
During the first half of the twentieth century the American art world struggled to define the American art grand narrative, a construction built by artists and cultural critics. As early as the 1920s, in a battle to decide who would be the arbiter of American culture, rhetoric evolved that dichotomized modernism and regionalism, abstraction/representation, industrial/pastoral, built/organic, painting/photography, idealized/documentary, and pit New York against the Midwest. In Debating American Modernism (2003) Debra Bricker Balken explored the polarized debates of the 1910s and 1920s. The current catalog and associated exhibition of the same name is Balken's sequel, deconstructing the debates between the 1920s and 1940s through the lens of the Midwest, which had captured the American imagination via industrial success followed by the Great Depression and subsequent Dust Bowl disaster. Balken critically analyzes the polarizing rhetoric of contemporary critics/promoters Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Rosenfeld, on the one hand, and Thomas Craven, Thomas Hart Benton, and Maynard Walker, on the other.

Balken argues that it was the discourse of these competing factions in the 1920s-1940s that led to a popularized grand narrative of regionalism as quintessential American art. This construction obscures the movement's roots in and its particular manifestation of modernism that developed in response to contemporary national crises. As these crises faded, regionalism would exhaust itself and, through Jackson Pollock's relationship to Benton, be subsumed back into the modernist movement.

High quality reproductions (sixty colored plates and twenty-eight black and white illustrations) of works by Thomas Hart Benton, Margaret Bourke-White, Ross Braught, John Rogers Cox, John Stuart Curry, Philip Guston, Joe Jones, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Pare Lorentz, Ethel Magafan, Jackson Pollock, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, Charles Sheeler, Josef von Sternberg, John Vachon, and Grant Wood are included. Balken's writing is clear and builds upon her earlier work on modernists. The volume lacks a table of contents, introduction, numbered list of illustration/plates, and indexes, making it impossible to access the content in any other manner than linear. The footnotes are extremely useful and thorough, covering references to art or popular periodicals, e.g., The Nation, The New Republic, Modern Art, Scribner's Magazine, The International Studio, Time, Life, The Arts, MSS, Art Digest, Magazine of Art, Art Journal, and The New Yorker. In contrast, the bibliography is selective. The volume's covers are subject to considerable fraying, lowering the overall durability of the binding. The intended audience for this work is the interested general public or academics from college to graduate level.

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