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M. Elizabeth Boone

book review of

*New York: Art and Cultural Capital of the Gilded Age* edited by  
Margaret R. Laster and Chelsea Bruner

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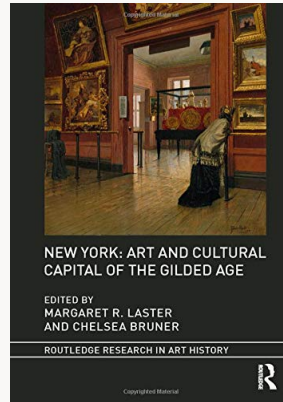
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Margaret R. Laster and Chelsea Bruner, eds.,  
*New York: Art and Cultural Capital of the Gilded Age*.  
New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2019.  
226 pp.; 60 b&w and 10 color illus.; bibliography; index.  
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The title of *New York: Art and Cultural Capital of the Gilded Age* cunningly evokes the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Author of the influential book translated into English and published in 1984 as *Distinction: The Social Production of Taste*, Bourdieu argues that “cultural capital” is not a gift of nature, but rather the product of upbringing and education. [1] As Western educational systems privilege direct experience and those who receive early acculturation in the home, they elevate and entrench the position of those with advantageous social origins. Taste, in short, functions as a marker of class, and aesthetic taste is used to assert one’s status and distinguish oneself from lower social groups.

Bourdieu, who was interested in the dynamics of power in society, further explains that although cultural capital is acquired at an early age, economic capital may be acquired over time. Those without the advantages of aristocratic breeding, inherited wealth, and a cultured upbringing can therefore exchange one for the other, and this is exactly what many of those involved in the creation of the elite culture of New York’s Gilded Age were doing. Bourdieu’s work is explicitly mentioned by three of the authors in this excellent anthology of essays about New York in the 1870s and 80s, and it is somewhat of a surprise that the editors do not bring this out in their otherwise useful introduction. Two of the three references to Bourdieu appear in Part I, “Creating the Art and Cultural Capital.” Kevin D. Murphy uses Bourdieu’s ideas about taste as a marker of class to explain William K. and Alva Vanderbilt’s decision to build their Fifth Avenue mansion in the style of a French Renaissance château, while Alan Wallach uses them to better understand the shift in popularity from grandiose landscapes by artists such as Frederic Church and Thomas Moran to small, intimate paintings such as John F. Kensett’s *Long Neck Point from Contentment Island, Darien, Connecticut* (1870–72, Carnegie Museum of Art). “To put the matter in Bourdieuan terms,” explains Wallach, “an individual can exchange economic capital for cultural capital . . . by patronizing artists and purchasing works of art. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is a form of capital that enhances its owner’s cultural authority and social standing” (60–61). Art, and

especially the refined, aestheticized landscapes that became popular in the 1870s and 80s, appeared to soften the hard edge of business.

John Ott, in what Joshua Brown refers to in his afterword as a more “jaundiced view” (209), evokes Bourdieu as well. With single-minded determination, Ott builds on critical museum theory in Part II of the anthology, “Institutionalizing Art and Culture in the Capital,” to argue that “museums are not neutral institutions but respond to and reflect the interests of their stakeholders” (122). At the 1880 opening of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s new building in Central Park, Ott points out, trustee Joseph Choate explicitly promised his wealthy listeners that their support would transform their economic capital into cultural capital: “Think of it, ye millionaires of many markets, what glory may yet be yours, if you only listen to our advice, to convert pork into porcelain, grain and produce into priceless pottery, the rude ores of commerce into sculpted marble, and railroad shares and mining stocks . . . into the glorified canvas of the world’s masters” (128–29). Ott’s point about art’s use by the wealthy is a valid one, marred unfortunately by occasional mis-statements such as the assertion that there was only one artist on the museum’s Board of Trustees during its first one hundred years of history (125–26). According to the *New York Times*, reporting on the first annual meeting of the Board in 1870, there were more, among them Church, Kensett, and John Q. A. Ward.<sup>[2]</sup> Others joined in the years that followed.

Editors Margaret Laster and Chelsea Bruner astutely placed Ott’s essay immediately after another, antithetical in nature, Esmée Quodbach’s “An Unsung Hero: Henry Gurdon Marquand and His 1889 Gift to The Metropolitan Museum of Art.” Quodbach’s claim, that Marquand was a wholly generous benefactor who only wished to set a philanthropic example for others, places his action in the context of Andrew Carnegie’s 1889 essay “Wealth.” Ignoring the unfair labor practices that led to the creation of his fortune in steel, Carnegie claimed that “the best way of dealing with the phenomenon of wealth inequality was for the rich to give away their fortunes during their lifetimes in such a manner that these would be redistributed responsibly and thoughtfully” (115). Whether the creation of a nation’s great museums is only possible in a climate of worker exploitation is a question that Ott and Quodbach pose when read together. Neither answers it sufficiently without the other, and undoubtedly most readers will find understanding somewhere in the middle.

“Depicting the Capital in Art and Culture,” Part III of the anthology, consists of several case studies, one on sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens by Thayer Tolles and another on animal painter William Holbrook Beard by Ross Barrett. It also includes an essay on the visual culture of Broadway by the late David Jaffee, who passed away just as he was completing this project and to whom the volume is dedicated. Tolles does not explicitly discuss Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, but her findings offer yet another way of expanding upon his ideas. By examining several commissions executed by Saint-Gaudens before the unveiling of his famous *Farragut Monument* in 1881, Tolles shows that the sculptor’s success was “the result of a deliberately orchestrated breakthrough moment for him and for American sculpture” (164). His upper-class patrons believed that culture could inoculate them against the encroaching ills of post-Civil War society, and Saint-Gaudens, despite his Lower East Side immigrant background, became their sculptor of choice. He was systematic in his career development, adopting the manners of his patrons and cultivating those in a position to champion his art. By so doing, he complicated Bourdieu’s model, exchanging cultural capital

acquired by working for the city's most influential art patrons for the economic capital he lacked in his early years as the Irish-born son of a poor French bootmaker.

All of the essays in this book, with the exception of David Scobey's "Looking West from the Empire City: National Landscape and Visual Culture in Gilded Age New York," were written by scholars trained in art history. Scobey is a historian, and it is perhaps his greater distance from the seductions of a Euro-American notion of "fine art" that inspired him to question the volume's exclusive focus on the east coast metropolis. *New York: Art and Cultural Capital of the Gilded Age*, explain Laster and Bruner in their introduction, "takes as its premise the idea that in a period of unprecedented economic expansion and class consolidation after the Civil War, New York City grew to become the country's leading cultural capital, and that the interrelated developments that gave rise to the city's supremacy in this arena constituted the defining moment of the Gilded Age" (1). As a scholar born and educated in New York who has lived substantial periods of time in California and now teaches in the prairies of Canada, I have begun to question the supremacy of New York and its claims to lead cultural production in a country as diverse as the United States; due perhaps to my personal history, I found Scobey's intervention particularly useful.

Scobey helps us to understand how an assumption of New York's supremacy has come about by focusing on John Gast's well-known chromolithograph *American Progress* from 1873. Gast's print is usually explained as an icon of manifest destiny, with native people, buffalo, and other forms of wildlife being pushed westward and out of the picture by miners, pioneers, farmers, and their various forms of transportation: the Conestoga wagon, the stagecoach, and the railway. The personification of American Progress—a blond female figure partially draped in white—holds an elementary school primer and strings telegraph wire across this forcibly vacated land. The key to this image, Scobey points out, is found in the top right corner, where the city of New York is positioned as the source for all this activity, the place from which ideas about the nation originated. "New York's introjection of the West was not only economic but also ideological" (33), he concludes. New York imposed itself on the West, and New York became a synecdoche for the United States as a nation. Or, to put it in Bourdieuan terms, New York exchanged its economic capital for the right to develop and control the cultural definition of the country. The state's moniker, employed by several authors in the volume, is "the Empire State," and the colonization of the continent by elite white Americans on the eastern seaboard has led unfortunately to both an oversimplification of this ideal and its outright rejection. Chicago and San Francisco, to say nothing of Nashville and Topeka (the name derives from the Kansa-Osage indigenous language), defined their own gilded ages, and now that the complexities of New York's gilded age have been so carefully detailed, scholars need to focus their time and attention on the complexities of these other parts of the country.

The editors of *New York: Art and Cultural Capital of the Gilded Age* are clearly playing on the double meaning of the word capital—as both the cultural headquarters of the nation and financial asset—in their titling of the book and its three sections. With sixty black and white and ten color illustrations, the book is attractive if, at \$150 for the hardback, expensive. The eye-catching cover features Frank Waller's *Interior View of the Metropolitan Museum of Art when in Fourteenth Street* (1881, Metropolitan Museum of Art). Those of us who teach should ask our university librarians to purchase the ebook in addition to the hardcover, so that individual

essays can be downloaded, paired, and assigned to students in our undergraduate classes. All are well written and eminently readable by students and scholars alike. A brief afterword by Joshua Brown builds on thoughts in the editors' introduction by linking the nineteenth-century gilded age to the sense that we have recently entered a new one. The period, like our own, is much more complicated than it might at first seem. This book of essays, with their complementary and even contradictory approaches, is a useful step forward in recognizing this complexity. Together, they also open up and make visible the more nuanced spaces in between, blurring the hard edges of the polarized views that have contributed so effectively to our polarized nation.

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## Notes

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: The Social Production of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[2] "Metropolitan Museum of Art—First Annual Meeting of the Board of Trustees," *New York Times*, May 26, 1870, 4.