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J. M. Mancini: Pre-Modernism

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Introduction Interrogating Modernism

What distinguishes modern art
from the art of other ages is criticism.

—Octavio Paz, 1967

At the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art, better known as the Armory Show, thousands of Americans lined up to see what was billed as the first major exhibition of modern art in the United States. Even before the show opened, the art world was alive with anticipation. In a letter to her friend Gertrude Stein, the wealthy Greenwich Village salonist and patron of modern art Mabel Dodge set down a breathless account of what the show would mean to American culture. “There is an exhibition coming,” she wrote, “which is the most important public event that has ever come off since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, & it is of the same nature. . . . The academy are frantic. Most of them are left out of it. . . . I am *all* for it . . . there will be a riot & a revolution & things will never be quite the same afterwards.”¹ In these brief comments, Dodge provided a template that defined American modernism in its own time and dominated its historical interpretation for

1. Tiffany and Co., *Menu Card*, c. 1879. Published in *The Art Amateur* 1–2 (1879–80). Fine Arts Department, Boston Public Library

nearly a century: modernism as a riot, modernism as a revolution against existing institutions, modernism as a break in history.

This is a book about one of the most unyielding questions in the history of culture: the issue of how and why the course of art can appear to suddenly and dramatically change, in seemingly revolutionary fashion, from one dominant style to another. Under study here is one particular change, the emergence of modern art in the United States, and one very important aspect of that change: the roles that art criticism, art critics, and art publishing played in fostering not only a new aesthetic but also an altered mode of cultural production between the end of the Civil War and the second decade of the twentieth century.

From the outset, participants and scholars have devoted extensive effort to explaining the modernist revolution. As Dodge's comments indicate, modernists themselves were self-conscious about their own role as iconoclastic creators of a revolutionary upheaval in American art and culture. Many of modernism's early defenders not only described their activities as a challenge to outmoded artistic fashions, but also linked themselves to the loosening of moral strictures, the budding of radical politics, and the wholesale rejection of a stifling Victorian society in the years before the First World War. Over time, these self-creating gestures have become part of the historical fabric, so that it is sometimes impossible to separate performance from practice. This is not in itself surprising—historical figures always have a hand in their own self-fashioning. The difference is that modernists, unlike their peers the Progressives or their predecessors in the Gilded Age, still speak largely for themselves. Despite what seems like constitutional skepticism toward virtually everything anyone said at the turn of the century, once historians move out of the settlement house and the White City (see fig. 40) and into the bohemian quarters of the Village, they seem inclined to believe, along with Virginia Woolf, that “on or about December 1910, human character changed,” and are content to direct their skepticism toward fiddling with the dates.²

While the revolution against outmoded standards of art and behavior unquestionably played a part in the transformation of American art, I believe that the roots of the modernist revolution were deeper and more tangled than acknowledged by participants or scholars. Modern art was neither an isolated collection of works and makers nor the mere by-product of social and political radicalism, but a mutually constitutive set of institutional practices and aesthetic beliefs, deeply rooted in the immediate context of the American art world. More than that, it was a historical movement, with historical antecedents. As in the case of political revolutions, which historians convincingly have shown to be the product of multigenerational developments in political culture and language

rather than immediate catalytic ruptures in the political order, the artistic revolution called “modernism” did not happen overnight but was made during the course of a generation or more by people who were not even necessarily modernists themselves.³

My primary objective here is to challenge the mythical history of American visual modernism as a sudden, revolutionary rupture with the past. My aim is to demonstrate that late-nineteenth-century art criticism and publishing contributed significantly to the emergence of modern art by fostering the aesthetic principles, like abstraction, that would underpin modernist artworks, and by establishing the institutional and professional framework that would allow American art and the avant-garde to flourish after the turn of the century. Specifically, this book makes three arguments. The first and most general one is that turn-of-the-century transformations in American art must be understood within the context of a broader and earlier boom in art publishing that included new mass visual media like magazines, chromolithography, and art education materials for the public schools. The second is that the drive by Gilded Age criticism to promote an integrated, national infrastructure of museums, schools, and associations—and to construct art publishing as a portable branch of the art world—provided not only the organizational topography of the “mainstream” twentieth-century American art world, but also the framework for avant-garde organizers like Alfred Stieglitz. And finally, I argue that a push toward professionalization in criticism that began as early as the end of the Civil War led writers to embrace the principle of abstraction even before artists did, a move that provided an aesthetic platform for modernism even as it strengthened the authority of professional criticism.

This book also seeks to reframe another key transformation in turn-of-the-century American culture: the emergence, in Lawrence Levine’s famous phrase, of “cultural hierarchy.”⁴ Particularly among historians and sociologists, there has been little effort to challenge the hugely influential thesis, set forth by Levine and Paul DiMaggio, that the post-Civil War art world was predicated upon the establishment of “sacralized,” nonprofit, metropolitan museums meant to house only original and unique art objects.⁵ According to Levine and DiMaggio, this development (and parallel developments in music and theater) triggered the emergence of sharp divisions between “high art” and “popular culture” for the first time in the nation’s history. In examining this issue, I will argue that the many interconnections between the “fine arts” and its institutions, including museums, and “popular” media such as the graphic, decorative, and industrial arts, militate against this view. I will not suggest that museum builders and their allies in publishing did not contribute to the stratification of art, particularly as the nineteenth century neared its end. Contrary to prevailing interpretations, however, I will contend that the key villains

in this tale were not primarily entrepreneurs in either the nonprofit sector or the commercial world of image publishing, but the critics who sought to wrest professional control over the interpretation of art from both of them—and from their audiences.

This study rests upon a few basic premises. The first and most basic of these is that all art derives from and is defined by a multilayered process of cultural production, deeply rooted in the art world.⁶ The most important implication of this is that in the art world, a complex nexus of interlocking constituencies including critics and publishers, museums, the public, patrons, art schools, the market, and artists, all play productive as well as supporting roles in the definition, creation, distribution, and consumption of art. Many people who were not artists at all—or who are considered to be “minor” artists—shaped the future of American art. In insisting on the importance of the art world, however, I do not wish to diminish the ingenuity or the work of artists. The choices available to artists were conditioned by the contexts in which they lived and worked, and their creativity was both fostered and limited by those contexts. Nonetheless, artists did not lack agency. Like publishers and museum builders, many turn-of-the-century artists were canny entrepreneurs whose *strategic* resourcefulness facilitated and enhanced their ability to pursue *creative* goals. If I emphasize this entrepreneurial aspect of artists’ careers, it is not because of a lack of interest in their works or in artistic creativity. Rather, it is because many others are able to read and analyze it with far more eloquence than I. And, if I emphasize the significance of non-artists, it is not in order to denigrate the contributions of artists. Rather, it is because the very real roles these people played in making art—and in making art possible—are all too rarely acknowledged. This book is meant, then, as a companion to the many fine studies of the individual artists and artworks of the period, rather than as a polemic against them.

The second premise is that art worlds, and art-world practice, are historically specific. Like the styles that emerge from within art worlds, the latter change over time and develop in response to specific cultural conditions that vary with time and place. As a result, entire ways of making, understanding, and seeing art can be forgotten, lost, and rendered invisible with the passage of time, even when the works produced and consumed by those art worlds remain. Although art worlds and art-world practice are always the products of social conditions and social experience, neither they nor their constituencies are sociological universals. Like art, art worlds have histories that require historical interpretation.

The third supposition is that criticism, as both a discourse and an interlocking series of institutions and practices, is richer, more varied, and more important than is generally recognized. Perhaps more than any other art-world agent, criticism sets the art world’s boundaries, not only

shaping the modes of viewing and making that will be available at a given time and place, but also defining an art world's purpose, its personnel, and its aesthetics. What I mean by this is that even before a work is conceived, made, viewed, or interpreted, it has been fostered, directed, and limited by the critical context into which it is born. Aesthetics do not just proceed from artworks; they also precede them.

It is thus my intention to focus on something that has not generally received much attention: the importance of criticism and publishing in creating the parameters that define what kind of art will or will not be made, that determine who will or will not make art, and that delimit how and by whom art will or will not be seen. Sociologists of art have pioneered the study of how “organization and process” influence “how artists work and how their creations . . . are disseminated or marketed in relation to the broader socio-political-economic context.”⁷ And yet, even they often unnecessarily limit the history of criticism to purely the history of *taste*, and too narrowly describe the function of criticism as solely the legitimization of artworks that are *already made*. From the groundbreaking work of Howard Becker to the more recent efforts of Vera Zolberg and David Halle, the sociology of art often assumes that “artists produce works, some of which critics ratify.”⁸ But criticism also directly shapes what modes of “organization and process” are available to artists even *before* their works are made—and even *before they have become artists*. It is certainly true, as Malcolm Gee argues, that critics “have been central to the process by which twentieth-century artworks have been promoted, viewed, and understood.”⁹ It is crucial, however, to understand that critics both produce judgments and build systems.¹⁰ To fail to ask what drives critics to promote entire art worlds as well as individual artists or artworks is to fail to understand one of the driving forces behind artistic change.

A related point that must be made here is that the history of American art and criticism in this period is inseparable from either the history of print culture or the history of art-world institutions—local, as well as international. European painting, training, and criticism undoubtedly had an immeasurable impact on American modernism;¹¹ Americans *were* insecure about their culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they *did* look outward not just for what was old, but also for what was new. It is true, as Johanna Drucker writes, that “Clive Bell and Roger Fry were read by Alfred Barr and Clement Greenberg who were read by Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss, by Tim Clark and Victor Burgin.”¹² And it is true that expatriate painters like James Abbott McNeill Whistler absorbed both European and Asian influences in their art and relayed them to fellow Americans abroad through their artworks, their critical commentary, and their personal relationships.¹³ At the same time, however, many of the architects of American modernism, from the

time of Manet to the time of Greenberg and at all points in between, were American: they went to American schools and museums; they read American books, magazines, and newspapers; and they worked in the American art world. The result was that foreign and expatriate influences, important as they were, were mediated through the institutions of the art world, including the media itself.

Take, for example, the case of Whistler, who (alongside Frank Lloyd Wright in architecture and Alfred Stieglitz in photography) is perhaps the only American painter before the middle of the twentieth century to be considered significant in the international development of modernism. In part, this is on account of Whistler's novel incorporation of Japanese design, which helped him to achieve the flat, decorative effects that became his trademark—and which would also be important to the work of other early American modernists like Mary Cassatt. To put in context Whistler's role as an importer of Japanese influences, however, it should also be noted that one of the most popular art sections of the massively attended 1876 Philadelphia Centennial was the Japanese display. This event gave many thousands of American men, women, and children their own firsthand glimpses of the prints, ceramics, and other works that had influenced Whistler. Following the success of this display, in 1879 the new magazine *The Art Amateur* presented a series of full-color *japoniste* “Menu Cards Presented to Subscribers . . . with Compliments of [its editor] Montague Marks,” designed by Tiffany and Co. (fig. 1); Boston chromolithographer Louis Prang began selling sets of “Japanesque Floral Designs,” priced at twelve cards for sixty cents; and *The American Art Review* published an illustrated article called “Notes on Hokusai, The Founder of the Modern Japanese School of Drawing” (fig. 2).¹⁴ Its author was the collector of Japanese art, Edward Sylvester Morse of Salem, Massachusetts. Morse was also mentor to the first curator of Asian art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Ernest Fenollosa, who, in turn, was a major influence both on the artist and teacher Arthur Wesley Dow and on Ezra Pound, Fenollosa's literary executor.¹⁵ Whistler's art (and personal contact with artists) was certainly important in bringing Japanese art to Americans, but it was not unique.

It is also notable that Whistler was himself shaped by his early experiences in the American art world, as well as by his expatriation. Born in Lowell, Massachusetts, Whistler began his artistic training in the Drawing Department of the United States Naval Academy under Robert Weir, father of artists Julian Alden Weir and John Ferguson Weir; the latter Weir also became the first Director of the Yale Art School.¹⁶ Once again, this is not to make an argument for American exceptionalism, or to discount either foreign influences or the two-way experience of expatriation on Americans. Rather, it is to suggest that art-world institutions also



2. Unidentified artist after Hokusai (1760-1849), *Yamato-Daké No Mikoto*. Published in *The American Art Review* 1, div. 1 (1880). The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

played a formative but little-understood role in shaping American art, and provided an important context for the reception and translation of international influences.

Finally, it is necessary to say a few words about some of the terms that appear frequently in this book: “avant-garde,” “vanguardism,” “modernism,” and “modern.” The focus of this work is historical, rather than theoretical. As such, I do not aim to offer new definitions for these fraught and much-debated terms. Instead, I have tried to employ these expressions in ways that reflect what I have observed from my own research and the historical research of other scholars, without straying too far from definitions already in use elsewhere. It is hoped that a greater understanding of the historical context for the cultural changes in this period will help others to refine the “theory of the avant-garde” and the definition of modernism, particularly as they relate to American art and culture. This would be especially welcome because so much of the current theoretical literature for this period is based on European rather than American examples.

Definitions of the avant-garde vary widely.¹⁷ Despite these differences, two aspects do link a number of descriptions of the avant-garde: its revolutionary intention, as Matei Calinescu writes, “to overthrow all the binding formal traditions of art and to enjoy the exhilarating freedom of exploring completely new, previously forbidden, horizons of creativity”; and its metaphorical origin in the military concept of the “advanced guard.”¹⁸ Drawing upon both themes—the “overthrow of traditions” and the use of military organization to attain it—I use the terms “avant-garde” or “vanguardism” primarily to describe the *organizational* efforts, employed largely but not exclusively by artists, to create institutions and fields for “progressive” art. Contrary to many other observers, however, I do not use “progressive” in a normative sense: it is not my aim to pass that kind of critical judgment on artworks, and I believe that the vanguard was only one among many locations in which “exhilarating” explorations of creativity occurred. What this definition does reflect, though, is the tendency of a number of turn-of-the-century artists (and artists’ associations) to define their *own* work as “progressive,” and to pursue rhetorical, organizational, and exhibition strategies that emphasized their newness and difference from older art and artists. It is for this reason, for example, that I have described both the 1877 Society of American Artists and Alfred Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession as “vanguardist”—rather than because of similarities in the aesthetic character of their works.

The term “modernism” is somewhat more complicated because it must fulfill two distinct roles. First, it must describe a multifaceted *aesthetic* phenomenon: the movement in both art criticism and the visual arts away

from representation and toward abstraction; the idealization of authentic, irreducible, art objects; the search for unique formal methods distinctive to individual artistic media; the effort to depict new conceptions of time and space within the visual arts; and so on. But “modernism” is also the most appropriate term for the broader overall artistic milieu I am describing, which includes both art and the art world. This is further complicated by the fact that modernism also cannot be entirely separated from vanguardism. Although it is useful, for analytical purposes, to distinguish between modernist aesthetics and avant-garde organizational strategies, they were often overlapping and mutually reinforcing phenomena. At times I have tried to overcome this difficulty by employing the hybrid phrases “vanguardist modernism” or “American visual modernism” to connote the general milieu (rather than aesthetics), but these expressions are too cumbersome to use with great frequency.

“Modern,” on the other hand, will denote social, economic, or cultural phenomena (except when it is used to modify “art”). Like “modernism,” this is a broad term, which refers not only to the self-consciously “modern” milieu populated by social nonconformists, but also to the wider cultural environment wrought by industrialization and its attendant social changes. Indeed, one of my aims here is to suggest how the relationship between “modernism” and “modernity” might be reformulated slightly to include more of an emphasis on how participants in the art world grappled with “modernity” in its broader aspects: how artists and artisans responded to de-skilling and obsolescence in the industrializing economy; how critics emulated the strategies of other professionals in order to capitalize on the post-Civil War crisis of authority; and how these social trends within the art world contributed to aesthetic change. These relationships were exceedingly complex, and I do not pretend to exhaust this line of analysis. Instead, I hope that this study will present future scholars with further avenues of inquiry.

In the end, the problem presented by these definitions mirrors the central difficulty posed by the research itself: how to relate social, cultural, or economic change to the question of aesthetic transformation. In order to untangle the history of modern art, it is also necessary to untangle the history of cultural hierarchy. That is the aim of this book.