
Ruth L. Bohan. *Looking into Walt Whitman: American Art, 1850-1920*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. 261p.

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Not by accident does Walt Whitman have one of the most easily recognizable faces in 19th-century American literature; as a keen sitter for portrait photographers, Whitman ensured that his image would be available as an adjunct to his words, often adorning the various editions and revisions of *Leaves of Grass* published during his lifetime. Indeed, his affection and fascination for visual culture goes much farther than simply a concern for self-representation, as Ruth Bohan demonstrates in this historical look at Whitman's engagement with contemporary visual artists and his enduring presence in the work of American modernists in the 30 years following his death.

Bohan's project began as an investigation into Whitman's reception among visual artists active in New York during the first 20 years of the 20th century but acquired a broader focus as she learned more about his active involvement with his contemporaries. The book measures Whitman's involvement against the changing circumstances of his life and career; it represents Whitman's role in American art as growing and transforming in the same organic way he imagined his poetic role evolving. It examines all facets of Whitman's role in visual art from object of the gaze to catalyst for modernist exploration.

Although a great deal of attention has been paid to Whitman's fascination with photography and his own photographic image, Bohan emphasizes that his involvement with the visual culture of the 19th century was much more broadly based. During the long foreground to the appearance of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Whitman was active in a variety of ways in the burgeoning New York City arts scene. At the time, New York was supplanting Boston and Philadelphia as the pre-eminent marketplace for artwork in America. Whitman befriended artists, frequented galleries, advocated for arts organizations such as the Brooklyn Arts Union and wrote about art in various newspapers. Along with some of his friends in the Free Soil movement, Whitman championed the arts community as a vital concomitant of a healthy democracy. He also shared William Cullen Bryant's commitment to the Horatian ideal of the "sister arts" as celebrated by Hudson River School painter Asher Durand in the painting *Kindred Spirits*.

With reference to W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of "imagetext" which refers to a composite piece fusing image and text, Bohan explores Whitman's fascination with portraiture and its relationship to his self-constructions in the various avatars of

the lifelong poem. Indeed, Bohan seems to mirror Whitman's fusion of image and text with a generous sampling of the portraits to interact with her contextualizing historical narrative and her insightful readings of the various constructions of the poet. The often contradictory portrait representations become for her the multitudes contained by the Whitmanian self in "Song of Myself," the multifarious facets of the democratic self.

But for me the most striking reading of the Whitmanian presence in a 19th-century artwork comes in relation to a painting in which Whitman does not appear at all, Thomas Eakins' *The Concert Singer*. The portrait represents Weda Cook, an opera singer and one of the earliest musical interpreters of Whitman's poetry. In reading this portrait of a solitary singer known to both Eakins and Whitman, Bohan traces a subtly encoded homage to the poet himself as complex as the relationship between the two men.

In the second half of the book, Bohan traces elements of interactions between Whitman and the first generation of American modernists. In Whitman, some modernists found "a refreshingly vital spirit of wholeness and personal possibility." But some of Whitman's surviving disciples such as William Sloane Kennedy and Horace Traubel provided a tangible link with the good gray poet for early 20th-century Greenwich Village artists, most notably Marsden Hartley. Bohan sees a coded narrative of Whitman's ideal of manly comradeship in Hartley's spirit-infused landscapes and visionary sexuality. Hartley, who painted pictures of both of Whitman's Camden houses and named one of his landscapes after Whitman's poem "Proud Music of the Storm," here acts as a transition figure who merges Whitmanian sympathies with the discursive practices of modernism. Similarly, Bohan locates Whitman's populist touch in Robert Coady's journal *The Soil*, which rejected the elitist elements of artistic modernism in favor of a celebration of the body, popular culture, and the technological advancements of the day. The final key modernist to reflect the Whitmanian spirit is Italian immigrant Joseph Stella who had read Whitman before immigrating from Italy in 1896 and who could quote long passages of the poetry. Stella would develop a fusion of Whitman and Italian futurism in his art and perhaps speaks to Whitman most clearly in his paintings of the Brooklyn Bridge, the successor to Whitman's Brooklyn Ferry as a symbolic space for the transcendence of difference in a common humanity.

Bohan's book is both comprehensive in sweep and compellingly narrative in form. The one major difficulty it presents to the reader lies in the overwhelming number of names she links with Whitman; the reader would be well served by a background in American art history of the 19th century. But there is little need to know the

paintings since the book is generously illustrated with all the relevant images discussed in the text, from the familiar “The Trapper’s Bride” to lesser-known contemporary cartoons. Her treatment of Whitman portraits is also impressively comprehensive, and her readings of various paintings insightful and very creative. ✱