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BOOK REVIEWS

Forging an American Identity: The Art of William Ranney: With a Catalogue of His Works. By Linda Bantel and Peter H. Hassrick, with essays by Sarah E. Boehme and Mark F. Bockrath. Edited by Kathleen Luhrs. Cody, WY: Buffalo Bill Historical Center, 2006. xxxviii + 225 pp. Illustrations, concordance, index of titles, select bibliography. $59.95.

Since the appearance of Francis S. Grubar's *William Ranney, Painter of the Early West*, a catalogue raisonné published to accompany the artist's 1962 retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Ranney's reputation has revolved around the thirty-odd images of western trappers, hunters, and pioneers he worked up in New York (and later in an impressive two-story studio he kept across the river in West Hoboken) during the 1840s and early 1850s, at least in part from sketches dating to the time of his enlistment as a soldier in the Texan war for independence more than a decade earlier. The present account, *Forging an American Identity: The Art of William Ranney*, while paying more balanced attention to the artist's broader oeuvre, nonetheless privileges these same western images—works described by Sarah E. Boehme as pictorial narratives of roughly contemporary life on the prairies that "contributed to the region's significance in the national mythology."

The publication documents, celebrates, and targets visitors to the 2006 Ranney retrospective organized at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center's Whitney Gallery of Western Art in Cody, Wyoming, which has since traveled to the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art where it closed in August 2007. Not having seen the exhibition, I will limit my comments to the book itself, the scholarly ambitions of which are both evident and admirable though uneven.

In her acknowledgments, lead author Linda Bantel describes *Forging an American Identity* as "comprehensive" in that it "lists all the known works of the artist, along with pertinent historical and technical details, analysis and historical interpretation." The authority and in some sense the usefulness of the project breaks down where the syntax of this sentence does, with "analysis and historical interpretation" not precisely governed by the verb (or the ambition) "to list"—a rift dividing the scrupulously objective gathering of useful information for which a catalogue raisonné is designed, and interpretive analysis, a project quite different in nature. As an art historian I see analysis and historical interpretation as privileged ends served by, indeed reliant upon, basic research. It's precisely for this reason that I question their uneasy combination here. Or perhaps it's simply that the quality of the historical interpretation offered is itself uneven, and most spectacularly so in the catalogue entries devoted to the very images of particular interest to readers of this journal.

The good news is that the oddly hybrid nature of *Forging an American Identity* seems a sign of growth pains in the field of western art history, the result in part of a desire by museum professionals to draw at long last on decades of art historical scholarship in the academy. The fault lines are discernible, however, throughout.

Ranney Moran, a descendant of the artist and supporter of the exhibition, notes in his curiously substantive prologue that we'll "probably never really know what was going through [the painter's] mind as he worked, but fortunately we have been given a taste of life at this period, left to us on canvas and paper." The nonscholarly tone of these ruminations, while doubtless possible to explain away, raises doubts not entirely allayed by the essays that follow. It's as difficult to discern a recognizable art historical project in this agenda as in Moran's fawning introductory encomium that the artist "did his best for his country, family, and himself."

That said, *Forging an American Identity* is consistently good with the facts. Boehme's useful biographical introduction follows Ranney's emergence as an artist of importance riding a tide of patronage from the American Art Union. Mark Bockrath offers a concise, equally helpful discussion of the artist's technique: the materials he used and the use to which he put them. The heart of the book, the catalogue raisonné itself, comprises 183 pages of entries, one for each of 150 oil paintings, followed by 29 pages detailing another 84 works on paper. The reproductions are generally excellent, as are data entries carefully listing provenance, exhibition histories, and mentions in both the historical record and art historical literature. Interpretive essays ranging from a paragraph to several pages in length accompany many though not all of these entries. Those devoted to images of the West were handled by Peter H. Hassrick, whose scholarship has helped define the field for more than three decades.

Discussions of particular interest include those dedicated to such well-known works as *Prairie Burial* (cat. 38), *Boone's First View of Kentucky* (cats. 45, 46), and *The Trapper's Last Shot* (cats. 51, 52). These entries, in which balanced treatment of historical context and thematic content, respectively, illuminate images too easily relegated to the status of illustration, are useful and should be of great value to future scholars. Unfortunately, in certain of his essays Hassrick, venturing rather far into the more treacherous waters of cultural interpretation, offers instead readings that awkwardly overreach their evidence. His claim, for instance, that *Lasso* and *Hunting Wild Horses* of 1846 (cats. 18, 19) represent elaborate geopolitical allegories based on the mere juxtaposition of possible symbols with historical events seems supported by little beyond rhetorical flourish, itself marked by avoidable sexist false generic usage: "Man intrudes on nature, cuts into the circle and extracts what he wants." In an admittedly even more "complex and speculative" reading of *The Pipe of Friendship* (cat. 110), Hassrick argues that the image, "[g]iven the contentiousness of the times," served as an allegory of sectional politics with each of three riders somehow representing (we're never told how) the regions with which they're spatially aligned. Such stretching of a point based on something like visual analysis can be amusing, as where the eponymous and rather effeminate figure in Ranney's *A Trapper Crossing the Mountains* is described as resembling, under his garb, a Polykleitos athlete. Mostly readers are left to wonder at the blurring of the line separating such less than persuasive speculative exegesis from the documentary project of the catalogue raisonné in which these transports are embedded.

Yet the strengths of *Forging an American Identity* far outweigh its idiosyncrasies. Where Ranney's several dozen representations of life "on the prairie" are concerned, ironically, it may be the comprehensive inventory of the artist's work *beyond* that subject matter narrowly defined that constitutes this volume's chief contribution to our understanding, allowing a fresh opportunity to recognize the role played by such western images in defining a larger oeuvre in the context of which they should be read and to which they may indeed provide a key.

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