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Book Review: Karl Bodmer's Studio Art: The Newberry Library Bodmer Collection

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Karl Bodmer’s field sketches executed along the upper Missouri between 1832 and 1834 constitute one of the principal sources of visual evidence regarding the ethnohistory of the Northern Plains. In this volume a less well-known selection of these works, both drawings and watercolors, held in the collections of the Newberry Library receives for the first time sustained scholarly consideration, situ-
ated in a historical context defined by the ethnologic ambitions of Bodmer’s patron, Prince Maximilian. Anthropologist W. Raymond Wood first briefly recounts the familiar story of the artist’s travels and then traces the provenance of the artworks themselves, which he praises elaborately for their scientific accuracy. This insistence on the documentary transparency of Bodmer’s images recurs in the long essay by Joseph C. Porter that follows, the volume’s centerpiece. Porter, curator at the North Carolina Museum of History and co-editor of Maximilian’s journals, establishes the intellectual framework within which Bodmer worked, paying particular attention to contemporary scientific theories with regard to race. David C. Hunt, currently Director of the Stark Museum of Art, traces the publication history of Bodmer’s later translations of his own field studies into aquatints, describing the print techniques involved, the production of multiple editions priced for different markets, the choice of engravers and printers, and known variants in a discussion certain to interest bibliophiles and collectors.

The volume culminates in thirty-two black-and-white and twelve color reproductions of the Newberry Bodmers, which alone justify its purchase, affording the reader opportunity to make sense of the primary evidence—the images themselves—in the contexts provided. Wood accompanies this set of handsome plates with helpful annotation.

Despite some awkward redundancy caused by its organization as a collection of essays, each with its own bibliography and notes, Karl Bodmer’s Studio Art is certain to appeal to amateur as well as professional historians. The authors’ insistence on the documentary nature of the works of art they reproduce but never analyze, however, underestimates their evidentiary value. When addressing Bodmer’s work rather than its context, for instance, Porter lapses into bland tautology, describing the images as “wonderful examples of expeditionary art” that somehow provide “a remarkable view onto Jacksonian America.” Whereas such works of art by their very nature invite close pictorial assessments informed by recognition of just the sort of complex thematic engagements he otherwise carefully elaborates, Porter prefers to read Bodmer’s images somewhat reductively, reproducing a view of Fort Pierre, for example, to illustrate a passing reference to Fort Pierre. The authors find much to say around but disappointingly little to say about the works of art they reproduce. Wood notes in his introduction that while historians and anthropologists have tended to “idolize” Bodmer, “the world of art” has not. I would suggest that rather than idolize the artist, paying tribute to the accuracy of his transcriptions, it might be preferable to engage the complex visual evidence these objects represent—a project still pending to which this volume nonetheless usefully contributes.

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