Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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book review of

America's Impressionism: Echoes of a Revolution edited by Amanda C. Burdan and *Monet and Chicago* edited by Gloria Groom

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 20, no. 1 (Spring 2021)

Citation: Alexis Clark, book review of *America's Impressionism: Echoes of a Revolution* edited by Amanda C. Burdan and *Monet and Chicago* edited by Gloria Groom, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2021), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2021.20.1.7>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

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America's Impressionism: Echoes of a Revolution edited by
Amanda C. Burdan and *Monet and Chicago* edited by
Gloria Groom

Reviewed by Alexis Clark

Amanda C. Burdan, ed.,
America's Impressionism: Echoes of a Revolution.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.
192 pp.; 137 color illus.; bibliography; index.
\$31 (hardcover)
ISBN: 978-0300247701

Gloria Groom, ed.,
Monet and Chicago.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.
144 pp.; 82 color illus.; exhibition checklist; timeline.
\$24 (hardcover)
ISBN: 978-0300250831

As universities' and publishing presses' budgets have been slashed—with more reductions likely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic—mounting pressure has been placed on each printed word to be brilliant, or at least result in brilliant sales. Publishing on Impressionism, however, may escape these cuts due to the movement's continued widespread appeal. Impressionism still sells.^[1] In the marketplace of ideas, the scholarly and the saleable are not necessarily opposed, though they are often placed on opposite ends of the publishing spectrum: academic versus trade publications. Books intended for non-specialist and specialist publics have thus produced somewhat disparate stories of Impressionism, furthering already extant ruptures between these readerships. While more specialized books often nuance old(er) narratives of art or tell entirely new stories, mass-market books tend to reintroduce readers to codified accounts. Much like the differences in teaching undergraduate and graduate students in art history, each type of publication has its reasons and merits. Still, there are moments when a novel interpretation may be needed to reach

both readerships. The covers of both books reviewed here are emblazoned with a detail of a painting of water lilies—Gloria Groom's reproduces Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* (1906), and Amanda C. Burdan's John Leslie Breck's *Grey Day on the Charles* (1894)—perhaps because this common index of Impressionism appeals to academic and non-academic readers alike. Both books also include essays by academic and best-selling authors. Yet each ultimately addresses distinct audiences—Groom's seems suited more to non-specialists and collectors; Burdan's more to specialists and academics—even as they tell overlapping tales of transatlantic ties between the United States and Impressionism.

With the title *America's Impressionism: Echoes of a Revolution*, Burdan has immediately drawn attention to the underlying demands placed on any complete history of this art: it must account for the adoption of Impressionist techniques and subjects by US artists working both abroad and at home, and the exposure of European audiences to American Impressionism. The title further signals that the book is not only about American or US Impressionism, but about the collecting of Impressionism (once more from abroad and at home) in the United States as well. As such, *America's Impressionism* narrates the story of an aesthetic, practice, and discourse that, after originating on distant shores, washed up on the opposite side of the Atlantic, where it would be naturalized. Surveying how Impressionism "proceeded to colonize the country," Burdan and her co-essayists aim to broaden the record of Impressionism, stretching it to include more artists, more of the United States (not only its East Coast centers in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York), more discussion of Impressionism as a "sustainable aesthetic practice" into the twentieth century, and more awareness of the contradictions riddling this art and the discourse on it (26). Yet, as the book's subtitle indicates, the United States' claims on Impressionism are complicated. Burdan casts American Impressionists as belated revolutionaries who painted sentimental, "old-fashioned," and nostalgia-laden scenes that "comfort[ed] its audience" (27, 29). In comparison to the political, social, and aesthetic challenges presented by much modern art to the ostensibly moribund culture of the bourgeoisie, sentimentality and nostalgia hardly seem "revolutionary." Whether or not one agrees that "soothing aspects" and "deeply sentimental roots" constitute a revolutionary aesthetic or ethos, the more pressing question seems: why do artists and art still need to be revolutionary to warrant inclusion in the story of modern art? Smartly, Burdan admits this trouble with American Impressionism, soliciting her readers to

Consider the contradiction of an artistic style born of the French Academy's *refusés*, as French Impressionism was, being taught in art schools. Think of a style made up of those who deliberately worked outside of established traditional systems in making, displaying, and selling their work being reconfigured in the United States into an orthodox system. Imagine a style originating in the rejection of the master's hand, the studio system, and academic pedagogy being installed in the United States by instating a new academic order in art colonies across the country. As American artists did each of these things, it seems perhaps they overlooked a key revolutionary point of the style art its birth (26).

Though Burdan occasionally succumbs to the lure of making American Impressionists into artists agitating for the "revolutionary reconceptualization of visual reality's representation," the contributing essayists readily acknowledge complications consonant with the academicization and institutionalization of this revolutionary aesthetic (26).

Providing the most important theoretical framing for the catalogue's overarching discussions of "the sentimentality with which artists in this country infused their canvases," Emily C. Burns explores how "American artists adopted Impressionism belatedly," noting that Impressionism "did not circulate fluidly in the United States until the 1890s" (51). Though contributor Ross King conversely attributes this circulation to the US newspaper press and dates it to the 1880s, by the 1890s, the critics, both in France and in the United States, surveyed by Burns were distressed at what they witnessed when it came to US art and culture. Perturbed by a perceived cultural lethargy in the United States, these reviewers exasperatedly saw this delay as typical when "viewed against the backdrop of European sophistication" (51). This perception on the part of critics, especially in the US, merits careful consideration as it contains some contradictions. Any claim by these critics that US artists were slow to adopt Impressionism meant that they did not experience Impressionism as a contemporary painterly style in the 1890s—which it was. Many of the French Impressionists—Monet, Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir—painted into the twentieth century, making them the contemporaries of the artists from the United States who adopted and adapted Impressionism in the 1890s and 1900s. As Sharp reminds his readers, "Post-Impressionism did not mean that Impressionism was over, only that something else had emerged as well" (115). Castigating US artists as slow to embrace Impressionism furthermore meant that these critics expected artists in the United States to immediately seize on this aesthetic almost as soon as it originated in France—an almost impossible demand. (Simultaneously, these critics seem to have sidelined Mary Cassatt and her early embrace of Impressionism.) Lastly, casting Impressionism as signaling "European sophistication," meant that these critics did not associate Impressionism with the complaints commonly lodged by their French counterparts that at times collapsed lack of *fini* with a lack of refinement. But, as Burns writes, the rough, unfinished, and textured surfaces of American Impressionist paintings would be filtered through the fabled ruggedness of the United States and its terrain (59). US critics did, then, perceive Impressionism as a rough-and-ready aesthetic, albeit without reducing this roughness to unsophistication. What remains somewhat unexplained is why artists, presumably having read reviews spurning them as falling behind France, did not rush to produce scenes filled with signs of modernity but instead continued to embrace sentimentality.

Turning to the 1891 *Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures by American Artists* at Paul Durand-Ruel's Paris gallery, Burns explores how US reviewers stationed in Paris "understood and debated the concepts raised by Impressionism" and "how critics internationally made presumptions of American cultural belatedness" (52). The 1891 exhibition amounted to a broad survey of art in the United States. More than four thousand attendees of various nationalities descended on Durand-Ruel's to peruse paintings by both the better-known American Impressionists (William Merritt Chase, Childe Hassam, Theodore Robinson, John Henry Twachtman, and J. Alden Weir) and the lesser-known American Impressionists (James Carroll Beckwith, Joseph Foxcroft Cole, Philip Leslie Hale, Edmund Charles Tarbell, and Eugène Vail). Upset by the slickly academic paintings produced by artists who had studied in Paris and Munich, exhibition reviewers embraced these artists' diverse approaches, thus marking diversity as a distinctly US contribution to an increasingly cosmopolitan Impressionism.

By the 1890s, American Impressionists who had been stationed in France set sail for the United States, where they would establish and teach at artist colonies throughout the country. Though *America's Impressionism* has not provided a coast-to-coast sweep of these colonies that would thoroughly demonstrate Burns' apt point about the diversity of American Impressionism, Burdan's contributors deftly shift attention from the East Coast to today's most populous states: California and Texas. Like Burns' concentration on the discourse around American Impressionism in the context of an exhibition, William Keyse Rudolph has studied Impressionism in Texas through a nexus of exhibitions (the 1896 Texas Coast Fair in Dickinson, Texas, which boasted 250 works of art and the 1936 State Fair of Texas, which was a World's Fair "rebranded as the state's centennial") and institutions (the Dallas Museum of Art, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston). Some artists, such as the Spaniard José Arpa y Perea, who had recently migrated to the state, helped spread Impressionism by painting popular local landscapes studded with cacti and wildflowers. Others, like Julien Onderdonk, transmitted lessons learned from American Impressionists formerly resident in Paris and recently returned to the United States. After attending Chase's Shinnecock Summer School in 1901, Onderdonk, like Arpa, proceeded to produce what twentieth-century writers would deem "mediocre" (i.e., not revolutionary) paintings with fields of the Texas state flower, the bluebonnet (77).

Similarly, California Impressionists, as discussed in an essay by Scott A. Shields, painted local nature—"the Sierra Nevada, rolling hills, expressive trees, the coast, and views of the sea"—as well as the state flower, the orange poppy, *en plein air* (83). Chase also mediated the spread of Impressionism to California. In 1914, in Monterey, Chase led a class in which 150 students worked in the studios of a local art club and on the local beaches. Under his instruction, aspiring California Impressionists learned to paint rapidly outdoors. Pushing into the early twentieth century, with a discussion of the Panama Pacific International Exposition in 1915, Shields explains how Impressionist paintings attained popularity not only because they recorded the "California climate and terrain," but also because of the "prevailing artistic conservatism" (85). Childe Hassam contributed to the Exposition's mural project, integrating local vistas into his cycle of paintings. As part of the catalogue's notable efforts to highlight contributions of American women Impressionists, Scott surveys how Evelyn McCormick depicted Monterey's historic adobes and missions at a moment when "Spanish heritage was both popular and promotable"—an exciting theme in the study of American Impressionism with potential for further exploration (87).

Towards the end of his essay, Scott connects California to Chicago, where Alson Skinner Clark, William Wendt, Gardner Symons, and Edgar Payne trained or lived (97). While in Chicago, these artists likely encountered French and American Impressionism at the 1890 Inter-state Industrial Exposition and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, and possibly in private collections. Writing about the introduction of Monet's paintings into collections in the United States and the national imaginary of Impressionism, Burdan and Ross King trace the attraction of "Givernites," including John Singer Sargent, Willard Metcalf, Lilla Cabot Perry, Theodore Robinson, and Guy Rose, to the French Impressionist's country residence. Like Chase, these artist-expatriates, protagonists in most any accounting of American Impressionism, also transmitted and taught Impressionism to ever more artists. Still, Monet, who had arrived in Giverny in 1883, kept his distance from the blossoming "international colony of artists," offering only "grudging advice to the young Americans" (38). Despite

usefully highlighting the artists who acted as ambassadors for Monet-ian Impressionism, King's essay would have benefitted from further editing. For example, King writes that the Givernites arrived in the village in 1885; his co-essayist Burns, however, traces their arrival to 1887 (54). More glaringly, when King writes that Monet's art reached the United States through the printed page in the 1880s and 1890s, he overlooks the earliest exposure to this art. In 1876, novelist Henry James published a review on Impressionism.^[2] Moreover, in presuming the US public only read domestic publications, King has not accounted for British sources nor for non-English language sources reporting on French Impressionism. "As early as 1889," King reports, "a French critic was anxiously speculating that the 'rapacity of the Yankees' might mean that Monet's best work would go to the United States" (38–39). Surprisingly, King does not discuss how this quotation almost paraphrases Monet's own stated anxieties to his dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, as noted by Gloria Groom in *Monet and Chicago* (19). As King rightly notes, Durand-Ruel initiated the export of Monet's paintings with the 1883 installation of Foreign Exhibition Association; three years later, he sent forty paintings by Monet for *The Special Exhibition of Works of Oil and Pastel by the Impressionists of Paris*, an exhibition that King claims delighted reviewers (42). (It will be remembered that Burns has traced how US reviewers "regularly debated its [Impressionism's] meaning and validity," which perhaps should lead King to summarize art-critical sentiment with more nuance (51).) King's celebration of US artistic openness to Impressionism over and against France's supposed recalcitrance lends the catalogue its own sort of sentimentality.

National pride has animated the history of Impressionism, almost since the first histories of this art were published.^[3] In the slim catalogue *Monet and Chicago*, which emphasizes image over word, Gloria Groom has shifted this pride from the national to the institutional by drawing attention to the role of the Art Institute of Chicago in cultivating public appreciation for Impressionism as well as scholarly research about it. As attested by Burdan's contributors, Chicago played a key part educating and encouraging American Impressionist artists across the country into the twentieth century. Rudolph, for instance, reveals that the Art Institute of Chicago director Robert B. Harshe selected the checklist for the 1936 Centennial Art Exposition that featured many living and dead American Impressionists. *Monet and Chicago* offers readers its own abbreviated history of the AIC's collection of French Impressionist works, while recognizing those who have and will soon bequeath their Impressionist collections to the museum. The AIC now holds thirty-three paintings and thirteen works on paper by Monet, more than any other institution in the United States (9). As Groom explains,

From its inception, the Art Institute of Chicago boldly embraced this new movement. In 1895 the museum hosted the first-ever solo exhibition of Claude Monet's works outside a gallery, and it was the first American museum to purchase one of his paintings. Forward-thinking patrons Bertha and Potter Palmer and Martin A. and Carrie Ryerson were drawn to this avant-garde style, and their bequests to the Art Institute in the 1920s and 1930s, together with other important gifts, laid the foundation for Chicago's word-renowned collection of Impressionist art (9).

Institutional pride and appreciation for donors occasionally clouds some of the catalogue's history as it pertains to the collectors Honoré and Berthe Potter Palmer and Martin A. and Carrie Ryerson. In their respective essays, *New Yorker* contributor Adam Gopnik and Groom celebrate the Palmers and Ryersons who "bought to share" in the spirit of public

philanthropy (16). These collectors loaned their paintings by Monet to temporary exhibitions in Boston, New York, and, of course, Chicago; nonetheless, the general public could not regularly access these works until the 1920s and 1930s. By that point, many museums in Europe and the United States had examples of Impressionism. More, by the time the Palmers and Ryersons started to collect French Impressionism in 1891, this style was not necessarily “avant-garde” in the United States, as discussed in Burdan’s catalogue. Though Gopnik and Groom, like King, insist that the Ryersons and the Palmers made these purchases when “avant-garde French painting [was] still unwelcome in France,” this notion of French institutional history and collecting practices requires some revision (16). By the 1890s, and certainly by the 1900s, French institutions had softened their former recalcitrance to this art, adding examples of Impressionism to their walls through bequests and donations and championing this art in their catalogues as part of their national *patrimoine*. The Ryersons and Palmers thus purchased the bulk of their collections when Impressionism was starting to be inscribed in France’s and Europe’s museums, making their collecting practices in keeping with widespread trends.^[4]

Exquisitely illustrated, these catalogues capture the connections between Impressionism and the United States. At a moment when many art museums in the United States remain shuttered due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these books effectively act as *musées imaginaires*—a bittersweet substitute for seeing these artworks and attendant stories narrated on actual museum walls. Though the most discerning readers will detect some editorial lapses, both books conterminously give an account of Impressionism’s introduction and dissemination across the United States certain to delight their intended audiences. What remains needed are ways to narrate the story of Impressionism and the United States for non-specialist audiences without applying overly laudatory assessments, denigrating or overlooking the complexities of other nations’ attitudes towards this art, and appealing cloyingly to national sentiment. As Sharp has declared, “America’s Impressionism never entirely exited the twentieth-century stage” (117). Books and related exhibitions such as these ensure that Impressionism, French and American, will continue to occupy a central place on the now twenty-first century stage.

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Notes

[1] For a discussion of the role of the publishing industry in the popularization and internationalization of Impressionism, see Rachel E. Perry, “Immutable Mobiles: UNESCO’s Archives of Colour Reproductions,” *The Art Bulletin* 99, no. 2 (June 2017): 166–85.

[2] Henry James, “Parisian Festivity,” *New York Tribune*, May 13, 1876, 2, cited in *Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception*, ed. Kate Flint (London: Routledge, 1984), 37–38.

[3] For an example of a recent scholarship on the history of these histories of Impressionism, see Katia Papandreopoulou, *Camille Maclair (1872–1945), Critic and Art Historian “A Lesson in*

Pictorial Nationalism", diss. supervised by Eric Darragon, at the Université de Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne, defended on November 16, 2013.

[4] For debates around the Caillebotte Bequest which saw dozens of paintings by the French Impressionists enter the Musée du Luxembourg, see the following sources: Marie Berhaut, *Caillebotte: Sa vie et son œuvre*, Fondation Wildenstein (Paris: Bibliothèque des Arts, 1978); Marie Berhaut, "Le Legs Caillebotte: Verités et contreverités," *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire de l'art français* (1983), 209–23; and Pierre Vaisse, "Le Legs Caillebotte: Annexe: Documents," *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire de l'art française* (1983), 201–8. These are but some of the sources that have discussed the more complicated history of Impressionism and French museums and institutions.