American Art to 1900: A Documentary History, edited and compiled by Sarah Burns and John Davis, is an important addition to the teaching and study of American art and history. Designed to provide historical and social context to early American art, this text includes an embarrassment of primary source material: advertisements, charters of art schools and societies, transcripts of speeches, poems about art objects, critical discourse on the subjects, styles, and message of art, and editorials on issues of taste, decorum, identity, race, and patriotism as related to art making and viewing. Invaluable correspondence and diary writings include letters from artists abroad to families back in the United States, advice from one artist to another, details of commissions, and diary entries recounting exhibitions, informal gatherings, and insight into the mind of established and struggling artists alike. Painting, sculpture, printmaking, photography, and watercolor are the primary media discussed, and the art market, collecting, and art education are given ample coverage as well.

The book is structured chronologically into fourteen main sections. Within each section content is divided further into smaller areas organized by topic preceded by a head note providing context to the reading. The book’s organization and the informative head notes ensure ease of use for student and teacher alike. The table of contents is clear and easy to navigate, the index is sufficiently thorough, and cross referencing is provided in the head notes.

The documents originate from a wide assortment of published and unpublished sources, fiction and nonfiction, well known and esoteric. No matter the depth at which a reader may be immersed in the study of American art, they are certain to discover a new viewpoint, resource, or artist in this book. Writings by and about canonical American artists are ample and include Winslow Homer, Mary Cassatt, Frederic Church, Charles Willson Peale, Gilbert Stuart, among others. Also featured are unnamed and lesser known artists, including women and people of color.

Bibliographic information is provided with each entry, comprised of the author (if known), source, publisher, and date of publication. The authors are wide ranging and represent noted writers of fiction and history as well as critics, artists, collectors, and concerned citizens. American Art to 1900 is an art book but the focus is on words and writing, which is made clear in the breadth and depth of writings offered as well in the paucity of illustrations, a mere fourteen images (all black and white) in the entire book.

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