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book review of

The Representation of the Struggling Artist in America, 1800–1865
by Erika Schneider

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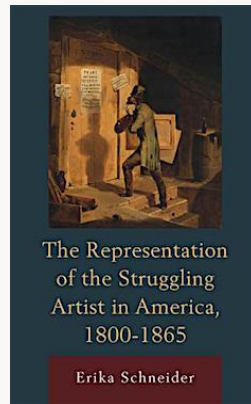
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Erika Schneider,
The Representation of the Struggling Artist in America, 1800–1865.
Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015.
196 pp.; 30 b&w illus.; bibliography; index.
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In *The Representation of the Struggling Artist in America, 1800–1865*, Erika Schneider explores the use of the “starving artist” as a trope, which was employed with varying degrees of veracity in the art and writings of Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century. Schneider traces depictions of the struggling artist through the lenses of early American democracy and the conflict between artistic integrity and financial stability, identifying what she considers to be truly American about this theme.

As Schneider demonstrates, the subject of the struggling artist is manifest in several ways in American art and literature in the early nineteenth century. Genre scenes, often private sketches, such as John Lewis Krimmel’s *An Artist and His Family Confronted by a Bill Collector* (ca. 1813), depict an artist in tattered clothing faced with the realities of his poverty. Another type is a still-life of an artist’s possessions, such as Charles Bird King’s *Poor Artist’s Cupboard* (ca. 1815). This work displays the fictional painter C. Palette’s belongings, which include a selection of writings on poverty juxtaposed with a paltry meal of bread and water. A third category deals directly with American artists’ middle class patrons. William Sidney Mount’s *The Painter’s Triumph: Artist Showing His Work* (1838) does so fairly favorably, suggesting a positive if uneasy relationship between artist and farmer-patron. Other works mock this new type of patron to varying degrees. David Claypoole Johnston’s print, *Comparison in the Sitter: Ideality in the Artist* (1837), utilizes a caricature style for the scene of an artist attempting an idealized portrait of an unattractive, unsophisticated sitter, “Mrs. Blowhard.”

It should be addressed from the outset that the majority of the artists discussed in the book were not impoverished. Many actually came from affluent backgrounds; as Schneider writes, “how well the trope worked with parents holding the purse strings” (33). This book explores the

adopted persona of the starving artist more than artists' real physical hardships. The "starvation" experienced was largely intellectual: suffering from the dearth of cultured patrons that would allow artists to pursue their craft without sacrificing their ideals. Schneider could have more explicitly demarcated artists who experienced economic adversity and those whose struggles were self-imposed; what are the implications of those who chose to adopt "poverty" as a personal challenge or mode of representation and how should this play a part in an interpretation of their work? This concept of artists' playing at poverty draws on stereotypes of the necessity of struggle to spark creativity as well as the magnanimity of sacrifice to uphold artistic values.

The first chapter, "Political Beginnings," introduces the problem of patronage in early nineteenth-century America. A continuing source of resentment for American artists was the lack of support for genres other than portraiture. Many artists left the United States for Europe, not only for training, but also in hopes of finding more willing supporters than in their native country. The new democratic nation did not have a system of royal patronage or a longstanding tradition of upper class support for the arts. Washington Allston and his student, Samuel F. B. Morse, spent several years in England where they felt their talents were better appreciated. Morse kept his discouragement and censure of the treatment of artists in America to letter writing, rather than memorializing it in painting. After forsaking history painting for portraits, Morse eventually gave up painting for a successful career in scientific invention. Schneider quotes his letter to James Fenimore Cooper, "Painting has been a smiling mistress to many, but she has been a cruel jilt to me. I did not abandon her, she abandoned me" (35).

Washington Allston, whose painting *The Poor Author and the Rich Bookseller* (1811) is this book's first illustration, felt that leaving patronage up to "the people" stifled artistic progress in America (23). Allston was a Federalist in a country that was giving way to Jeffersonian Republicanism. In *The Poor Author*, his subject dovetailed with similar themes of creative struggle in contemporary literature. Schneider integrates discussion of the work of authors such as Washington Irving, whose story "The Poor-Devil Author" and other works addressed the plight of the American writer. Publishers sold reprinted British books for a much higher profit margin than they could expect from taking a chance on an unknown American author. Just as artists were compelled to paint portraits to maintain an income, Irving's author "Dribble" is told he must write fantastical, bloody tales to satisfy the public, although he still must be well known in order to find a publisher.

The stated theme of the second chapter, "Man Enough," is an exploration of the "emasculating qualities" of artists' failure to financially support a family, using King and Krimmel's works as evidence (4). Schneider interprets these artists' adaptations of the struggling artist narrative as highlighting the conflict between the artistic profession and traditional family life. Krimmel's sketch *An Artist and His Family*, mentioned above, depicts two nattily-dressed bill collectors pointing in their ledger to the artist's debt, which the artist's wife and children witness worriedly. The artist, still seated at his easel in a corner of the room, assumes a position of resignation. Schneider notes that Krimmel himself never married and writes that this sketch "supported his decision" by demonstrating the dangers of the path of domesticity for an artist (50). In reality, Krimmel was not living in poverty, but he did struggle for commissions and never enjoyed the consistent success that patronage would have brought. Like Krimmel, other artists chose to keep their criticisms to sketches or other small scale or private works.

Charles Bird King inherited wealth and did not experience actual financial difficulty as a result of his career. Instead, he chose to adopt hardship by living well below his means in his early career in London. King and fellow artist Thomas Sully had an “artists’ pact” that, while probably exaggerated in the surviving correspondence, obligated them to share living quarters and subsist on meager meals (51). For some time, King also purportedly chose to sleep on the wooden floor rather than in a bed (while he was living in Buckingham Palace, no less).

In addition to *Poor Artist’s Cupboard*, discussed above, King’s fictional starving artist C. Palette makes an appearance fifteen years later in *Vanity of the Artist’s Dream* (1830). C. Palette’s situation has worsened, due in some part to the artist’s frivolous purchases and pursuits listed on a sheriff’s notice tacked to the *trompe l’oeil* frame. Among the items in this still life is a note describing a doctor’s visit in which the doctor’s wife inquired why C. Palette had not married, to which the artist writes “ha ha ha;” other personal notes read “[No] lady would be fool enough to have” and “I think I’ll sigh and live single” (64). King’s *The Itinerant Artist* (1830) also draws on this conflict between the artistic profession and family life. In this work, an artist paints a wife and children while the husband, gun slung over his shoulder, departs home to hunt. The artist remains with the women and children in the traditionally feminine sphere of the home while the patriarch proves his capacity to provide.

Some of the other connections to “emasculatation” in this chapter feel tenuous. For example, the (decapitated) bust of Apollo Belvedere included among C. Palette’s possessions, or the poor personal appearance and living conditions of the author depicted in David Claypoole Johnston’s lithograph *Agreeable Surprise* (1833) representing the lack of a wife “to perform the traditional roles of cooking and sewing” (54). Nonetheless, Schneider demonstrates artists’ preoccupation with their perceived inability to support a family.

The third chapter, “Compromise,” focuses on the work of William Sidney Mount. His paintings offer an optimistic view of American patronage, while his sketches and writings reveal that he felt creatively stifled. Schneider’s argument uses Mount’s situation as a reflection of the “attempted democratization” of the artist-patron relationship, or the fragile compromise reached that leveled subject and style to suit both parties (75). Through her examination of the record of Mount’s private opinions, Schneider enhances the interpretation of Mount’s genre paintings to accommodate his doubt.

Underlying this chapter’s arguments is the effect of English travel writer Frances Trollope’s book *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, published in 1832. Trollope’s treatment of the arts in America was slightly more generous than her opinion of American behavior, but she still found the quality of American art below European standards. Trollope’s opinions reflected those of many European critics, and they inflamed an American sensitivity toward inferiority. Illustrated in this chapter is one of David Claypoole Johnston’s lithographic parodies of Trollope’s visit, and Schneider writes that in the wake of Trollope’s publication, “American critics rallied around the artists that they had already produced” (79). It was becoming clear that creating a distinct and original artistic culture, rather than mimicking European models, was a necessity in the young country. However, it was also clear that “mediocrity” must be avoided in the democratization of the arts; Schneider quotes James Fenimore Cooper in *The*

American Democrat (1838), “Thus do we find in literature, the arts, architecture and in all acquired knowledge, a tendency in America to gravitate towards the common center . . .” (84).

In this context Mount’s *The Painter’s Triumph* seems an illustration of democratic patronage. The artist, well-dressed and distinguished in appearance, reveals his work to his patron, a neat if somewhat caricatured farmer. The artist’s attire and his sketch of the Apollo Belvedere on the wall mark him as cultured (though Apollo’s head is turned away from the scene in the studio, as if in disapproval), but the artist’s work appeals to the “everyman” signified by the farmer. However, the farmer’s missing teeth and squatting stance lower his status relative to the artist. Mount’s writings indicate his uneasiness with working to appeal to this new American patron, as he struggled with the difficulty of his art being “dictated by others;” “[W]ork from impulse, and carry out your plans if possible,” he instructed himself in his notebooks (90).

This chapter also continues a discussion of institutional support for American artists. One with particular relevance for Mount was the American Art-Union, a subscription service that distributed prints of paintings to American households. The featured artists were paid for the use of the reproduction of their work. The AAU began by supporting established artists, but moved toward featuring unknown artists. Schneider writes that Mount took issue with this change in policy, and he planned a painting with the subject of “A young artist leaving the Art-Union with a rejected picture” (92). Mount himself had a painting rejected from the AAU, although he sold four others through the organization. Schneider doesn’t fully discuss the irony of the AAU’s attempt to support artists who would be struggling to gain a foothold, and Mount’s belief that this policy “contributed to the number of starving artists” (93). Mount himself did not struggle financially, due in part to family wealth. His experience of struggle was a creative one.

Chapter Four, “Respite Abroad,” considers American artists and writers who criticized the lack of support for the arts in their home country while living and working in Europe. Schneider details the essays and letters of Margaret Fuller, an editor and arts critic working from Italy who often wrote on the state of the arts in America. Fuller lamented the slow development of American literature and its lukewarm or conditional support from publishers and from the public. She advocated public, outdoor venues for art, which would help Americans understand the value of art and give artists an incentive to work. Additionally, she laid blame on American collectors who did not understand an artist’s living expenses, particularly when studying and working abroad, and who therefore drove art prices down by “bargain hunting” (111). Schneider also briefly touches on speeches and an essay by Herman Melville, in which he calls the American public to appreciate the country’s fine arts: “[L]et America first praise mediocrity even, in her own children, before . . . the best excellence in the children of any other land” (112).

The second half of the chapter discusses American sculptors, who perhaps faced even greater challenges for patronage, as the upfront cost of the materials for a work was much higher than that of a painting. As did painters, some sculptors relied on portrait commissions to earn the money to continue working. Schneider quotes Horatio Greenough, who wrote in a letter, “Though they feed my body . . . [portraits] starve my soul by keeping me constantly busy on trifles” (120). Greenough’s *The Discouraged Artist* (1848) is a unique sculpted work on the

struggling artist theme. The bas-relief, now lost, was actually created in gratitude to patrons who loaned Greenough money to travel to Europe. It depicted a sculptor, his work in progress, and a lamp being lit by a heavenly hand, embodying the assistance Greenough received that allowed him to keep working. The work was shown at the Boston Athenaeum in an 1850 exhibition; Schneider writes that it “represented a symbolic gift to all those in Boston who supported art” (117). She links this work to Mount’s *The Painter’s Triumph*, both works representing the ways in which artists adapted to the system of patronage in America.

“Reading Between the Lines,” the fifth and final chapter, takes stock of the development of the arts and patronage at mid-century and examines the continued use of the struggling artist theme despite progress. Artists had more venues at which to exhibit, both public and private, and the public and patrons had more opportunities to view artists’ work. Schneider writes that the subject of the struggling artist persisted in art and writing at this time, both because some artists, of course, had not achieved financial success, but also because the trope served as a marketing tool. Schneider devotes much of the chapter to a poem by artist John P. Frankenstein, “American Art: Its Awful Altitude, A Satire,” a lengthy invective against the lack of support for the arts in America. In making his grievances public rather than confining them to private letters or sketches, Frankenstein hoped to garner support for his situation. David Gilmour Blythe’s painting *Art versus Law* (1859–60) is one of the final works related to the struggling artist theme discussed in this book, and is particularly noteworthy because, as Schneider writes, Blythe did not have family wealth on which to rely. The painting shows an artist arriving at his studio, painting supplies in hand, only to discover that he has been evicted for failing to pay rent. The scene, though made somewhat lighthearted through style and the use of text, apparently illustrates a real event in Blythe’s life.

The book concludes with a brief discussion of the fading of the struggling artist type following the Civil War. Schneider writes that the preference for American genre scenes faded, and artists (such as William Merritt Chase and Thomas Hovenden) began to construct a persona that was more worldly and cultured. A fuller discussion of how this shift was tied to the experience of the Civil War would be beneficial; as the book’s dates end with the conclusion of the Civil War, greater attention could have been paid to how the struggling artist narrative no longer coincided with American interests following the war.

Schneider’s publication utilizes artist’s self-representation to explore attitudes about art and patronage in a young country. The evolution of a system of patronage in a democracy and its effect on quality and subject matter, the extent of the influence of European models for both art and the support of art, and the real and fictionalized “American struggle” depicted in the work of artists and writers are key themes underlying this book. The use of both a chronological and thematic organization felt somewhat disjointed, especially with each chapter containing many separate, short narratives. Interweaving historical events more fully into this story may have helped address this and maintain a consistent context for why the struggling artist type was particularly apt for American artists at this time.

Schneider had much material in both art and literature to analyze, underscoring the importance of this theme in the American experience during the first half of the nineteenth century. As she concludes, “In many ways, the struggling artist embodied every man; failure was another part of the American dream” (165). Given this association—the struggling artist as

emblematic of the struggle of a new nation—examples of how the treatment of this theme differed in European art could have bolstered Schneider’s arguments. The French bohemian / Romantic model is mentioned briefly, and Schneider writes that American artists could not “choose to ‘suffer’” in the same way for fear of isolating already hesitant patrons (161). American artists seem to have created a more consciously sympathetic (rather than solitary or threatening) self-representation. Illustrating works of the two traditions would help to underscore this point and more closely define the American depiction of the struggling artist.

Overall, Schneider has identified an important type in early American art: the artist struggling for recognition in a new country still deciding its own cultural values. The book leaves the door open for future scholarship on this subject, particularly the consideration of cross-Atlantic comparisons and an investigation of representations of artists whose struggles were more authentically monetary as well as creative.

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