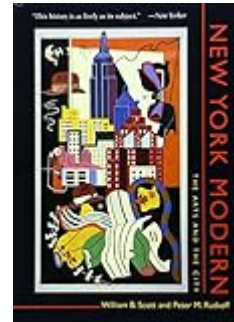


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William Scott, Peter Rutkoff. *New York Modern: The Arts and The City.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. 448 pages. \$21.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-6793-4.



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Making New York Modern

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In their exceptionally well-researched study, *New York Modern: The Arts and The City*, William Scott and Peter Rutkoff explore the centrality of New York City in the development of a vibrant, modern American culture. For Scott and Rutkoff, "New York Modern" is a concrete thing. They define it as "rooted in the urban realism of Walt Whitman, Thomas Eakins and Edith Wharton." "New York Modern," they write, "is the confluence of a long-standing tradition of urban realism, a more recently arrived European modernism, and the ever present, ever changing American vernacular" (p. xvii). While they argue that the "complexity of New York City made it impossible for one school, patron, institution to dominate," by the late 1950s, "New York Modern had matured into an artistic culture that celebrated diversity and controversy." It was "neither a style nor a school; rather it was an artistic dialogue—part engagement, part resistance, part alienation, part celebration—that invited artists from a variety of backgrounds and with divergent concerns to voice their own understandings of modern life" (p. xvii). While their encyclopedic survey of New York

Modern at times seems overly determined and often a bit tenuous—everyone who passed through New York appears to be included in their study—theirs is a rich and satisfying chronicle of the seemingly impossible, a thorough account of New York cultural life between 1876 and 1976. I can imagine using the text in a number of academic courses in Art History, American Studies, American History, and Urban History. It should also be interesting reading to anyone interested in the cultural history of not only New York City but of the United States in general.

Anyone who has chosen New York City as a subject of study understands the centrality of contradiction and debate—the confluence of resistance, alienation, and celebration—to an understanding of the city's historical and cultural importance in the creation of a democratic aesthetic. This is the strength of the book. Smith and Rutkoff capture the vitality of the city as well as the individuals and institutions that made possible a modern, democratic American culture by focusing on the multiple roles that New York City played in the lives of the artists and institutions they investigate. Their task is monumen-

tal. In the introduction they write that

“*New York Modern* is the history of the articulation of a modern artistic culture that took place in twentieth-century New York. We look in detail at both the larger community to which New York artists belonged as well as the particular artistic medium and context in which they worked. Equally important is the dynamic relation between the never entirely separate public and artistic works as each affected each other. New York Modern was never a fixed, well-defined artistic style nor an aesthetic canon but was rather a seventy-five year artistic and political dialogue over the nature of modern art and its relation to modern life” (p. xix).

Indeed, from the “the pioneer moderns”—Charles Ives, Scott Joplin, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis—who “created new forms of music and dance that challenged conventional conceptions of art, race and gender [and] infused their art with the vitality of American popular and commercial entertainment, disregarding the beaux arts distinction between fine art and popular art” (p. 41), to the “insurgent moderns”—Diane Arbus, Red Grooms, and Mimi Gross Grooms—who “challenged the upper-class appropriation of the arts” (p. 352), Scott and Rutkoff trace how New York City’s artists “drew on images that they discovered in America to give their art an explicitly American cast, accessible to a broad national audience” (p. xvii).

Their study is an exhaustive, sometimes vertiginous, cataloguing of music, dance, theater, and the visual arts. They weave dominant players and lesser-known individuals into a rich narrative—paying particular attention to the work of women and people of color in creating New York Modern. In their two chapters on Harlem, they nicely contextualize the work of the “renaissance” years within work being done in the rest of the city. In their detailed treatment of jazz, they demonstrate how “Duke Ellington and other New York jazz musicians brought Harlem and African America into American popular music, forcing white Americans to reassess their racial categories” (p. 161). Moreover, Scott and Rutkoff also chronicle the histories of the larger communities in which many of these artists lived and socialized as well as the institutions that they created and that nourished them: Alfred Steiglitz’s 291 and An American Place, the Apollo Theater, the Whitney Studio, the Downtown Gallery, the Cedar Tavern, Judson Church, the Group Theater, Minton’s, Monroe’s, Caf Society, and others. The list goes on and on.

One of their goals is to challenge artistic hierarchies

to demonstrate how New York Modern blurred the line between high and low culture. Regarding the radicalism of the 1930s, they write, “Heterodox to the core, New York Modern spoke in a variety of New York dialects in the Red Decade—Marx and the Marx Brothers, Stein and Steinway, W.E.B. DuBois and Dubose Heywood, Blitzstein and blitzkrieg. In the 1930s no single voice could shout down the cacophony of New York Modern” (p. 194). In recent years, there has been a wealth of excellent scholarship on the multiple roles popular culture played during the 1930s. One wishes Scott and Rutkoff had integrated some of this work into their analysis in a bit more detail and further problematized the tensions between Marx and the Marx Brothers, for instance.^[1] Nevertheless, their analysis is surprisingly deep for a study of this magnitude. In a few cases, however, they merely restate older arguments. For example, their manichean comparison of the histories of the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art presents the Whitney as an organic embodiment of all that is good in New York Modern and the MoMA as a unilateral agent of cultural hegemony. MoMA is the bete noir of the study. “By the end of World War II,” they write, “MoMA had reduced the rich and diffuse range of modern work to a narrow, almost sectarian, aesthetic” (p. 169). They do not explore the ways in which the MoMA’s early folk art shows and departments of photography, film, and industrial design challenged long-standing definitions of what constitutes fine arts, or how shows such as the 1934 “America Can’t Have Housing” exhibit overtly mixed art and politics to challenge visitors to the museum, as well as local and national officials to action. Instead, they focus on how the museum institutionalized modernism “as a vision of modern art defined in abstract, apolitical, and European terms” (p. 180).

Similarly, while they do an excellent job of showing how “following World War I painters such as Stuart Davis, Charles Demuth, Edward Hooper, Charles Sheeler and John Marin created a complex image of modern life, powerful and dynamic but also impersonal and ominous” (p. 111), they limit this treatment almost exclusively to New York City. All of these artists also found inspiration outside of New York City, in the industrial landscapes of Pennsylvania steel country and in the beaches and forests of Maine. While the importance of the pastoral strain in American modernism may be outside of the scope of their project, in a study focused on the emergence of a national cultural identity, some mention of this seems necessary. Yet, they do an excellent job of demonstrating how New York Modern left the perimeters of New York City and

spread from the streets of Greenwich Village to the Black Mountains of North Carolina, and how the jazz clubs of Harlem and Midtown borrowed from and begat those in Paris, New Orleans, and Kansas City.

Scott and Rutkoff do not end their study with the institutionalization of modernism in New York during the 1950s at places like MoMA and Lincoln Center. Instead, by including the work of Diane Arbus and Red and Mimi Gross Grooms, they push beyond this institutionalization and explore how a new generation of artists created a new realism, focusing on the details and people of New York who defiantly insisted that the proper subject of modern art remained modern life. The arts of New York belonged to the city not just its upper class. Following the lead of political radicals, feminists, and African American, Hispanic and homosexual activists, New York artists resisted the determination of MoMA and its patrons to

gentrify the neighborhood and to essentialize modern art. Instead, the city's avant-garde renewed New York Modern's tradition of iconoclastic insurgency (p. 352).

Such an endpoint is satisfying, particularly within the context of their larger project. Yet, one wonders within this proliferation of identity politics—"political radicals, feminists, and African American, Hispanic and homosexual activists"—where New York Modern ends and the postmodern begins.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 1997). For more on the role of popular culture in creating a working class culture of unity see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal* (New York: Cambridge, 1990).

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