'From the documents bequeathed to him by a civilization, dispersed in museums or recovered by chance in the course of archaeological excavations, the art historian, who is also something of an anthropologist, reconstructs the sentient, affective, aesthetic fabric of past societies' (p. 7). The present task, he says, is 'from the documentary evidence provided by art, to define, or more precisely, to refurbish the image given to us by America' (p. 8).

What M. Mathey means by 'sentient' and by 'affective' is unclear, but his concept of an aesthetic fabric seems clear enough and one idea to which we can address ourselves. A fabric is a series of interwoven threads or fibres, and the idea of an aesthetic fabric would presume, therefore, that all of the aesthetic ideas or arts are interwoven. This is a useful idea and one of great significance in certain cases like those of Periclean Athens or of Medicean Florence. An example of the apparent momentary existence of a genuine aesthetic fabric in American art was demonstrated recently at the Brooklyn Museum exhibition entitled *The American Renaissance*. In this exhibit strong affinities were shown to have existed between architecture, painting, and sculpture in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

It is well to remember, nevertheless, that authors, artists, architects, and composers do not always talk together, and that this fact is particularly true of American art where regional and individual differences are often pronounced and characteristic. The idea of an aesthetic fabric is, accordingly, probably truer of France than of America.

M. Mathey's other purpose in preparing this volume, that of using American paintings to refurbish America's image, deserves comment. The author's image of



Charles Sheeler, *American City Interior*, 1936. Painting on fiber board. Worcester, Massachusetts, Worcester Art Museum.

America, or at least the image he wishes to convey, is clear from his table of contents. In it are the usual chapters on Colonial America, the Wild West, and the growth of the big cities. There is scant attention paid to landscape, to portrait-painting, or to still-life; three categories of American realism which would at least serve to enlarge the image of America, if not to 'refurbish' it. Perhaps M. Mathey might wish to consider the 'refurbishing' of the image of France currently underway at the exhibition mounted by the Cleveland Museum of Art called *The Realist Tradition: French Painting and Drawing, 1830-1900*. Rural poverty and urban social calamities could not have been any worse in America at that time than that depicted by French artists of their own country.

Finally, there is the problem of the author's conception of certain themes in American painting. For instance, there is the chapter entitled 'The Realism of Acquired Wealth' which is little more than a hodgepodge of Civil War photographs and paintings by such disparate figures as Grant Wood and Andrew Wyeth. In the chapter titled 'From the Armory Show to the Depression' (a conception borrowed from Milton W. Brown's book of the same title) there is again

a lack of cohesion and coherence, and included are works decidedly non-realist in appearance like Marsden Hartley's *Portrait of a German Officer*.

The final chapter, 'From Concrete Reality to Photo-Realism,' also included a number of abstractions by Mark Tobey, Jasper Johns, and Christo. M. Mathey would have done himself a service as well as that of his readers if he had spent time defining at the outset, as did Professor Linda Nochlin in her book on French realism of the nineteenth century, just what is meant by realism.

Aside from the problems with the text and with the choice of illustrations, it should be mentioned that in this age when publishers routinely bleed and crop reproductions of art-works, that Skira has again produced a volume in which obvious care in this area has been taken. None of the illustrations has been cropped or bled, they are generally centered on the page, and the colour separation is good. One could only wish that the author had devoted as much care to his subject as he did in his earlier survey of French Impressionism.

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PHILIP BOARDMAN *The Worlds of Patrick Geddes: Biologist, Town Planner, Re-educator, Peace-warrior*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978. 528 + x pp., illus., \$31.50.

«'Mother, why is it that Daddy has so many enemies?' And with infinite sadness she said, 'Well you see, if a man does something that should be done, and tries to do it – perhaps succeeds in doing it – then others will say to those who should have done it: Why didn't you do it? And that makes them enemies.'»

C'est la première femme de Patrick Geddes qui parlait ainsi et elle résumait pour la postérité le côté tragique de cet Écossais génial qui est peut-être le père du meilleur urbanisme contemporain et à venir. Devant l'activité polyvalente et débordante de ce personnage immense – botanique, biologie, sociologie, géographie humaine, urbanisme, philosophie de l'éducation, etc. – on me pardonnera de n'évoquer ici que les impressions vitales de cette lecture.

La biographie de Philip Boardman est tellement touffue et déroutante, à l'image de Patrick Geddes, qu'il faut un certain courage pour aller au bout de cette «brique» de cinq cents pages, à la typographie rebutante. Mais le lecteur est bientôt récompensé de ses peines initiales, car cette *histoire* est absolument fascinante et inoubliable. C'est que Philip Boardman a un talent certain de narrateur, une capacité admirable d'évocation, dont voici un exemple: «When the Peninsula & Orient steamer from Bombay docked in Marseilles early in April 1924, it was an utterly enfeebled Patrick Geddes who had to be helped on the train to Montpellier. Despite his Bombay doctor's optimism the voyage had not been one of that happy convalescence which many times had been his lot. Instead he was on his back 'mostly all the 18 days to Genoa – only in last days up on deck for a few hours but never at dinner in cabin. Milk diet.' Yet he claimed it was not illness, but 'utter weakness & lassitude – a full experience of old age, such as never before!'» Patrick Geddes avait alors 70 ans, mais il devait vivre encore huit années d'une activité intense propre à essouffler un jeune homme de vingt ans. Geddes aimait la vie avec une passion lumineuse