

Book Reviews and Notices

Currents of Change: Art and Life along the Mississippi River, 1850–1861, by Jason Busch, Christopher Monkhouse, and Janet Whitmore. Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts; distributed by University of Minnesota Press, 2004. 192 pp. Illustrations, exhibition checklist, notes, index. \$34.95 paper.

Reviewer Kate Elliott is a doctoral student in art history at the University of Iowa, specializing in nineteenth-century American history painting and western American art.

Accompanying the exhibition of the same name held at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, *Currents of Change: Art and Life along the Mississippi, 1850–1861* presents a historical examination as grand as “the Father of Waters” itself. This collection of essays differs from other scholarly examinations of the artistic culture of the Mississippi River valley in its wide geographic focus, which encompasses the length of the river. In their essays, curators Jason Busch and Christopher Monkhouse and art historian Janet Whitmore explore the visual legacy of the Mississippi River valley, attempting to define the river’s role in forging America’s mid-nineteenth-century identity, especially in the critical decade preceding the Civil War. As each essay explains, this was an era of rapid industrialization, when river towns became boom towns overnight. It was also the period before the supremacy of the railroad, when grand steamboats replaced the ubiquitous flatboats, becoming floating show-cases of current artistic tastes.

Busch’s contribution, “Handsomely Furnished in the Most Fashionable Style: Art and Decoration along the Mississippi River,” illustrates these important economic changes through decorative arts. His choice of objects and explanation of their significance paint a picture of a new elite eager to create a luxurious domestic sphere on the recently tamed frontier. The river played the important role of transporting fashionable domestic items as well as artists, artisans, and art ideas, and served as a conduit of mingling tastes. The book’s unusually wide geographic scope allows for these kinds of observations; at least as far as the arts were concerned, this era was not as marked by regional tensions as we commonly believe. The river, time and again, is presented as a point of union, not division.

Race, however, proved a disruptive issue to the cultural climate of the Mississippi River valley. Indeed, Busch, realizing that the lavish lifestyle of the rich was built with the labor of immigrants and slaves, often includes African American voices in his narrative. Unfortunately, this conscious inclusion is not uniform throughout the essays. Whitmore's contribution, "A Panorama of Unequaled Yet Ever-Varying Beauty," missed several opportunities to discuss the racial power dynamics that are clearly present in many of the canvases she illustrates. When she does broach the darker moments of U.S. history, as in her discussion of Samuel Mardson Brookes and Thomas H. Stevenson's *Bad Axe Battleground* (1856), which depicts the site of the decisive but deceitful victory of U.S. troops during the Black Hawk War, Whitmore fails to examine the clear power dynamics behind the commission of such a prosaic view of the historically significant site.

Monkhouse's fascinating essay, "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and the Mississippi River: Forging a National Identity through the Arts," explores the genesis of Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* and *Evangeline*, as well as the often unexplored reciprocity between the visual and literary arts. Monkhouse relies heavily on material culture, expanding his study to include popular prints, song sheets, and whirligigs, demonstrating how forms of popular expression broaden the impact of popular phenomena, such as Longfellow's epic poems, more effectively than the fine arts alone.

This openness to vernacular culture is one of the greatest strengths of *Currents of Change*. Throughout the catalog, all forms of culture are treated as equals in cultural exchange. The curators pulled interesting but relatively unknown works from historical collections along the Mississippi, including fascinating visual documents from storehouses such as the Minnesota Historical Society, as well as smaller institutions such as the Muscatine Art Center and the Lee County Historical Society, whose treasures have yet to be mined.

This regional dimension of *Currents of Change* makes it worthwhile for anyone interested in the history of the Mississippi River valley, but it also shows the exhibited art works as important to the nation and national identity. Critical issues are at times unevenly treated, yet the sum of the essays is definitely greater than its parts, making *Currents of Change* an important piece of scholarship defining nineteenth-century America, capable of standing independent of the exhibition.

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.