

Reviews

American art is European art

Neset, Arne. *Arcadian Waters and Wanton Seas: The Iconology of Waterscapes in Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Culture*. American University Studies. Series XIX. General Literature. Vol. 36. New York: Peter Lang, 2009. 275 pages: ISBN 9781433102974. hardcover \$67.95

America is Europe, or at least once was. American culture and European culture are but two different branches of the same tree. Arne Neset once more supports this truth with his book on *Arcadian Waters and Wanton Seas*, where he looks at the iconology of waterscapes in nineteenth-century transatlantic culture. (America and American culture in this context, of course, refer to the “Euro-American” concept of the words, and not to Native American cultures).

In most surveys of world art, American artists are hardly mentioned until after World War II. All American Studies people know about the great painters of early United States like Thomas Cole, Thomas Moran, and the Charles Wilson Peale family. For surprisingly many art historians these names are unknown. They are more occupied by John Constable, Édouard Manet, and Jacob van Ruisdael. Arne Neset brings all these painters together—or at least those who painted landscapes with water, or waterscapes.

Although he does concentrate on waterscapes, Neset goes beyond landscape paintings to find Euro-American connections and enlarges his analysis to really deal with the European roots of (Euro-)American culture. I wish he would have gone even further, but already at its present stage, the book is very useful not only for students of the United States, but also of Europe, and of art in general.

Arne Neset tries to find American exceptionalism in American landscape paintings only to conclude how closely the many “American ideas” are tied to similar developments in Europe, and pretty much at the same time, too. Are the seeds of America, after all, to be found in German woods, English

meadows, and Italian groves? Was Herbert Baxter Adams right and Frederick Jackson Turner wrong?

America was seen by many as the land of milk and honey, a pastoral Arcadia, while at the same time others saw it as a wild and difficult place. Professor Neset categorizes this in landscape painting by defining the more positive image as a Claudian landscape, after Claude Lorrain, a landscape painter active mostly in Italy during the 17th century. The more wilderness and rough terrain (or waters) paintings he refers to as Salvatorian landscapes, after Salvator Rosa, another 17th-century Italian painter. Claude Lorrain's classical Arcadia was filled with natural beauty and human happiness, while Salvator Rosa depicted barren, savage, and mountainous landscapes. It is easy to see why both of these approaches appealed to American painters of the 18th and 19th centuries, and perhaps even of the 21st century.

Obviously Edward Hicks' *The Peaceable Kingdom* represents a Claudian landscape, with the big animals as well as William Penn and the Indians in peace and harmony with each other by the trees and the bay providing a perfectly beautiful setting. At the same time, Thomas Moran's *The Chasm of the Colorado* shows a more Salvatorian view of America with a wild and forbidding landscape.

Life, however, is seldom as simple as that, and neither are paintings. Professor Neset goes to a great detail and care to show that many of the paintings, whether American or European, contain elements of both the Salvatorian and the Claudian approach. Just pick up Albert Bierstadt's *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California*, for example. In the foreground you have a most peaceful Claudian setting with deer coming to drink, while at the back you have majestic towering wild mountains (and in this case, even modeled after the Alps in Switzerland, where Bierstadt was finishing his painting).

Arne Neset covers most of the (great) American painters. John Singleton Copley, Winslow Homer, George Caleb Bingham, and others are all there under his keen scrutiny. Although most paintings are (or at least should be) known to Americanists, Neset is able to find new dimensions and new interpretations to enrich the understanding of their work. As always in art, interpretations are subjective, but even if you do not agree with Neset's analyses, you have to agree with his logic.

There are a few things about the book that I do not like. I wish it would have been published by another publisher than Peter Lang, considered by many as a vanity press, as I think a proper commercial or academic pub-

lisher would have paid more attention (and money) to the illustrations. With modern technology colored reprints of the paintings this should not be a problem, nor too expensive. Now many of the paintings appear with nothing but different shades of gray. On many occasions it is very difficult, if not even impossible, to see the details which professor Neset bases his analyses on. Pity!

And I could have done with shorter quotations of Milton and some other writers Neset refers to.

If you know nothing about American art, this is not the first book to buy. After the introduction, however, this is an excellent second or third book for a better understanding of American art, and the close connection between Europeanism and Americanism.

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Colorful variation: complex issues and concise clarity

Lothe, Jakob, Hans H. Skei, and Per Winther, eds. *Less Is More: Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*. Oslo: Novus Press, 2008. 219 pages: ISBN 978-82-7099-493-9. hardcover \$35

Less Is More is the result of a long-term short fiction project initiated by three scholars, Jakob Lothe, Hans H. Skei and Per Winther, based at the University of Oslo. It sequels *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis* (University of South Carolina Press, 2004), the first collection to emerge from the same project. *Less Is More* is an ingeniously designed and thoughtfully researched collection of short fiction theory, and it continues to develop the field of short fiction theory initiated in *The Art of Brevity*, but does so more in alignment with its objects of study. As the academic equivalent of short fiction, the included scholars have created brief aphoristic texts. This is to my mind refreshing for the genre of the academic article. In thought-provoking texts by the size of roughly ten pages these contributors manage to balance the difficult task of presenting theoretically complex issues and remaining concise without losing in clarity. If the introduction to *The Art of Brevity* provides an excellent overview of the development of the field of short fiction theory and its essays aspire to discuss this field, *Less is More* extends the borders of the field to include other media and new approaches.