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América from Europe

Paloma Alarcó

“(…) Fleeing from the French Revolution, the young Chateaubriand journeyed to the United States in 1791. Accompanied by a Dutch guide, he traveled up the Hudson River to Albany, where he penetrated deep into Mohawk lands. He reached as far as Niagara and the Great Lakes before heading southward across French Louisiana along the Mississippi to Natchez territory. In his tales inspired by this adventure – *Travels in America* (1827) and the exotic novels *Atala* (1801), *René* (1802), and *The Natchez* (1827) – and his *Memoirs from beyond the Grave* (1848), he illustrated the splendor of America’s landscapes and described the customs of the natives, not taking care to omit scenes of the cruelty of the war between the indigenous peoples and the Europeans who had arrived in their lands. We now know that many of Chateaubriand’s stories were the product of his romantic imagination, but they nevertheless succeeded in shaping a mythicized image of America that took root in European popular culture for several generations.

(…) Most of these old myths have now been dismantled by recent historians, but there is no denying that, like Chateaubriand’s “good savage,” the heroic characters in May’s accounts and Bodmer’s illustrations helped shape an idea of native Americans that to an extent lingers on in the European imaginary today.⁵ One of the keenest readers of Karl May’s adventure stories as a boy was Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza; the impact they made on him stimulated his future interest in American art and culture. The earliest evidence of this passion was the acquisition of 70 hand-colored prints by Karl Bodmer that marked the start of his American collection in the late 1950s.

(…) The United States was admired for its new ideas on democracy, freedom, technical innovation, and economic prosperity, but Europe continued to be seen as the source of classical tradition and history. In spite of the country’s major progress, the first American artists considered it essential to travel to the Old World to learn from the “courtly Muses of Europe”, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: initially to England and Germany, and later on to Paris. As a result, they produced works that fluctuated between invention and dependence in their quest for ways of applying long-established conventions to the new specifically American experience.

After the Civil War, when the United States attempted to convey a new image of Americanness and present itself at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867 as a newly reunified country, its presence went almost unnoticed at the major meeting of cultures.

(…) Some 70 years later, when *Trois siècles d’art aux États-Unis* opened at the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris in 1938 – a time of great instability in Europe – European audiences

remained unenthusiastic. The aim of this ambitious show, organized by the MoMA in New York at the request of the French government and curated by its director Alfred H. Barr together with Dorothy C. Miller, was to convey an international image of American art and trace the development of an “American tradition” from the folk art and the sublime and Arcadian American landscapes to contemporary Modernism. In his book *Have We an American Art?* written to mark the occasion, Edward Alden Jewell, art critic for *The New York Times*, complained of the show’s poor reception among the European public, and the critics’ lukewarm reviews.

In 1946, soon after World War II ended, the Tate Gallery in London, with the collaboration of the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the support of the American government agencies, staged *American Painting: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day*, an exhibition that was also greeted with less enthusiasm than hoped. (...) Soon afterwards, at the height of the Cold War, the reception of American art in the Western bloc countries changed radically.

(...) Americanness no longer lay in that Arcadian image of an early American artistic tradition but in the cutting-edge Abstract Expressionism. The young New York artists – Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Franz Kline – whose hitherto unseen energy expressed the deepest anxieties embedded in North American culture, appealed to a whole generation of Europeans marked by a feeling of pessimism stemming from the war.

The new painting was expressive and heroic but, above all, it was genuinely American. It was precisely when they broke free from European tradition that artists succeeded in transforming earlier indifference into acceptance, and they even sparked a progressive Americanization of European art. Whereas up until then American art had drawn from European sources, it was now American culture that was influencing the Western world. Irving Sandler spoke somewhat chauvinistically of the “triumph of American painting” and, years later, in an essay that interpreted Abstract Expressionism from a political perspective, Serge Guilbaut admitted that New York had stolen Paris’s leading role on the art scene.

(...) This linear discourse from early Romantic landscape art to abstraction managed to catch on. Interest in pre-1945 American art grew, albeit very timidly in Europe. In 1975, for example, the Musée du Louvre acquired Cole’s *Cross in the Wilderness* of 1827–29, a paradigmatic example of the new style of majestic and sublime landscape showing an Indian chief mourning at the tomb of the man who had revealed the Christian faith to him. Not long afterwards, Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza, who had by that time assembled sizable holdings of modern American painting, began collecting works by Cole and his followers.

(...) Until a relatively short time ago, pre-World War II American art was practically unknown in Europe. It has taken years for the continent to acknowledge its specific qualities and the uniqueness of its cultural, political, and artistic context. (...)”

Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza and the Dissemination of American Art

Alba Campo Rosillo

(...) The bicentennial of the US Declaration of Independence in 1976 rekindled interest in American art. In addition to the celebrations that took place in countless towns and cities across the country, several museums staged exhibitions of the art produced over the last 200 years, albeit from different perspectives. Baron Thyssen often traveled to America and visited many of these shows, acquiring catalogs for his personal library.

The bicentennial and its multiple cultural expressions spurred Hans Heinrich to begin buying American art of past periods. With 33 twentieth-century paintings in his possession, in 1977 he purchased two canvases by Winslow Homer, one of which has been loaned for this show. *The Natural Paradise* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York proved to be a particularly eyeopening experience for the baron, since it focused on landscape painting – his favorite genre – and its various themed sections brought together works from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Barbara Novak's ideas, expressed in the exhibition's catalog, deeply influenced the baron's way of thinking.

(...) That is how Novak became the baron's advisor and influenced the acquisition of more than 70 landscape paintings, 30 of them with a Luminist aesthetic. The resulting collection was a set of highly representative works by foremost American artists of the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, and it included five canvases by Frederic Church, the painter of *Niagara*, executed in 1857, which was reproduced on the cover of the abovementioned catalog of the MoMA show. Novak also became established as the official theorist of the Thyssen collection and wrote the catalogue raisonné of the American collection among other publications.

(...) Novak spoke of her decision to devote herself to American art in an interview given in 2013: "I thought that was a more worthwhile scholarly thing to do, to really go into a field that needed work. Plus, I felt it was ours. It wasn't that I thought that it was the greatest art in the world, but I thought it was tremendously interesting.

Novak's statement "I felt it was ours" clearly strikes a chord with Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza's own interest in American art. In the catalog of his American art collection, published in connection with a traveling exhibition in the early 1980s, he stated: "I am very attracted by all American artists, maybe because I am a quarter American." It should not be forgotten that his maternal grandmother, Mathilde Louise Price, came from Delaware, and that the baron grew up reading the books of the German writer Karl May telling of the adventures of the fictional character Winnetou, a Native American in the Far West. The baron thus felt American art to be "his", too, and this emerges in the pace and scope of the purchases he made over the next seven years (1977–83) – when he assembled more than 150 works of art.²⁸ In 1984, the collection was viewed as "safe, but top-drawer," as it contained works by artists regarded as essential. Over the following years, the rate of purchases tailed off to an average of four per year, and since 1993 Baron and Baroness Thyssen – and since 2002 Carmen Thyssen on her own – acquired a further 23 works of American art. The quality and diversity of the collection was acknowledged by a former director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, who stated that "in scope and catholicity it is probably unique in Europe."

(...) The baron was the most ambitious European collector of American art in the 1970s and 1980s, and sent his artworks to exhibitions all over the world, broadening America's cultural horizons.

(...) Baron Thyssen was a client of the New Yorkbased Spanierman Gallery, as were two other key collectors of American art: Detroit-born Richard A. Manoogian (1936–), the director of Masco Corporation, and Daniel J. Terra (1911–1996) of Chicago, the founder of Lawter Chemicals and the Terra Foundation for American Art. Manoogian, the son of Armenian immigrants, began collecting American art with his wife Jane in the 1970s, initially buying modern pieces and subsequently turning his attention to nineteenth-century works, just as the baron did around the same time.

(...) Daniel Terra, was the son of Italian immigrants. He started out as a collector in 1973 and publicly showed his holdings of American art for the first time in 1977, encouraged by the spirit of the bicentennial celebrations. The following year he set up the Terra Foundation for the Arts to promote the study of America’s artistic and cultural legacy. (...) Daniel Terra and Baron Thyssen earned international fame for their pioneering collecting of American art in the 1970s and 1980s, a time when American museums were acquiring works by Abstract Expressionists to fill empty rooms instead of buying historical pieces. As we will see, Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza aimed to internationalize art in general and American art in particular, and Terra shared this clearly humanistic outlook. (...)”