Fall 2010

Review of *Charles Deas and 1840s America* by Carol Clark, with contributions by Joan Carpenter Troccoli, Frederick E. Hoxie, and Guy Jordan

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Husch, Gail E., "Review of *Charles Deas and 1840s America* by Carol Clark, with contributions by Joan Carpenter Troccoli, Frederick E. Hoxie, and Guy Jordan" (2010). Great Plains Quarterly. 2619.
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His known works are not many—ninety-eight paintings, drawings, and prints are listed in Carol Clark’s catalogue at the end of this richly documented volume—and almost half have not been located. Most of the artist’s extant paintings were produced between 1833 and 1849. By the age of thirty, Charles Deas (1818–1867) was disturbed enough to require institutionalization; he spent the rest of his days in one asylum or another. With a career of such apparently limited scope and scale, one might wonder whether the artist deserves the attention he is given in this book and in the exhibition at the Denver Art Museum that it accompanies.

He does, absolutely. The paintings themselves are fascinating, both visually and thematically. After limited success in the New York art market of the 1830s, Deas made his way to St. Louis in the 1840s. From there, he sent paintings back east, focusing on subjects exotic to a New York audience, some with a disturbing, violent edge—desperate riders escaping a blazing prairie, a fearsome Indian and doomed white trapper locked in mortal combat—others showing the dress, customs, and habits of Natives, mountain men, and fur trappers.

In addition to a clear introduction and the catalogue itself, the book contains five essays. Two are by Clark, one a lively overview of the artist’s life, the other an in-depth analysis of Deas’s narrative paintings of the 1840s. Clark’s interpretations, informed by an obvious understanding of the culture of the time (e.g., its popular figures of speech) as well as by a sensitivity to Deas’s mental state, emphasize the intertwined tensions of race and economic competition in both the artist’s and the nation’s consciousness.

Clark’s beautifully written and convincingly argued essays are joined by Frederick Hoxie’s examination of the economic and social consequences of westward expansion in 1840s America, Guy Jordan’s close reading of Deas’s Walking the Chalk, a tavern image unlike others of its time, and Joan Carpenter Troccoli’s discussion of the mythic conceptions of the Rocky Mountains and of western trappers expressed in Deas’s Long Jakes.

Although the artist’s own psychic anxiety surely affected his work of the 1840s, paintings like Long Jakes, Prairie on Fire, and The Death Struggle are equally documents of America’s “expansionist fervor” in the turbulent decades before the Civil War, revealing “an undercurrent of deep uncertainty about the nation’s future.” As Clark explains, “That in the end Deas succumbed to his own demons does not diminish the national resonance of his pictures, which gave substance to the region that was shaping the idea of America.” And, in an impressive synthesis of research, analysis, and presentation, Clark, Hoxie, Jordan, and Troccoli give substance to the life and work of an especially intriguing artist.

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