

Merle Armitage: Accent on Taste

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Born outside of Mason City, Iowa, on Lincoln's birthday in 1893, Merle Armitage lived a fascinating life that encompassed several distinct careers. He made a modest fortune as an impresario (a theater promoter), and moved on to become a celebrated book designer who brought a modern aesthetic to the publishing world. The Cowles Publishing Company hired him in the late 1940s to create a new look for their flagship magazine *Look*. In addition, Armitage was a collector of modern art and a gourmet cook who authored several books on both subjects and was awarded the Cordon Bleu for his culinary achievements. His hobbies and careers illustrate Armitage's curious ability to traverse usually rigid cultural hierarchies. Most interestingly, Armitage managed his life in such a way that defied classifications like "highbrow" and "lowbrow." His life and works, as represented in the University of Iowa Libraries' Iowa Authors Collection, throw cultural divisions of high/middle/low into serious question and force a rethinking of the very nature of cultural distinctions regarding taste.

During his career as a theater promoter, Armitage managed dancers, opera and ballet companies, and light opera stars. While these may seem to be high culture performers at first glance, Armitage's use of rather questionable marketing strategies targeted a middlebrow audience. One case involved Larina, "an extremely beautiful girl, a black-haired, slender creature," but a minor player in Foederoff's Russian Ballet Company.¹ Armitage repeatedly ran afoul of the company for featuring her picture

¹Merle Armitage, *Accent on Life* (Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1964), 100.

prominently in press releases. He justified his use of the pictures purely on economic grounds: "The fact that Larina was simply a dancer in the company was unimportant," the pictures "were delightfully eye-catching," and Armitage knew that they would guarantee ticket sales.² When the primary members of the company threatened not to perform because of Larina's press coverage, Armitage used "that one feared word 'deportation'" to silence them.³ Armitage held deep respect for the artistic abilities of the company, but he used sex to sell tickets.

To arouse public interest in the opera singer Rosa Ponselle, Armitage recounts: "by disguising my handwriting, I penned a letter to a Los Angeles newspaper critic" with the false rumor that "Lucian Muratore will next week announce that he is divorcing Lina Cavalieri and will marry Rosa Ponselle."⁴ He goes on to brag that "the results were terrific."⁵ Armitage's marketing strategy for two highbrow acts (Foederoff's company and Rosa Ponselle) depended on sex and innuendo and catered to a public more interested in personality than artistic genius.

Although Armitage made his fortune as an impresario, he is best known today for his adventures in book design. Armitage's books show the high culture side of his personality. They flow naturally out of the modern aesthetic he developed designing playbills and programs. He followed the modernist adage that "form follows function," and transformed it into the notion "let the punishment fit the crime."⁶ He insisted that the first step to good book design was to know the book intimately and "allow the subject of the book to determine its design and format."⁷ Therefore, a book about the piano should be designed and bound so that it will rest functionally on a piano stand like sheet music. A book about modern art ought to be a piece of modern art. A book on Gershwin must illustrate Gershwin's jazz flair in the typography of the title page.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 106.

⁴Ibid., 55-56.

⁵Ibid., 56.

⁶Merle Armitage, *Accent on America* (New York: E. Weyhe, 1944), 301.

⁷Merle Armitage, "Books to Reflect Our Time," *Publisher's Weekly* 155/19 (May 7, 1949), 1898.

The first dozen books he designed (many of which he wrote himself) all concern the arts (either visual, stage, or music), and all but one focus on the American scene. E.A. Jewell's assertion that "Art in America lamentably lacks a literature" inspired Armitage.⁸ He set out to write and design exactly what Jewell called for: "monographs on our best artists, or our most promising young artists," which "might fill a five-foot shelf."⁹ Armitage hoped that "while pleading the case for the artist," his books might "through physical qualities and design elucidate the text."¹⁰ So he wrote and designed books about Rockwell Kent, Eugen Maier-Krieg (who had moved to America), Edward Weston, Martha Graham, Warren Newcombe, Richard Day, Pasquale Giovanni Napolitano, and Henrietta Shore. The books consist mainly of illustrations coupled with essays solicited by Armitage from art critics. His high culture ideal of "pleading the case" is interestingly middlebrow. That he wanted to fill a "five-foot shelf" sounds ominously like Charles Eliot's notoriously middlebrow Harvard Classics series (which also was designed to fit on a five-foot shelf).

Critics received his books as art and criticized them as such.¹¹ His outlandish designs and title pages that could rarely be contained on the recto or right-hand page of a book (usually needing a full two pages for their expressive expanse), irritated some critics.¹² While heavily criticized by some for not respecting tradition in his designs, Armitage's books brought the modern aesthetic to book design in a way that no one else had ever done. The members of the American Institute of Graphic Arts rewarded him by electing him their president in 1952.

Armitage's first effort at book design coincided with his first published work as an author. In 1928, Armitage gave a speech for the California Art Club titled "The Aristocracy of Art." Jake Zeitlin, Los Angeles book dealer, saw the speech and worked with Armitage to turn it into a short book. The speech reappears as a

⁸Merle Armitage, *Warren Newcombe* (New York: E. Weyhe, 1932), unnumbered preliminary page.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Armitage, *Accent on America*, 301.

¹¹For one example see Catherine Royer's "The Armory Show of Book Design," *American Artist* 15/5 (May 1951), 40-44.

¹²Armitage, *Accent on Life*, 361.

chapter section in Armitage's 1965 autobiography *Accent on Life*. It describes Armitage's aesthetic, and also describes how aesthetic sensibility comes about. In addition, it illustrates Armitage's image of himself as a member of an elite culture of refined taste:

Our sensitive reactions to the world are the result of two things: the perceptions with which we were born, and the experiences which we have, the degree to which we may add to natural sensitiveness and perspicacity is in direct ratio to the flexibility and plasticity of our spirit and our mentality. Some people congeal, spiritually and mentally, when they are fifteen years of age, some when they are fifty, and some never.¹³

This is Armitage's way of introducing the notion that "art is essentially aristocratic."¹⁴ By aristocratic, Armitage does not mean the upper classes, or the "fat and dull dowagers rolling about to teas in padded limousines."¹⁵ Armitage sees the aristocracy as a natural one based on a receptivity to the arts. Some people are born with a willingness to foster an artistic sensitivity. Through innate gifts and training, the art lover naturally evolves. The emphasis on the natural gifts involved is decidedly genteel in character. People are born into the aristocracy. At the same time, the individual can change his or her nature to some degree by not congealing spiritually or mentally.

Armitage goes on to ridicule people who work for the advancement of the arts: "I am often amused by overzealous souls who are going to 'do something for art.' These people are starkly ignorant. Art is an elusive divinity."¹⁶ But art opens itself to those who open themselves:

But I want to make my point upon one basis and one premise. That premise is that art is an aristocratic goddess who can be wooed and won by anyone, so long as that anyone has a certain open-mindedness, a certain flair, a certain spirit somewhat akin to rapturous impulsiveness, a certain capability of ecstasy, a certain contempt for the cheap and tawdry, a certain understanding of sensuality, a certain pagan love of beauty for itself alone.¹⁷

¹³Ibid., 143.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 144.

¹⁶Ibid., 145.

¹⁷Ibid., 147.

Armitage links art appreciation to the gift of grace: nature bestows it on the individual, and it facilitates the capacity to achieve ecstasy. As grace is a ticket into heaven, an openness to art is a ticket into a highbrow aristocracy.

The line "a certain contempt for the cheap and tawdry" brings up Armitage's next major career move which was as art director for the mass-circulation magazine *Look*. During his time at *Look*, Armitage reveled in the "cheap and tawdry." Regardless of the lead story, he always featured a beautiful woman on the cover of the magazine to sell copies. A shooting script written by Armitage for a photo-essay "The Big Chief of the Southwest," called for finding "three comely young women, who can be photographed in bathing suits."¹⁸ He goes on to say that the day at Phantom Ranch may be the only opportunity to get some "good alluring sex shots" for an article on trains.¹⁹ An actual examination of the photo-essay reveals that many more opportunities were found. In one case, the outstretched legs of two models frame a photo of a Hopi dance.²⁰

The most curious aspect of Armitage's work is how similar his style remained. Armitage went all the way from being a brash impresario targeting a middlebrow audience, to a high culture book designer aiming at an art "aristocracy," to a mass market magazine designer. Throughout his career moves, his design ideas never significantly changed. When Armitage first began working with design as an impresario, he wanted to find a middle ground between "a dullness essential to any sort of snobbery" and "the gauche and flamboyant practices of P.T. Barnum."²¹ It can be argued that when it came to media manipulation, Armitage leaned toward the Barnum side of the continuum, but the middle ground he describes is a fairly accurate appraisal of many of his designs.

As an impresario, Armitage experimented with a modern aesthetic in his promotional materials. His first efforts utilized sans serif type faces and border designs that played on "classic antiquity" which were in the "current fashions."²² As time went by,

¹⁸Merle Armitage, shooting script for "Big Chief of the Southwest," 6. Iowa Authors Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Merle Armitage, "Big Chief of the Southwest," *Look* 16/3 (January 29, 1952), 53.

²¹Merle Armitage, *Notes on Modern Printing* (New York: W.E. Rudge, 1945), 23.

²²Phil McPharlin, "Early Armitage: Advertising Pieces of an Impresario," *Print: A Quarterly Journal of the Graphic Arts* 4/4 (Winter 1945-1946), 23.

THE ARISTOCRACY OF ART: Merle Armitage



**AN ADDRESS BEFORE THE CALIFORNIA
ART CLUB OPEN FORUM, LOS ANGELES
MARCH 4, 1929**

JAKE ZEITLIN: LOS ANGELES, MCMXXIX

and he became more self assured, he started to create powerful modern images. An illustration for the cover of a program for the Los Angeles Grand Opera Association featured a drawing of an



opera singer whose dress creates the shape of an opera shell. A silhouette of a conductor's hand penetrates into the open area of her skirt. Directly below is the word "Opera" in a distinctly modern type face. Everything on the cover is reduced to clean forms which suggest the grandeur and pomp of the opera while being neither stuffy nor brash. A repeating pattern of waves acts as a border at the bottom of the page. Armitage repeated the basic design idea in his first book, *The Aristocracy of Art*. The title page is dominated by a black and white display of solid forms. The type is a more conservative Times Roman, but the layout of the page is reminiscent of one of Armitage's programs.

A program produced in 1937 for a concert for Leopold Stokowski (the conductor who dearly wanted to bring classical music to the masses through such ventures as Disney's *Fantasia*) shows Armitage's designs at a more mature stage. The text runs across the fold of the program, and appears in uneven, but balanced blocks. A small illustration near the left margin counters the rather busy text to stabilize the two page layout. In his book on Gershwin, published the next year, Armitage utilized a simi-

lar layout design.²³ The title page spills across the gutter and fills two pages with text blocks strikingly similar to those used in the Stokowski program. This time, an illustration sits in a lower corner to anchor the layout.

When Armitage moved on to design *Look* magazine, the design ideas he developed as an impresario, and used as a book designer, reappear. The previously mentioned photo essay on the Big Chief features the Armitage style in layout design. On one two-page spread, the main photo (of women washing their hair) extends across the gutter of the page. Other smaller photos balance it out in a style similar to the text block layouts he used earlier. In addition, Armitage incorporates a small southwestern design as a border device. Though different from the wave used on the Grand Opera program, the border is a simple, repeating pattern that fills out a small area of text to make it another block. The border keeps the small text area from being overwhelmed by the photos. Interestingly, the border device also appears in a modified form on Armitage's stationery and in the trademark he designed for himself. All have simple straight lines moving up and down diagonally.

Perhaps Armitage viewed himself a cultural producer who produced some artifacts for one audience (the democratic populous) and other artifacts for another audience ("The Aristocracy of Art"). If so, then his dictum of letting the punishment fit the crime applies more to the victim. *Look* never aspired to be anything other than popular, so it became a mass culture artifact. He intended his art books for a distinguishing audience, so they became high culture. As a concert promoter, his main interest was almost always money, but the money was in the hands of a middlebrow population. As a result, those cultural artifacts (the performances orchestrated by Armitage) became middlebrow. In all three cases, Armitage used the same set of aesthetic principles. The design of his books evolved out of the design ideas he created as an impresario, which in turn came from his love of Modern Art. He transplanted the same design ideas onto mass market magazines produced for mass consumption. Even though all of Armitage's pro-

²³See Merle Armitage, *George Gershwin: Man and Legend* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938).

ductions (from playbills, to books, to magazine covers) shared a common aesthetic, each became an inherently different kind of cultural artifact.

Viewed from one perspective, Armitage was a man of refined taste who championed a modern aesthetic. The two hobbies that dominated his leisure time were art collecting and cooking. His hobbies alone make him appear to be rather highbrow in most people's eyes, and several of his career accomplishments back up that notion. Armitage helped to found the Los Angeles Grand Opera Association, and he sat on the board of the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra. He devoted much of his life to what we think of as the high arts, from the visual to the theatrical. But at the same time, Armitage was always an advertising man (he worked in 1924 in the advertising department for Packard Motor Company) whose favorite marketing ploy was sex.²⁴ He was highbrow and lowbrow while selling "culture" to a middlebrow audience.

What does this say about the twentieth century popular notion that there is a high, middle, and low culture? Is it a lifestyle, a set of commodities, or the consumption of those commodities that defines the hierarchy? Armitage's works blur the lines between high, middle and low. The commodities he produced defied division, and so did Armitage.

²⁴"Look Gets a New Cover," *Cowles Ink* 1/7 (June 1951), 7.