

## Book Review

Ruth L. Bohan

*Looking into Walt Whitman: American Art, 1850-1920*

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Ruth L. Bohan, Associate Professor of Art and Art History at the University of Missouri, St. Louis since 1981, has created a prize-winning in-depth analysis of the inter-relationships between Walt Whitman and American artists.<sup>1</sup> Bohan documents the intricate pas de deux between the artists and the poet—their works of art and their aesthetic stances change him a little, and both his innovative writings and his persona, especially after his death, transform many of them.

In her introduction, the author points out that Whitman observed such factors as American essentialism and philosophical anarchism that rendered some art powerful and then emulated these tools in his poetry. Another visual factor that Bohan suggests informed Whitman's writing is illusionism (the artist's ability to render palpable, three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional picture plane). Whitman denied "the flatness of the page" [1] and created a "powerful sensory presence" [6]. Bohan cites F. O. Matthiessen's observation that Whitman shared with his contemporary painters a "fundamental commitment to the democratic spirit and unpretentious reality of life—what Matthiessen termed 'concrete observation'" [6].

During the Nineteenth Century (Part 1 of the book), the author discusses photographers, painters, and sculptors who created images of Whitman and who also changed the poet's image of himself and the manner in which he projected himself thereafter. Whitman, however, was not an ongoing and vital part of any single group of artists with whom he developed a shared

aesthetic philosophy. Early in his career he reviewed exhibitions as a critic. After 1855 he focused attention on artists who helped him market the visual image he chose for himself. Surprisingly, Whitman's relationships with artists were not central to the development of his poetry. Although distinguished art historian Albert Boime argued persuasively that Gustave Courbet [1819-77] and Whitman created innovative works with similar aesthetic and revolutionary philosophies inspired by the same international forces, Boime could not document that either knew the creative output of the other. Boime wrote that "the thematic and subjective affinities of Whitman and Courbet are so striking that past failure to make a case for their relationship appears as an historical oddity."<sup>2</sup> If Whitman was aware of avant-garde tendencies in art, he rarely mentioned an artist more modern than French painter Jean-François Millet [1814-75] about whom he wrote two important paragraphs. Whitman admired Thomas Eakins [1844-1916], but neither developed a published in-depth interpretation of the Philadelphia's painter's art nor demonstrated in his poetry influence from the person or his painting. Whitman certainly was interested in art, but art was not the subject of sustained analyses which he printed. Whitman consistently preferred nature rather than art as his inspiration.

In a published essay, "Walt Whitman and the Visual Arts," I wrote that during his years as a journalist in New York City, Whitman was directly involved in the arts: he attended countless operatic, theatrical, and musical performances, frequented art galleries, befriended many artists, understood the global perspectives they represented, and critiqued them in his newspaper columns.<sup>3</sup> In that essay, I traced more parallels than causative connections between American art and architecture and Whitman. Bohan was correct to focus on the images created by painters, sculptors, and photographers of Whitman because interaction was substantive. She also acknowledges that his overt sexuality and his free verse are far more

modern than content and form in painting and sculpture contemporary to his poetry [Introduction].

The impact on early twentieth-century American artists of Whitman's transformative philosophy of individualism, natural spiritualism, and optimistic rebellion is incalculable. The corollary that Whitman formulated his aesthetics in the company of inspirational artists, however, is not true. In the first half of this book, Bohan carefully documents Whitman's brief encounters with art and artists throughout his life. Although the author researched her topic exhaustively and well over several decades, we do not find revelation and insights because they are not there. Artists were an interesting but not a seminal factor for Whitman in his formative or his later years.

In Chapter 4, "Reception and Representation in the 1880s," Bohan offers a close reading of many portraits of Walt Whitman created from life by such artists as John White Alexander [1856-1915], Herbert Gilchrist, and Sidney Morse. Whitman's critical assessment of these conservative interpretations always focus on how well they serve his purposes rather than on aesthetic merits. Although most of these images have been known, Bohan's profound knowledge of literature and art amplifies our understanding of them. What she considers a new and subversive approach to Alexander's Walt Whitman [1889, Metropolitan Museum of Art] associates wisps of lace with Alexander's and Whitman's expression of homosexuality which seems to be a tenuous conclusion.

Bohan devotes more than half of Chapter 5, "Thomas Eakins and the 'Solitary Singer,'" to Eakins' painted and photographic portraits of Whitman. The most sustained relationship and "interplay between painter and poet" that Bohan developed in Looking into Walt Whitman is Whitman's five-year friendship with Eakins. Talcott Williams, a distinguished journalist for the Philadelphia Press and apologist for both, introduced them in 1887. Whitman did not agree with

the continuing allegiance Eakins gave to Jean-Léon Gérôme [1824-1904], the painter's mentor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts [111-12]. She enumerates many important affinities between poet and painter including their direct observation of nature as the seminal force for their work, their riveting focus on the nude male body, and their rejuvenation by an immersion in the archetypal culture of the American west. Bohan writes that "the two celebrated in their art a commitment to the voice, the body, science, and the physical and mental benefits associated with vigorous activity" [112]. Both Whitman and Eakins, after physical and spiritual declines, "found renewal amid the natural beauties and challenging daily demand of a life lived close to nature . . . on an extended trip west" [116]. Both celebrated the rugged independence and personal freedom grounded in iconic big sky journeys in the American west. Bohan also aligns the two pioneers by their otherness: "Vilified by segments of the general public and marginalized by their peers, Whitman and Eakins thus shared a history of rejection at the hands of their contemporaries" [114]. Bohan reports that Eakins, referring to his portrait of the poet,

claimed to have begun the work "in the usual way," only to discover "that the ordinary methods wouldn't do—that technique, rules and traditions would have to be thrown aside; that, before all else, [Whitman] was to be treated as a *man*, whatever became of what are commonly called the principles of art [127].

Bohan then goes on to test the two "compositional strategies" that Eakins "celebrated in Whitman's verse": "oppositional strategies" and "a concern with Whitman's masculinity" by examining Eakins' The Concert Singer [127]. Bohan decides that the singer, Weda Cook,

represented the kind of hardworking, self-made individual admired by both Eakins and Whitman. Her years of training and dedication to her craft resonate poignantly through her straining vocal cords, while her humble origins are inscribed in her homemade dress.

Standing alone on a nearly bare stage, Cook embodied Whitman's democratic idealism.

[131]

This passage demonstrates parallels between the painter and Whitman. Bohan infers that Eakins' image "interrogates Whitman's presence without explicit reference to his person" [127].

In Part 2, "Whitman and the Modernists: The Twentieth Century," Bohan posits that Whitman's revolutionary philosophic content and free-verse form fueled avant-garde ventures of artists, critics, publishers, and gallery proprietors who collectively engineered the emergence of modern American art between 1900 and 1920. Bohan has chosen to focus on a few important modernists rather than try to write an exhaustive compendium of all artists touched by the master poet.

Bohan devoted a chapter each to Marsden Hartley [1877-1943] and Joseph Stella [1877-1946]. Both Hartley and Stella were involved actively in the exhibitions, lectures, and symposia of the Société Anonyme, especially during its first year. Bohan has co-written several major publications on this vanguard American organization, founded in 1920 by the artists Katherine S. Dreier (1877–1952), Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), and Man Ray (1890–1976).<sup>4</sup>

Bohan in Chapter 6, "Marsden Hartley's Masculine Landscapes," begins her story of "the complex matrix of associations allied with the discursive practices of modernism" [143]. Hartley is one of many pioneering American modern artists who wrestled with sexual and personal identity, the nature of abstraction in art, and the intersection of the physical and the spiritual. Hartley explored and embraced many pan-spiritual non-Christian systems including Wassily Kandinsky's, Katherine Dreier's, and Madame Blavatsky's as well as Whitman's. "More than any artist of his generation, Hartley established the foundations of his modernist vision in the company of a small but intense group of Whitman supporters [far more than in the company of

artists]" [144]. Throughout his career Hartley investigated Whitmanian themes of sexuality, spirituality, nature, and visionary illusions.

In Chapter 7, "Robert Coady and The Soil," Bohan documents the importance of Robert J. Coady [1876-1921] and his seminal publication as a disseminator of Whitman's complex philosophies of populism and ever-modern pluralist vision, his "democratic idealism, expansionist rhetoric, and boisterous enthusiasm for the broadest range of American cultural experience" [187]. She enfolds important insights about the modern dancer Isadora Duncan into a discussion of Whitman and the human body.<sup>5</sup> Duncan proclaimed the poet Walt Whitman as one of her three "dance masters," hailed Whitman as the "supreme poet of our country," and credited his poetry with having instilled in her "my great spiritual realization of life."<sup>6</sup>

In chapter 8, Bohan builds on the work of art historian Wanda Corn, whose important publication, The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-35, acknowledged Whitman's importance to Stella, but not in fine detail. Bohan enriches our understanding of this relationship by uncovering and publishing extensive documentation of Whitman's influence on Stella.<sup>7</sup>

Bohan is aware of theoretical stances developed for art history during the last thirty years and, for example, utilizes reception theory and examines gender issues to develop new insights to understanding Walt Whitman. She deftly interweaves the traditional approaches of documentary research, visual analysis, iconography and biography with contemporary methodologies of the discipline of art history and American studies. For the most part gender issues are implied rather than explored because so few images of Whitman were created by women and so few women declared or demonstrated that they were inspired by Whitman.<sup>8</sup>

Although Walt Whitman continues to impact American artists through his words and presence to the present day, Bohan logically confines her study to the seventy years of greatest

interaction between artists and the poet. The topic is so vast, that Bohan had to exert considerable discipline to create a readable and cohesive narrative as opposed to a recording of myriad amazing and idiosyncratic interactions between Whitman and artists.

Bohan's Looking into Walt Whitman is not the first book exploring Whitman's relationship to art. For a symposium in 1989 at Rutgers University-Camden, Bohan and other scholars created fresh new analyses of the American poet in relation to European and American art and artists.<sup>9</sup> Among the extensive and rich results was Bohan's essay, "'The Gathering of the Forces': Walt Whitman and the Visual Arts in Brooklyn in the 1850s," which forms the basis of her Chapter 1, "The 'Gathering of the Forces' in Brooklyn," in the book under review. Bohan also contributed a chapter, "'I Sing the Body Electric': Isadora Duncan, Whitman, and the Dance," to The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman, another important contribution to a topic treated as well in Looking into Walt Whitman.<sup>10</sup>

Because Bohan has researched her topic so thoroughly for so long, she presents impressive scholarly apparatus to support her story. A J. Paul Getty Trust Postdoctoral Fellowship Grant, a Smithsonian Institution Short Term Visitor Fellowship, and two NEH Travel to Collections Grants provided funds for her diligent and rewarding search for primary and secondary sources and access to pertinent works of art. She includes very useful and extensive bibliography and twenty-eight pages of substantive endnotes as well as an excellent index. She also provides many new and enlightening illustrations. Adding provenance and/or the dates institutions acquired works illustrated in the book only would add to the reader's understanding of their historical context.

Ruth Bohan has created a scholarly and insightful analysis of the complex nature of Walt Whitman's identity, one of America's most prominent cultural symbols. Material images of course are open to multiple interpretations, and the intentional ambiguity of Whitman's poetry,

prose, and portraits demand new approaches. Bohan provides those here, recognizing not only that the perspectives of critics change but that the symbols themselves change over time.

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w<sup>1</sup> For the book cover, Bohan's book won the 2007 AAUP Book Jacket and Journal Show Scholarly award.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Boime, "[Leaves of Grass and Real Allegory: A Case Study of International Rebellion](#)," Walt Whitman and the Visual Arts, Geoffrey M. Sill and Roberta K. Tarbell, eds. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 53.

<sup>3</sup> A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman, David S. Reynolds, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 153-204.

<sup>4</sup> For Hartley's and Stella's roles in the Société Anonyme, see essays Bohan wrote in The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné, Robert L. Herbert, Eleanor S. Apter, and Elise K. Kenney, co-eds.; Ruth L. Bohan, contributing editor (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984, 3-6, 323-4, 626-38). See also Ruth L. Bohan, The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition: Katherine Dreier and Modernism in America (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press, 1982), a revised version of the author's Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1980. Bohan's Ph.D. in American studies prepared her for the interdisciplinary approach of Looking into Walt Whitman. See also The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America, Jennifer R. Gross, ed., contributions by Ruth L. Bohan, Susan Greenberg, David Joselit, Elise K. Kenney, Dickran Tashjian, and Kristina Wilson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Bohan's condensed version of [her chapter on Stella](#) is included in [Mickle Street Review 17/18](#).



<sup>5</sup> In [The Great American Thing](#) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), Corn also wrote an in-depth assessment of the American essentialist Robert Coady [81-89]. As Bohan acknowledges, the definitive essays on Coady were written by Judith Zilczer.

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. Bohan, [Looking](#), 174-75. See also Ruth L. Bohan, "'I Sing the Body Electric'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, Ezra Greenspan, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 173.

<sup>7</sup> Corn's chapter on Stella, "An Italian in New York," [134-90] and Bohan's chapter overlap because they work from some of the same excellent sources. Corn, Professor of Art History at Stanford University, is the author of the Postscript to [Walt Whitman and the Visual Arts](#).

<sup>8</sup> Dora Wheeler, memorialized in a portrait by William Merritt Chase [1882-83, Cleveland Museum of Art, o/c] painted a portrait of Whitman from life in 1889.

<sup>9</sup> David S. Reynolds and Tarbell organized the conference. The papers subsequently were published in [Mickle Street Review 11](#) and in [Walt Whitman and the Visual Arts](#).

<sup>10</sup> [Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman](#) 166-211.

[Mickle Street Review](#)