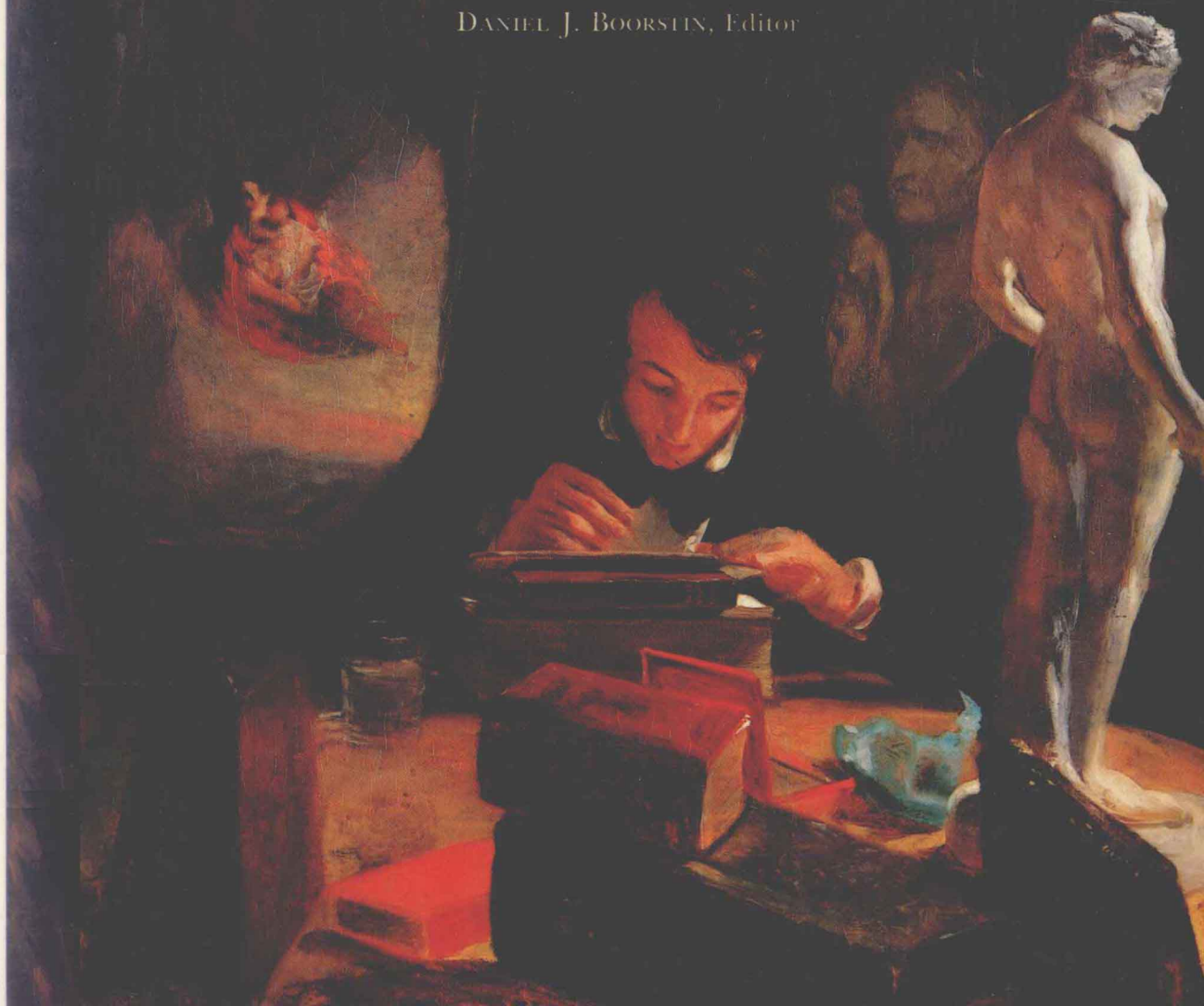


Joshua C. Taylor

THE FINE ARTS IN AMERICA

The Chicago History of American Civilization

DANIEL J. BOORSTIN, Editor



THE FINE ARTS IN AMERICA

Joshua C. Taylor

The University of Chicago Press

Chicago and London

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

© 1979 by The University of Chicago
All rights reserved. Published 1979
Paperback edition 1981

Printed in the United States of America

01 00 99 98 97 96 95 94 93 92 3 4 5 6 7 8

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Taylor, Joshua Charles, 1917–
The fine arts in America.

(The Chicago history of American civilization)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Art—United States. 2. Art—American.

I. Title. II. Series.

N65O5.T373 709 73 78-23643

ISBN: 0-226-79150-5 (cloth); 0-226-79151-3 (ppbk)

Series Editor's Preface

Today the United States is one of the world's great centers for the fine arts. Yet only a century and a half ago a snide English critic could indict this country by the mere question, "Who looks at an American picture or statue?" The rise of American civilization has seen the nation transformed from a colony, a remote and insecure outpost of European cultures, into a nursery and a refuge of artists, an exporter of works of art, a dynamic influence on the artists of the world, and a refresher of the vision of art lovers. How has it happened?

In this book Joshua Taylor tells the story and offers some explanations. He has given us a short, readable, and lively history of painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts in the United States since early colonial times and has shown us how and why they flourished—or languished—on the American scene. He helps the artists tell us what they have to say about our civilization and about the fine arts. And incidentally he shows how they have shaped our very definition of culture.

The fine arts whose story we read here have been a neglected touchstone of our history. A cliché, which has reinforced our American limitations and substantiated foreign prejudices, is that we are primarily and preeminently a "practical" people. But the dictionary tells us that the fine arts are "produced or intended primarily for beauty alone rather than utility." At the same time specialist-historians have tended to chronicle the fine arts as the impersonal product of movements rather than as the lifework of artists. They have been inclined, then, to treat the fine arts in America as a backwater, populated by minor figures imitating the work of the European masters who made the movements.

Joshua Taylor might have called his book *The Fine*

Artists in America, for he shows us how a large and varied cast of artist-characters responded to American opportunities for new visions and for giving new shapes to old forms. Of course this is a history of art in one country. But Taylor reminds us that what distinguished an artist in the United States was how he used (or neglected) the traditions and resources of the whole world of art. We see that in art, as in so much of the rest of our civilization, what made us American was how we brought together the currents of the world. The community of artists—in its inspiration, its motives, and its motifs—is peculiarly international. All this helps us understand how Joshua Taylor can confidently describe American artists without pigeonholing American art.

Taylor captures deftly and concisely the unique achievement, the powers, and the limitations of each artist. Through them we can see what the American experience adds to our understanding of the artists' quest—and how their work has enriched people everywhere who want to enjoy the fine arts.

By setting the fine arts in the mainstream of our civilization, this book admirably serves the purpose of the *Chicago History of American Civilization*, which aims to make every aspect of our past a window to all our history.

DANIEL J. BOORSTIN

Author's Preface

There are many advantages to treating the art of a single country, concentrating on its particular struggles and moments of triumph. Art so considered can be seen in close association with its public and with its local sources; it can be encountered at home. With a bit of care one can thus avoid the abstract history of art by styles, so favored by historians earlier in this century, a method that rarely penetrates the realm of content and that makes art seem self-contained and self-perpetuating, with only tangential human contact. For the inhabitants of the country whose art is being considered, it also has the advantage of treating material that relates directly or indirectly to the area where they live—to what they see around them, what they do, what they remember—and leads them to reflect on values that have gone into the making of their own society. Even if history hands down a somewhat negative report on local achievement, there is significance to be found in a study of efforts made and in the goals themselves, for aspirations are a living part of culture. A frank look at one's own artistic past and present can only be helpful, and when it turns up unexpected and rewarding insights that well might be bypassed in treating history as a sequence of general, international movements, one begins to doubt the truth of history without people—specific people.

There are also dangers. As soon as the term “American art” appears in the heading, many temptations arise. One of the most perilous is the desire to isolate what is American in American art, to isolate and synthesize cultural characteristics as though a succinct definition makes things what they are. Art has often been used for nationalistic purposes, in the United States and elsewhere, and theorists have sometimes marshaled

their evidence as if they were arming an aesthetic warrior to defend the nation's honor on the field of international artistic values. Out of a definition an unspoken scheme of values often emerges: the work of one artist is referred to as "more American" or "less American" than that of another: always the artist who best fits the national stereotype becomes the popular hero—though at the same time another critic might use the same criterion as a mode of disparagement. Consequently, for the nationally oriented mind "European influence" becomes a subtle opponent, a force luring the artist away from his true national character. Moreover, in this conflict the idea of what is European is frequently based on even less information than the idea of what is American, often consisting of tired generalizations about the work of a handful of artists acknowledged as both "national" and "great."

Such a procedure hardly deserves to be called history—national mythmaking might be a better term. Such myths have had their historical function and should be studied as part of the cultural complexity, but one should be wary of accepting one's own myths as the structure, rather than the material, of history.

Of course it is possible to distinguish the works of many American artists from those of artists in other countries, but not because of any collection of isolated traits. On one occasion the difference might be an obsession with the material world that makes acceptance of the ideal in art unlikely; at another time it might be a longing for the past and for romantic associations that causes the artist to resist an art based on direct observation. Art in the United States, as elsewhere, has had its pattern of change and development, and though many writers have tried to prove the contrary, the pattern here has rarely coincided exactly with those discernible in other countries. To see the development of American patterns alongside those of Europe is to understand what at any one moment is characteristic of America. To try to distill an essence out of this changing past, with its shifting pattern of relationships, is to lose, not gain, an understanding of the national character, which, regardless of protestations of unity, remains complex.

The first person who set out to do something about the fact that art in the United States had a history was

the elderly William Dunlap. He had studied painting in England with Benjamin West, had trouped his large religious paintings about the country in the 1820s, and had involved himself in almost every aspect of theater in America and become its chronicler. In the early 1830s he began to gather information on American artists for a history that would record their struggles and their achievements. Dunlap's *Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* was published in New York in 1834. In spite of the title, the volumes do not trace the systematic progress toward a predetermined goal as a stylistic development. Unlike his Renaissance prototype Vasari, Dunlap did not believe he was standing on a cultural summit, though he was justly proud of the expansion of art he had witnessed in his own lifetime. His book gathered together the past to serve as a foundation for what he saw as a creative future. It called the attention of public and artists alike to the magnitude and importance art had attained in America, and so enhanced art's respectability. His study itself became an important element in the history of art in America.

Like Dunlap, Henry T. Tuckerman, in his *Artist-Life, or, Sketches of Eminent American Painters* (1847) and his later *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life* (1867), concentrated on the individual artist, though Tuckerman felt much freer to comment on trends and goals and could picture the life of the artist in more optimistic terms. His books had a promotional air. No one now doubted the importance of art, but Tuckerman wanted to broaden its popular base. Only toward the end of the century was there an effort to see art in America as a loose but persistent continuity, brought together according to nineteenth-century concepts of history. A major prompting came in 1876 with the celebration of the centennial of the American Revolution. The art galleries of the great exposition in Philadelphia presented not only a cross section of contemporary art, both European and American, but a selection of American artistic achievements from the past, boasting for the first time of a local artistic paternity. In 1879 S. G. W. Benjamin's *Our American Artists* and in 1880 his *Art in America: A Critical and Historical Sketch*, indicated a trend toward assessing the accomplishments of art in America on more general, national terms. Finally, with Sadakichi

Hartmann's *History of American Art* in 1902, Lorado Taft's *History of American Sculpture* in 1903, and Samuel Isham's *History of American Painting* in 1905 (brought up to date in 1927 by Royal Cortissoz), something like comprehensive histories were made available and came to be considered worthwhile and even necessary. Unlike Dunlap three-quarters of a century before, Isham could talk about styles and schools and tendencies: American art had gained its place in the critical language of the day.

In the 1920s theoretical considerations of American art became popular, and since the 1930s studies in American art of every sort, in recent years including careful archival research, have expanded enormously. It is as if the international acceptance of American art after World War II made its whole history worthy of exploration.

This book does not set out to create new patterns, though it pointedly fails to honor some existing ones. My aim has been to trace the course of painting, sculpture, and, to a lesser extent, the graphic arts in America as they have entwined themselves in the broader cultural activities of the country. The book hints at more than it discusses, in the hope that it might provide an entrance to many realms of further investigation. It is not so much a history as a sketch for a history, and like any good sketch it tries to formulate that which is basic rather than lose itself in detail. For those looking for endless lists of names and events it is bound to be a disappointment. In the past few years profusely illustrated texts and catalogs on individual artists and circumscribed periods or movements in American art have been published with increasing frequency. The amount of material now available makes a single compendium almost meaningless. Each artist and each realm of artistic exploration deserves a separate history. The choice, then, now lies between the sketch, with its consideration of basic ideas and structure, and the infinite detail and particularities of the parts. Although the two must always maintain a healthy relationship, there is no longer a place in history for a "finished" picture.

The numerous marginal illustrations throughout the text are meant as points of reference, not as substitutes for looking at original works of art. Some are well-

known examples, widely reproduced elsewhere, but many are not those of the standard repertory. Sometimes a work less frequently seen jogs the mind to a fresh consideration of the artist. Almost all, however, are in public collections where they can be seen, or from which one can at least obtain slides and reproductions.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, the "fine arts" of the title do not here include music, dance, theater, or architecture. The book considers the life and times in the United States of sculpture, painting, some of the graphic arts, and their associated institutions. The various arts, though related, have followed different courses and have depended for the most part on different contexts in their search for support and acceptance within the fabric of American society. An analysis of their differences might provide material for fruitful separate study.

I should like to thank Richard N. Murray for his help in checking innumerable details in the text, Rachel M. Allen for assembling the photographs, and Alison H. Fenn for translating my handwriting into a readable manuscript. I am grateful also to the many institutions who have given permission to reproduce works from their collections.

Introduction

The term “America” is used in this book in the curious way in which it has been employed since at some point in the eighteenth century it came to mean the cultural and geographic entity first formed by the predominantly English colonies on the eastern seaboard and eventually occupying the entire central portion of North America. By what quirk of history or nationalistic myopia such a term was accepted—effectively ignoring Canada and Mexico, to say nothing of the countries of Central and South America—is not for discussion here. It is a fact, however, that though various parts of the present United States of America were first settled by explorers and colonists from other countries, the culture spreading from the eastern colonies eventually dominated, and it is with that culture that this book deals.

The Spanish in Florida, the Gulf area, and the vast Southwest, and the French in the area of the Great Lakes, the Mississippi, and Louisiana, did leave their mark in place names, in some architectural remains, and in local traditions, but their contributions to the fine arts entered the picture later rather than earlier. Only in the early twentieth century were traces of other cultures, including those of the native inhabitants, sought after as lost flavors by a country becoming conscious of itself.

An exception to this lack of continuity might seem to exist in the southwestern United States, which until the 1840s was part of New Spain, then part of the independent nation of Mexico. San Francisco was founded by settlers from New Spain in the auspicious year of 1776, but for more than a century mission centers had been established throughout a wide area, and they continued well into the nineteenth century. These European cultural enclaves in the Southwest varied widely in the style of work they produced, depending on the

religious orders that founded then and on the response of the native population. Especially in what is now New Mexico, the merging of imported Spanish images with local traditions created a rich flowering of building and crafts, some vestiges of which still persist. Nonetheless, the potent forms of this culture, isolated from its Spanish sources in the nineteenth century, did not enter the main course of American art until the early twentieth century. It was also principally in the early twentieth century that California and Texas began to reappraise their Spanish heritage, and much that is Spanish in the crafts and architecture of Texas and California dates only from that time. To try to trace a direct line of descent in the arts from Spanish and Mexican periods would be misleading. The major developments in art, once the area was part of the United States, belonged not to the local inheritance but to established practices "back east."

The often splendid mission churches have kept little in the way of painting and retain only sparse sculpture, and none of it seems to have had an effect on the settlers who moved into the territory from the East. Although the settlers were willing, at least temporarily, to borrow forms of building, since these were well suited to the local materials and climate, they brought along their own cultural images and tended to spurn what existed locally. No people are less inclined to emphasize the picturesque and romantic aspects of a cultural frontier than those who find themselves on it. "The West" furnished artistic content for the East; in the West the dream of art tended to be eastern.

The other area not covered in this study is the art of the native Americans. This significant body of material, from early to more recent times, represents a separate tradition. From an early period in the colonization of what is now the United States, interest was shown in Indian crafts and artifacts, but so little did the native art agree with European principles that it was given consideration only as an ethnic curiosity. Although the image of the Indian himself caught the artistic imagination, his art had to wait for appraisal until its impetus had been almost totally lost. Again, it was only in the early years of the twentieth century that artists sought inspiration in the native American arts and that native Americans

were encouraged, little by little, to try to recover their all but lost traditions.

Because the art we have accepted as American initially radiated from the eastern seaboard, centers of art elsewhere in the country—as they have come into being and established their own direction—have often found themselves submerged by the eastern image. Our histories of art have reinforced the attitude that art of any significance has existed only in a restricted area. But since at least the 1870s much that is vital in art has been generated elsewhere. Although from the mid-nineteenth century New York was the center of the art market, with increasing frequency it was supplied by artists from an ever-widening geographic area. To speak of regional art in the United States would be misleading, for regional roots usually turn out to be runners linked to the root structure of the East. Yet, as art has developed in the United States, local tendencies have gradually become more discernible, reflecting particular situations and the thinking of distinct groups of artists. This change is, in its way, exactly the reverse of the process in many European states. There, through the course of the nineteenth century, local diversity in art was progressively taken over by national standards. The individuality of art centers in the United States has grown through deliberate effort and is a cultural phenomenon that should not be overlooked.

Over some three hundred years American art has become increasingly complex, taking in a widening range of experiences both from local sources and from abroad. It has moved from early efforts at unity, prompted by the need to establish identity in what seemed a cultural wilderness, to a celebration of diversity, gradually leaving behind the obsessive fear that artistic differences would signify to the world a national cultural weakness. If there is a central character to American art, it is that it has come to mean more and different things to an ever-expanding public. There is no single scale by which to determine its total character or measure its values, a lack that is not without advantages. America's individual artists have contributed much both to their own society and to the worldwide range of artistic experience. They have provided a wealth of insights by which America, for all its diversity, might better know itself.

Contents

Series Editor's Preface

vii

Author's Preface

ix

Introduction

xiv

1670-1776

3

Beginnings 3

1776-1860

29

Art and the New Republic 29

The Art of Recording America 46

Europe and the Great Tradition 52

The Identification of Art with America 65

The Persistence of Traditional Ideals 89

1860-1900

95

A Crisis for Art 95

The Professional Artist 118

Collectors and Collecting 141

THE FINE ARTS IN AMERICA



1670-1776

Beginnings

It has become something of a historical commonplace to say that for the first two centuries or so European settlers in America were too busy with practical matters to concern themselves much with the arts. Such a rationale is not a modern invention. In the eighteenth century the colonists were already using it to explain their situation, and it was repeated over and over from the Revolution onward. The formula, expounded with a good measure of self-righteousness, maintained that science, commerce, and political organization had first to meet their goals to produce the leisure necessary for a flowering of the arts. In such a rationally stated program, no one supposed that the fine arts were more than an embellishment to culture, though they were considered necessary to guide in a moral direction the leisure that was to make their creation possible.

Although it is true that the fine arts had relatively little support in those colonies that eventually became the United States, the statement has little merit as a general historical principle in defense of a lack of concern for art. In most cultures, the arts have been an integral part of the formative stages, closely interwoven with science and political development. There is no generic reason that the arts had to be pushed aside in the early stages of forming a new cultural entity in America. It should be remembered, however, that the American colonies represented not a new but a transplanted culture and could only in a very special sense be considered at a formative stage. The colonists' values were already established when they set out to take up residence in a new place,

Facing page:

Unidentified artist (Mason Limner), *Alice Mason*, circa 1670. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Adams National Historic Site, Quincy, Massachusetts.