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Amateurism and American Visual Culture: An Introduction

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“The most salient fact in the artistic culture of this country since 1930 is the rise of the amateur.” So begins the 1956 essay “The New Man in the Arts,” by Jacques Barzun.¹ From there, Barzun’s observations are superficially buoyant. The rise in amateurism, he argues, is the result of a longing to participate in “a growing community spirit which relishes what is local and of the group.” “With the passing of the class system,” he adds, “there also went something of the mild subordination needed for being a spectator.” Each man, he writes, “has some slight ability worth exercising; let him develop it for his own limited joy.”²

Barzun’s initial claim remains provocative, but his essay characterizes the amateur too literally, as someone who does something because they love it. All around him, in Neo-Dada New York (Barzun was a dean at Columbia University when he wrote the essay), were instances of more nuanced and ironic amateurisms that cultivated insouciant dabbling in opposition to skilled professionalism. Barzun also overlooked how critics disparaged amateurism, often on sexist grounds. In 1920, for instance, George Grosz and John Heartfield objected to Hannah Höch’s inclusion in the First International Dada Fair in Berlin on the grounds that female Dadaists were “charming and gifted amateurs.” They denied “us any real professional status,” Höch recalled.³ In the United States, critics regularly denied professional status to Georgia O’Keeffe as well. Of O’Keeffe’s iconic 1920s flower paintings, one writer remarked, she “was being a woman and only secondarily an artist.”⁴ Opponents of 1970s feminist art also reacted to the perceived taint of amateurism, often lamenting the incursion of craft into high art.⁵

Historians have systematically degraded Native American art on similar grounds. The influential anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber, who undoubtedly admired the baskets made by the Southern California tribes he studied, nonetheless concluded that all “Mission Indian” basket makers were pattern artists. In the work of Pomo Indians, for instance, Kroeber did not identify a tradition—in the way that, say, classicism is a tradition in Western art—but instead a “tremendous predominance of unmotivated custom and habit over conscious utilitarian, artistic, or religious purpose.”⁶ Perceptions of Indigenous cultures as instinctive and habitual rather than intentional and innovative, which lay at the heart of colonialist endeavors, depend on the reflexive association of amateurism with primitivism and professionalization with modernity. This is yet another reason why conceptualizations of amateurism merit deeper scrutiny.

Negative associations with amateurism remain strong today. Many artists and critics presume that hobbyists lack originality, skill, and criticality. “No One Likes a Sunday

Painter" was a 2013 headline in the online arts journal *Hyperallergic*, and Martha Stewart's craftiness, according to some observers, is a "performance of impeccable domestic comportment" that peddles merchandise and tasks lacking in social conscience.⁷ Amateurism is often invoked to malign artists, designers, and hobbyists, especially if they are women, to negatively compare them to a higher standard of purposeful and professional production.

Even a casual observer of American art and its history should know that amateurism has been fundamental to the development and reception of American art. In the Colonial period, for example, trained painters and self-taught limners were measured against professional European portraitists, and producers of decorative arts were often viewed as craftspeople or artisans rather than fine artists. During the nineteenth century, itinerant painters and folk artists improvised enterprises that had little in common with the conventional studio-based careers of professional artists. There is, too, a more critical amateurism, one that is employed self-consciously to deconstruct, explore, or question familiar dialectical systems—for example: expert/novice, trained/untrained, skilled/unskilled, and casual/painstaking. In the early twentieth century, amateurism was a vital concept for Robert Henri and the Ashcan artists. Although Henri studied and taught art formally, he disavowed academicism and was skeptical of professionalism. "I am not interested in art as a means of making a living," he wrote in 1923, "but I am interested in art as a means of living a life."⁸ Subsequently, Thomas Hart Benton, also a student of esteemed academies, forswore what he characterized as the theoretical expertise underpinning modernism and postured as an unlearned anybody. "I am an amateur thinker," Benton wrote in 1937, "one who thinks on the side, mostly in the privy."⁹

The various historical and contemporary categorizations of Native American visual culture are relevant to this theme. We know, for instance, that Abstract Expressionists borrowed from supposedly "primitive" artforms to heighten the aura of untutored amateurism around their works. We also know that appropriation is just one context, and a flawed one, for analyzing Native American art, which often finds itself at the crossroads of the vernacular and the institutional. Some Native American artists have negotiated amateur and professional identities for their own purposes, in order to advance sovereignty, for example, or to participate in markets not entirely their own.¹⁰

Especially significant to our understanding of amateur attitudes and practices are the junk stylings of Neo-Dada, particularly the slapdash techniques and casual disregard for high art found in the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Claes Oldenburg. Branden Joseph, playing off Brian O'Doherty's conception of a "vernacular glance," compares Rauschenberg to a "mole archaeologist," an artist—like a colorblind and near-sighted insectivore—who burrows in the dirt, collecting and combining with no regard for tradition.¹¹

The habits and artifacts associated with amateur photography, home moviemaking, and "sloppy" crafting overlap with both curating and fine art production in compelling ways as well.¹² In my own work, lately, I have been curious about how producers categorized as amateur come by and perform the degrees of expertise required for operating cameras, film, and other recording technologies.¹³ Equally interesting are questions about how photographic snapshots and home movies are curated privately in domestic spaces (in scrapbooks and on smartphones, for example) and exhibited, sometimes as art, in public institutions (such as archives, historical societies, and museums).

With a refreshing new perspective dating from the last decade or so, historians of American art have begun to examine the amateur/professional dialectic in compelling ways. For instance, the 2007 and 2008 exhibition *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888–1978: From the Collection of Robert E. Jackson*, organized by the National Gallery of Art, presented the work of anonymous amateur photographers in the arenas (major museums and a scholarly catalogue) of high art. The National Gallery of Art also organized the 2018 and 2019 exhibition, *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, which explored the intersections of folk, primitive, naive, and visionary art with modernist and avant-garde art.¹⁴ Kim Grant, a contributor to this group of essays, has addressed amateurism as a conceit affecting modern art in Europe and the United States, as has Julia Bryan-Wilson in her influential book about artistic labor in the Vietnam War era.¹⁵ The media scholar Patricia R. Zimmerman published a book almost twenty-five years ago, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, which examined amateurism as “the cultural inversion to the development of economic professionalization.”¹⁶ “The professional embodied the logic of scientized work,” she argued, “while the amateur constituted spontaneity.”¹⁷ Zimmerman’s observations laid the theoretical groundwork for later histories of amateur filmmaking.¹⁸



Fig. 1. Sister Gertrude Morgan, *Let's Make A Record*, 1971. Tempera, acrylic, and pencil on paperboard (album cover) and vinyl (record), 12 3/8 x 12 1/2 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak, 1981.136.5A-B

Still, the significance of amateurism in American art requires more critical attention. To that end, I am delighted to introduce five new essays on the broad theme of Amateurism and American Visual Culture. Sarah Archino’s essay, “The Critical Deployment of Amateurism in 1910s New York,” examines three instances of self-consciously intuitive artmaking in modernist circles, while Katie Anania’s contribution, “Walk with Me: William Anastasi’s Stenography of the Street,” considers how an untrained conceptual artist stumbled on a drawing practice rooted in disciplined professional training. Elaine Yau, in “The Love in Labor: Reconsidering Amateurism in Sister Gertrude Morgan’s Performances and Paintings,” addresses the hybrid strategies—including improvisation and intentional recording technologies—that one outlier used to channel a higher power, and Miguel de

Baca considers 1970s video artists and how they exercised the aesthetics of amateurism to deconstruct technological authority and question expertise more broadly. In the final essay, Kim Grant analyzes the production, reception, and meaning of George W. Bush's portrait paintings of wounded veterans to explore the distinction between amateur and critical fine art.

In their texts, the authors together demonstrate that amateurism is a usefully fluid concept for art criticism and art history. One particularly salient takeaway from this suite of essays is that amateurism emerges in the art world sometimes as a praxis, sometimes as a status, and sometimes as an attitude. Artists employ amateurism, both overtly and obliquely, for a number of reasons—to find relief from the burdens of expertise, to heighten the authenticity of their work, or to casually incorporate a new craft or technology into their fine art. But again and again, the amateur attitude works to dissipate the aura of authority that hangs around learned and professional practices. That should be of particular interest to art historians, who work within, and only rarely against, the highly regulated institutional framework of teaching, curating, and publishing to locate the public value of rare objects and specialized practices.

Notes

¹ Jacques Barzun, "The New Man in the Arts," *The American Scholar* 25, no. 4 (Autumn 1956): 437.

² Barzun, "The New Man in the Arts," 440–41.

³ Hannah Höch in Edouard Roditi, "Interview with Hannah Höch," in *More Dialogues on Art* (Santa Barbara, CA: Ross-Erikson, 1984), 109.

⁴ Samuel Kootz, *Modern American Painters* (Norwood, MA: Brewer and Warren, 1930), 49. See also Marilyn Hall Mitchell, "Sexist Art Criticism: Georgia O'Keeffe: A Case Study," *Signs* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 681–87.

⁵ See Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: New Women's Press, 1984), and Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Lucy Lippard's Feminist Labor," in *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 127–71.

⁶ Alfred L. Kroeber, "California Basketry and the Pomo," *American Anthropologist* 11, no. 2 (April–June 1909): 249.

⁷ Howard Hurst, "No One Likes a Sunday Painter," *Hyperallergic*, January 10, 2013, <https://hyperallergic.com/63127/no-one-likes-a-sunday-painter>; Nancy Shaw, "Cloning Scapegoats: Martha Stewart Does Insider Trading," *Social Text* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 57. Also see Carol A. Stable, "Getting What She Deserved: The News Media, Martha Stewart, and Masculine Domination," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 316.

⁸ Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, comp. Margery Ryerson (1923; reprint, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 158.

⁹ Thomas Hart Benton, "Confessions of an American," *Common Sense* 6, no. 7 (July 1937): 7.

¹⁰ I am grateful to my colleague Micah Pawling, Associate Professor of History and Native American Studies at the University of Maine, for sharing with me his thoughts about Native American art in the context of amateurism. For fascinating analyses of how notions of primitivism influenced modern artists, and of how amateurish ethnography has informed Native American art history, see the essays in Janet Catherine Berlo, ed., *The Early Years of Native American Art History: The Politics of Scholarship and Collecting* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992).

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- ¹¹ See Brian O'Doherty, "Rauschenberg and the Vernacular Gance," *Art in America* 61, no. 5 (September–October 1973): 82–87, and Branden Wayne Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 121–71.
- ¹² See Elaine C. Paterson and Susan Surette, eds. *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
- ¹³ Justin Wolff, "A Strange Familiarity: Alexander Forbes and the Aesthetics of Amateur Film," in Martha McNamara and Karan Sheldon, eds., *Amateur Movie Making: Aesthetics of the Everyday in New England Film, 1915–1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 71–94.
- ¹⁴ "American Self-Taught and Avant-Garde Art Explored in Major Traveling Exhibition Organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington," press release, National Gallery of Art, November 1, 2017, <https://www.nga.gov/press/exh/4049.html>.
- ¹⁵ Kim Grant, "'Paint and Be Happy': The Modern Artist and the Amateur Painter—A Question of Distinction," *Journal of American Culture* 34, no. 3 (September 2011): 289–303; Kim Grant, *All About Process: The Theory and Discourse of Modern Artistic Labor* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017); and Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*.
- ¹⁶ Patricia R. Zimmerman, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 7.
- ¹⁷ Zimmerman, *Reel Families*, 9.
- ¹⁸ In addition to the essays in McNamara and Sheldon, *Amateur Movie Making*, see Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann, eds., *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Alan D. Kattelle, *Home Movies: A History of the American Industry, 1897–1979* (Nashua, NH: Transition, 2000); Heather Norris Nicholson, *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice, 1927–1977* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2012); and Charles Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema: The Rise of North American Moviemaking, 1923–1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).