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I could begin by asking, does patriotism have a place in the study of American art? However, I prefer an even broader question: can ideology—and patriotism is nothing if not an ideological phenomenon—furnish a basis for scholarship?

Patriotism is first of all a system of belief—an assortment of related if often contradictory myths, assumptions, and prejudices that, as Terry Eagleton observes, “constitutes the subject’s lived, apparently spontaneous relations to a power-structure.”¹ In the United States, patriotism has its quasi-religious rituals (saluting the flag, singing the national anthem), its deities (Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, etc.), its sacred spaces, monuments, myths, symbols, origin stories, and taboos. Like any full-blown ideology, patriotism naturalizes belief. Critics might find patriotic claims hyperbolic, questionable, or risible—e.g., the belief that the United States is a bastion of democracy—but for many Americans, such claims represent indisputable fact. Finally, patriotism assumes a unitary national identity. It thus licenses broad generalizations about Americanism, “the American mind,” “American national character,” and “the American experience.”

Given its omnipresence in American life, it is not surprising that patriotism once exerted a powerful influence on American art scholarship. Take for example Barbara Novak’s *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1969.² Novak’s book represented an attempt to define what was described as “the Americanness of American art.” Following in the footsteps of John McCoubrey and several German émigré art historians, Novak argued that American painting tended to evolve stylistically from the “ideal” to the “real” to “Luminism.”³ For Novak, Luminism, exemplified by the work of such painters as Fitz Henry Lane and Martin Johnson Heade, epitomized Americanness.

Or to take another example of the influence of patriotic ideology, consider John Wilmerding’s *American Art*, a volume in the prestigious Pelican History of Art series.⁴ Wilmerding’s book, which appeared in 1976, can be read as an answer to the then-current question, “What is American about American Art?” Unlike Novak, however, Wilmerding was not concerned with discovering a quintessential American style but with the relation between American art and a putative American national character. Americans, Wilmerding maintained, are innocent, youthful, idealistic, pragmatic, and optimistic—“American” traits that in Wilmerding’s view are reflected in the work of artists as different as John Trumbull, Thomas Cole, George Caleb Bingham, and Thomas Eakins.

Wilmerding’s point of departure was a triumphalist version of American history. The book’s preface contains the following:

Within the boundaries of what came to be settled and organized as the United States a central impulse seemed to be an assault on the past. Both the immigrants from Europe and its past on the one hand, and the subduing of the Indians and their past, on the other, became forms of declaring both present and future possibility.⁵

Today, Wilmerding's paean to Manifest Destiny reads as an apologia for genocide. However, in 1976, it represented a dominant if increasingly contested interpretation of the history of westward expansion.

The patriotic strain in the study of American art reached its highpoint in 1980 with *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850–1875*, a mammoth exhibition Wilmerding organized for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the publication of Novak's *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875*.⁶ By then, however, a rising generation of Americanists inspired by the "new art history" was beginning to transform the field. The methods they used might be called "ideology critique"—the systematic questioning of the assumptions and beliefs, such as Americanness and "the American mind" that had structured earlier studies.

Today we work in an expanded field in which American art is no longer interpreted as an embodiment of Americanness, but studied in relation to a global history of art. Consequently, at a time when "America First"—a slogan with an ominous history—guides national policy, any attempt to return to patriotic conceptions or triumphalist narratives will seem at best naive and at worst opportunistic and reactionary. Indeed, in the face of an unprecedented assault in the name of patriotism on all we have learned in the last fifty years about American history, society, and culture, we must be prepared to critique Americanist ideologies if we have any hope of maintaining our scholarly integrity.

Notes

¹ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology* (London: Verso, 1991), 221.

² Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience* (New York: Praeger, 1969).

³ See John McCoubrey, *American Tradition in Painting* (New York: George Braziller, 1963); Jochen Wierich, "Mutual Seduction: German Art History and American Art," in Barbara Groseclose and Jochen Wierich eds., *Internationalizing the History of American Art* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 41–60.

⁴ John Wilmerding, *American Art* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

⁵ Wilmerding, *American Art*, xxiii.

⁶ See John Wilmerding ed., *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850–1875*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1980) and Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). See also Alan Wallach, "Investing in the 'American Mind,'" *Art History* 6, no. 3 (September 1983): 380–84.