Christine Stansell, American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century (with a new preface).

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REFERENCES


1 When American Moderns was published in 2000, it appeared with a number of other cultural biographies, such as Beneath the American Renaissance (1988), The First Woman in the Republic (1994), Terrible Honesty (1995), Walt Whitman’s America (1995), Mozart (1999) and others. At the same time, American Moderns bridged to an earlier version of the genre, which also offered a compelling narrative of American modernism and Greenwich Village. This earlier book is Malcolm Cowley’s still worthwhile Exile’s Return (1934). But Stansell’s book differs in significant ways from the other cultural biographies and also from Cowley’s story of the Village and a handful of its famous inhabitants. Thus it is rewarding that Princeton saw fit to reissue American Moderns in paperback with the author’s new preface.

2 Although, like Exile’s Return, Stansell tells part of the story of Greenwich Village as the locus of American modernism through extended biographical sketches of men (Alexander Berkman, Randolph Bourne, Floyd Dell, Max Eastman, Hutchins Hapgood, Eugene O’Neill, John Reed [of course], Ben Reitman, John Sloan, and others play important roles for Stansell), the power of her narrative resides in the stories of women and the aspects of culture they represent. For in large part, Stansell’s story of American modernism is the story of American women and their relation to twentieth-century (at least) U.S. culture. This emphasis distinguishes American Moderns. Writes Stansell in the preface to this
edition, “Most studies of bohematics have found that women were sidekicks—‘minor characters,’ in Joyce Johnson’s mordant description of the Beat Generation. When I set out to write American Moderns, it made sense to expect some version of the same pattern. But these New Yorkers turned out to be strikingly different, because they so often gave feminism pride of place in their longed-for democratic revival. Unmoored from social convention and loyalties to traditional family roles, bohemians heralded the newest of New Women as heroines of a desirable modernity. The determination to end misunderstanding and inequality between men and women was partner to the equally intense desire to bridge the class divide” (xi). It is with the stories of women that Stansell conveys more than shifting concepts of class and gender. Her striking and often powerful portraits of mostly confident women such as Margaret Anderson, Neith Boyce, Louise Bryant, Dorothy Day, Mabel Dodge, Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, and Mary Heaton Vorse illustrate for Stansell the then new ideas of sexuality, professionalism, the arts, idealism, transatlantic Euro-American culture, and the place of the immigrant in the United States. That relatively fewer portraits of women than men carry so much meaning in American Moderns gives evidence of the rich meaning Stansell finds in those representative lives.

Following the “Preface” and the “Prologue,” Stansell organizes American Moderns in five sections. Each section attends to a particular aspect of the way New York life contributed to the idea of “American Modernism.” Each section also contains a subsection or two that comprise the chapters of the book. Thus section I. “Bohemia” contains two chapters: 1. “Bohemian Beginnings” and 2. “Journeys to Bohemia.” Section II. “Talking” contains chapter 3. “Intellectuals, Conversational Politics, and Free Speech” and chapter 4. “Emma Goldman and the Modern Public.” Section III. “Writing” is comprised of chapter 5. Art and Life: Modernity and Literary Sensibilities” and chapter 6. “Writer Friends: Literary Friendships and the Romance of Partnership.” Section IV. “The Human Sex” is comprised of chapter 7. “Sexual Modernism” and chapter 8. “Talking about Sex.” The book’s section V. “Former People” carries chapter 9. “Loving America with Open Eyes.” Within these always compellingly written chapters that make up the book sections, Stansell covers the expected: lifestyles that shocked the middle class, leftist politics that responded to changing circumstances of life and living, little magazines and the effort to take control of art, the up and down careers of John Reed and Emma Goldman, and new art as an organizing force in culture. In addition to the expected, however, there are extraordinary points and passages worth calling attention to: the importance of novelty in cosmopolitan 1890s Manhattan below Fourteenth Street, including the role of journalism in shaping the new bohemian culture (11-12ff) as well as the role of literature and conversation in the transformation of sexual mores (275); the idea he-man modernist (33); the importance of “the Jewish intelligentsia” to the New Woman (35); the division between the “New Man” and “New Woman” on the one hand and their working-class and African American neighbors on the other (43, 67); Oscar Hammerstein’s offer to Emma Goldman of the then high salary of a thousand dollars a week in 1913 to go on the vaudeville stage (85); the utterly fascinating story of the supreme importance of talk as a class, cultural, and political mediation mechanism (118-19, and in chapter 8, “Talking about Sex”); the place of reading, which “most of all, that gave the bohemians their sense of themselves as artists and their convictions about what exactly was modern” (160); the attention given to the emancipated woman “at the symbolic center of a program for cultural regeneration” (225); the revealing irony in the fact that many women successful still found it necessary to engage male sponsorship; and, finishing where Cowley begins,
is Stansell’s overview of the effects of the First World War their relation to the decline of Village otherness (314ff). Such a combination of the familiar and expected with the new and surprising enables American Moderns to serve both those beginning a study of modernism in the United States and those continuing that investigation. Such a combination also gives one confidence in using the book in classroom. The familiar provides a good starting point for those beginning. The surprising, in addition to the organization of the book and the focus on women, would engage readers continuing their study. Taken together, the combination provokes further investigation.

It was a pleasure for me to read and learn from American Moderns when it was published first in 2000. It was a greater pleasure for me to read it again and learn more from it in 2010. This is an essential book for anyone who has any level of interest in U.S. cultural studies, urban studies and especially New York City, or modernism in the United States, at least, and its role in the creation of the “new century.”

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