Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer: A Landscape Critic in the Gilded Age, by Judith K. Major. 

In her meticulously researched monograph, Judith K. Major draws on a wide array of primary sources to argue persuasively that Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer has been unjustly neglected as a key voice of the Gilded Age. The volume’s nine chapters each focus on a major period in Van Rensselaer’s life – including her Continental education and cultivated upbringing in the upper echelons of New York society; her prolific career as a critic of painting, landscape architecture, public works, and more; her generative friendship with, and vigorous promotion of, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.; her support for the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893; and her later shift toward public service and reform. Though Van Rensselaer was respected and widely cited in her day, this is the first in-depth scholarly treatment of her work and, as such, it is an important addition to the literature.

Perhaps Major’s most tangible accomplishment is the attribution to Van Rensselaer of over 330 unsigned articles and editorials in the leading periodical Garden and Forest, helpfully listed in Appendix A. While Major does not detail her methods for attribution, she alludes to stylistic analysis as well as epistolary evidence and comparison with the published collection Art Out-of-Doors. Major’s many years of familiarity with Van Rensselaer’s work allow her to impart to the reader a strong sense of Van Rensselaer’s characteristic energy and erudition in these pieces. Although one may wish for a more nuanced evaluation of Van Rensselaer’s regressive, if common, attitudes on racism and women’s suffrage, Major excels in situating Van Rensselaer within the Gilded Age and contextualizing her ideas among luminaries of science and the arts such as Darwin, Humboldt, Ruskin, and Taine.

In addition to the appendix of Garden and Forest articles, the volume also includes a detailed chronology in Appendix B, a lengthy and wide-ranging bibliography, and a fairly thorough index. The pleasant and easy-to-read layout of the book is enhanced by numerous black-and-white images which do much to enrich the reader’s experience, but are not particularly suitable for reproduction. Though lightweight, the cloth binding is reasonably sturdy.

The book is undeniably aimed at re-establishing Van Rensselaer’s reputation among scholars and professionals, but Major’s clear prose and obvious affection for her subject make it suitable for advanced undergraduate students as well as graduate students. It is a valuable addition to any library, and is strongly recommended for collections dealing with art criticism, landscape architecture, or nineteenth-century America.

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