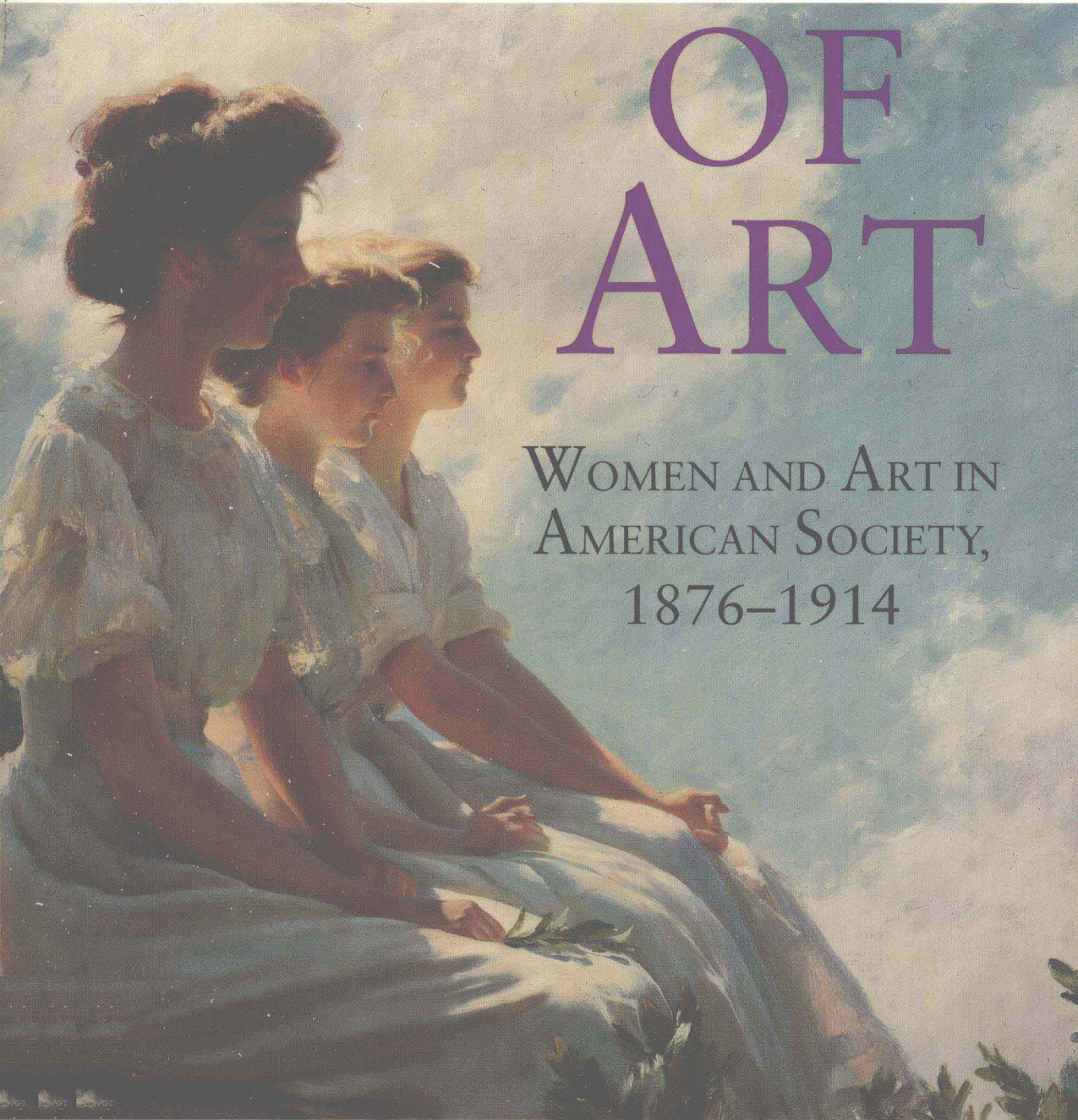


ANGELS OF ART

WOMEN AND ART IN
AMERICAN SOCIETY,
1876-1914



BAILEY VAN HOOK

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ANGELS
OF ART

TO MARGARET

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INTRODUCTION

Images of women were ubiquitous in America at the turn of the last century, decorating everything from soap to state capitols. In painting and sculpture, they participated in the expansive and eclectic spirit of the times and took on a bewildering variety of identities: Venus, Ariadne, Diana, Spring, Summer, Autumn, Law, Justice, the Arts, Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Republic, Commerce, the Telephone, the Telegraph, Roses, Butterflies, the Red Kimono, Green Dress, as well as studies in white, gold, and purple. If those identities are arranged chronologically rather than thematically, then in the course of thirty years, it can be seen that they shifted from the mythical and symbolic to the contemporary. In the paintings of the 1870s, decorously nude women, some like Ariadne acting out a particular myth, others with vaguer mythological associations, lived in forests, orchards, or wooded glades. In the 1880s, more poetic identities predominated, and legions of women were called "Spring" or "Dawn." A useful piece of evidence is Mariana van Rensselaer's *Book of American Figure Painters*, which was published in 1886 and included only work done during the preceding year. Although historical, domestic, and foreign genres were also represented, more than half of

the paintings reproduced depicted women as allegorical or quasi-mythological subjects. Their features were idealized, their costumes vaguely antique, and their settings generalized. The artistic styles were varied but technically competent. Evocative titles, such as *Sleep and Poetry* and *In Arcadia*, defined the women as occupying an otherworldly, symbolic, or “ideal” realm.¹

By the 1890s, some American artists had transferred these women from easel paintings to the larger stage of mural decoration. The symbols and allegories that female figures personified became less poetic and more inspirational: “Law” or “Commerce” or “Religious Liberty.” Although women continued sporadically to perform energetic public service in murals throughout the next decade, much more characteristically during the same period they assumed a passive role as formal elements in decorative easel paintings. Instead of bodies dressed up as allegories, they became bodies as mannequins, on which were hung the blue kimono, or the yellow gown, or their hands were receptacles for a yellow carnation or mandolin, which determined the title of the work. Popular also was the Whistlerian title “Study in . . .,” which established the artist’s intention to submerge the actuality of woman beneath the aesthetic concerns for color and composition. Sometimes, the female model was placed outdoors—to allow us to study the effects of sunlight on her delicate flesh—in paintings called “Hollyhocks” or “Sunlight and Shadows.”

This plethora of female imagery was not always so common in American art. Until roughly 1876, the year of the centennial of American independence and the occasion of a commemorative exposition marking the event in Philadelphia, nineteenth-century American art had been dominated by landscapists and genre painters. The nationalist orientation of American art faded after the Civil War, as transatlantic travel became cheaper and faster, and the economy recovered from the national debacle. American artists were drawn to Europe,² drawn by an increased awareness of foreign art, caused by the expansion of the art press, and lured by the shift in patronage from native to European art.³ America’s centennial year, 1876, was pivotal. To the emerging generation of painters and sculptors, works by contemporary European artists in the Centennial Exposition made American art seem backward and provincial. Young artists flocked abroad in increasing numbers, drawn by the promise of a superior (and sometimes free) art education in some of the most famous ateliers and schools of Europe.

The younger generation’s new appreciation for European art was also part of a broader reorientation in American society. After the wrenching internal conflict of the Civil War and the ensuing national disillusionment, more and more Americans on the eastern seaboard turned toward Europe to reassess their situation, much as Christopher Newman did in Henry James’s *The American* (1875). In all cultural discourses, Americans put less emphasis on characteristics perceived as unique, such as their nature and wilderness, Yankee thrift and ingenuity, individualism and independence, and more on the culture they shared with Europe. By moving in that direction, Americans consciously rejected what

has been interpreted as a pervasive ethos in the national psyche: the urge to be a pioneer, to go west, to bring civilization into the wilderness. Instead, many younger Americans chose to go in the opposite direction toward Europe, to the source of tradition and culture and the very symbol of the past.⁴ In literature, art, and music, there was a shift from provincial to cosmopolitan.

Between 1875 and 1880 the first major influx of European-trained American artists of this generation began returning home:⁵ Carroll Beckwith, William Merritt Chase, Thomas W. Dewing, Frederick Dielman, Wyatt Eaton, Will H. Low, Frank Millet, Walter Shirlaw, Abbott H. Thayer, Douglas Volk, and J. Alden Weir all finished their studies in Europe and came back to America. Those artists encouraged the perception that they were different in almost every respect from the previous generation; and their contemporaries and later historians reinforced that self-definition. This perception was supported in no small part by the formation of the Society of American Artists, founded as the American Art Association in 1877, with Shirlaw as president and Eaton as secretary. Ostensibly founded in opposition to the hanging policies of the National Academy of Design, which discriminated against the younger European-trained artists, it was meant to herald the passing of the torch. The new Society was in turn a drawing card for the next wave of artists coming home. Between 1880 and 1885, John White Alexander, Edwin H. Blashfield, George DeForest Brush, Dennis Miller Bunker, Kenyon Cox, Frederick Freer, Francis Coates Jones, and H. Siddons Mowbray returned from their studies abroad; encouraged by the ambitions articulated by their contemporaries, most joined the Society and only later, when tensions eased, were elected to the older institution.

In many ways perceived as significant by themselves and their contemporaries, the younger generation clearly broke with earlier American art. While the previous generation had been largely self-taught or had trained here in the classes given at the National Academy of Design or the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the younger artists had studied in the academies and ateliers of Munich and Paris. Although many older artists such as Thomas Cole, Daniel Huntington, or George Caleb Bingham had also been to Europe, this occurred later in their careers, so the trip was merely the final stage of their artistic development. Younger artists such as Low, Dewing, and Thayer went to Europe in their formative years, to obtain a solid grounding in academic technique before they began their professional careers. In addition, study in Europe meant more to them than just laborious hours spent in a chosen atelier; it brought the students a wider range of experience and a less provincial attitude, which made them less likely to adopt the moral tone or the homey picturesqueness of much midcentury American painting. Seeking to shed the narrow attitudes that they thought encumbered American art, the young artists eagerly aligned themselves with styles identified with the masterpieces of Western art. Since they were younger and more impressionable than the previous generation had been when they traveled abroad, those works could have a real

effect on their mature style and choice of subject. More important, students became intensely aware of developments in contemporary art, and felt confident enough to compete in the arena of international expositions with artists of every country, even France, the center of the Western artworld.

The multiplicity of styles employed by the returning American artists echoed the variety of training available to them. While in landscape painting, due to the influence of the Barbizon painters and later the Impressionists, we can perceive a definite shift from a linear to a painterly mode, that generalization cannot be made for figure painting. In the 1870s, some artists like John La Farge and Eaton showed a Barbizon influence in their figure painting, while Shirlaw and Chase employed the painterly bravura of Munich. In the 1880s, however, those painterly styles could not be called dominant. Among their colleagues, some practiced the hard photographic realism employed by Jean-Léon Gérôme, while others adopted the flashier Spanish-style realism of Léon Bonnat.

Whatever their style, the majority of the younger generation of painters became figure painters as their European teachers had been and had trained them to be. They had had more opportunity to paint from the model, male and female, not the plaster casts by necessity favored in American schools, and to represent the nude. In addition, they followed the French emphasis on the female figure. Previous American painting had more often represented males, because the incidents celebrated by American genre and history painting—especially discovery, exploration, war, and even settlement—had been constructed as masculine by the dominant historiographic ideology. There were also fewer specialists. Whereas at midcentury most American painters concentrated exclusively on genre, history, portraiture, still life, or landscape, that was not true of the more versatile younger generation. While there was still a distinction between landscape and figure painters, a rigid separation did not exist.

There was also a move away from anecdote or narrative that had marked genre and history paintings toward a vaguer “figure painting.”⁶ Concurrently, there was a shift from the stated moralistic, didactic, or literary discourses of American and Victorian painting toward a more aesthetic orientation that claimed that narrative was absent or secondary. And, naturally, most of those aesthetic works imaged women. Although there had been a gradual move—at least in easel painting—from the ideal to the contemporary in dress and setting, this predominantly female cast remained. American artists might be commissioned to paint portraits of men, but when they painted figure paintings (which according to their own prescriptions did not require that the model assert her identity) they represented women.

Oddly, although images of idealized young women dominated American painting from the mid-1870s to around 1910, they were largely missing from standard histories of American painting that were written from the early 1920s until the late 1960s. These images and what they represented were at variance with what American art was supposed to be (according to the standards of those who wrote