

Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry, by James M. Dennis. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. xvi, 279 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY LEA ROSSON DELONG, DES MOINES ART CENTER

For a number of years, the case for seeing the midwestern Regionalist painters Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry as modernists has been growing. During the height of their fame, in the 1930s, all of them would have been considered at the least traditional, if not backward and provincial, figures. The artists themselves, Benton especially, seemed to encourage that view, offering themselves as the antithesis of modernism and the agents of "common sense" in American painting. Critics and art historians then and since have generally agreed, and until the 1970s, these three were consistently presented as a drag in the grand progress of American art toward full participation in European-inspired modernism.

Dennis himself was among the earliest to question this approach. His 1975 study, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture*, examined the artist in a balanced, objective manner and found him not a simple rube but an informed painter of considerable cultural sophistication. Since then, other scholarship has reassessed the contribution of these artists and paid particular attention to how much they were involved in their times and not set apart from them. With this new context for the Regionalists, Dennis once more reinterprets them, now suggesting that it was their very "outsider" or independent status that firmly qualifies them as modernists. In other ways, as well, they were modern, although contemporary critics consistently failed to realize it. Dennis's definition of modernism is not strictly artistic or formal but broader, more culturally based, derived in part from other disciplines such as sociology. Although he acknowledges and then deepens our understanding of the modern (specifically, abstract) elements of Wood's art in particular and Benton's as well, Dennis also treats other aspects of their work, such as their criticism of American life and culture, their openness to change, and their innovations in the use of myths.

Dennis provides an enriched view of the criticism of these painters, compares these perceptions to his readings of the art, and offers several new avenues of interpretation. In discussing the critical reaction to Regionalist art, he makes the interesting argument that Regionalist art was produced primarily for an urban market. The artists' success or failure to give that market images of rural life that it found acceptable affected the response of critics of the time. Dennis also addresses the

damning view of midwestern Regionalism as simple-mindedly nationalistic and even fascistic. Despite the writing and rhetoric of Benton especially, Dennis finds the artists clear-eyed and critical of American life in their works of art, largely unswayed by any "America First" mentality. As for fascism, he describes the history of these interpretations, suggesting again that the midwesterners were shallowly understood. The most influential assertion of fascism and similarity to German painting of the 1930s came from the writings of H. W. Janson (the author of a major text for surveys of the history of art). Dennis demonstrates how that criticism arose largely from Janson's personal animosity toward Grant Wood, which developed when both were teaching at the University of Iowa in the early 1940s. The author also finds evidence of the Regionalists' modernism in their treatment of female imagery, and he details that role in the work of each of the midwestern painters.

Finally, Dennis identifies three other artists, whose works are generally regarded as good examples of American adaptation of European modernism, as actually being more thoroughly "Regionalist" than the midwesterners. Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, and Marsden Hartley, all of whom were associated with Alfred Stieglitz and the American avant-garde, were, Dennis suggests, much more involved with the specifics of their various regional subject matter. Despite the abstraction of their styles, he finds them much more consistent in their devotion to depicting the flavor of certain locales and less critical of American scenes and practices.

The view of Wood, Benton, and Curry as full and innovative participants in modernism will remain unacceptable to some readers, but Dennis's research, interpretations, and arguments are worthwhile and convincing in their claim that Regionalism's relationship to modernism is challenging, complex, and not as one-sided as many have thought.

Harvesting the High Plains: John Kriss and the Business of Wheat Farming, 1920-1950, by Craig Miner. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. xi, 225 pp. Illustration, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY GILBERT C. FITE, UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA, EMERITUS

For many years, controversy has raged over the best use of the Great Plains. Some environmentalists have argued that the region should never have been plowed up, and sharp criticism has been directed toward absentee landlords, or suitcase farmers, who reputedly raped

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.