

Cite this article: Antje Gamble, review of *MoMA Goes to Paris in 1938: Building and Politicizing American Art* by Caroline M. Riley, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2023), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.18439>.

MoMA Goes to Paris in 1938: Building and Politicizing American Art

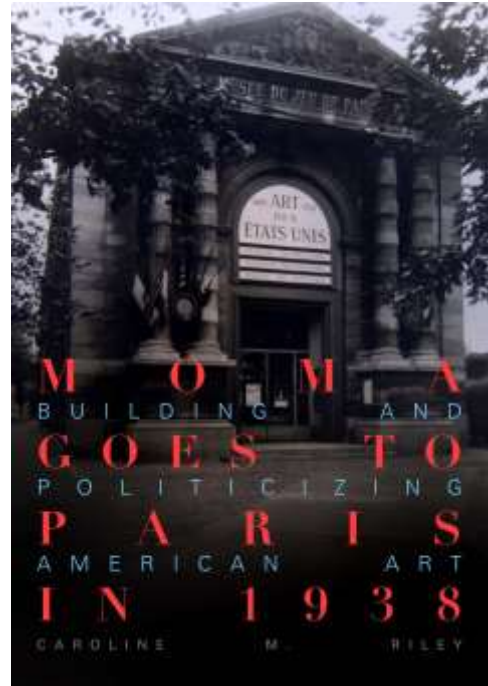
By Caroline M. Riley

Oakland: University of California Press, 2023. 360 pp.; 60 color illus.; 29 b/w illus.; 8 tables. Hardcover: \$60.00 (ISBN: 9780520386914)

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The interdisciplinary nature of museum studies has often relegated the study of art exhibitions outside of the field of art history. Yet, as Caroline M. Riley clearly lays out in her book *MoMA Goes to Paris in 1938: Building and Politicizing American Art*, by repositioning the study of art exhibitions “at the center of American art history,” scholars can make visible “manifestations of canon formation and the institutionalization of art history within the public sphere of the museum” (3). Riley’s in-depth analysis of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)’s exhibition *Three Centuries of American Art*, on view at the Jeu de Paume in Paris in 1938, highlights how artworks gain art-historical significance, political soft power, and market value when displayed to the public.

Notable recent scholarship on the import of MoMA’s early exhibitions and their effects on the development of a modernist art-historical canon includes Sandra Zalman and Austin Porter’s edited volume *Modern in the Making: MoMA and the Modern Experiment, 1929–1949*, which shows the extraordinary impact of the institution in shaping the ideas around modern art.¹ Kristina Wilson’s *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of the Exhibition, 1925–1934* (2009) and Mary Anne Staniszewski’s *The Power of Display: A History of Museum Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (1998) have also opened up important discussions of curatorial choices, institutional networks, and exhibition design in the field of museum studies.² Riley’s contribution to the new scholarship on MoMA is timely and important to understanding the specific impact of the museum’s exhibition program on art history. As she writes, the book explores “what interpretation of American art the museum sought to legitimize and how the selected artworks reflected American culture and sought to represent it” (3).



Riley makes two major contributions to the contemporary scholarship on museum studies and American art. First is the framework of the “exhibitionary life cycle,” which is a way to look at exhibitions as constructions of media, ideas, politics, and so forth as both ephemeral (their finite physical display) and long lasting (their continued impact on understandings of individual artworks and related art-historical canons long after the exhibition had closed). The exhibition is therefore not just assessed in its original form but also in its afterlife in popular and scholarly culture.³ As Riley convincingly argues, *Three Centuries of American Art* lived on after it came off the walls in Paris, helping to secure MoMA as an authority on modern art and thus raising its cultural power on the global stage.

The second major contribution Riley makes is in tracking the life cycle of the exhibition through the logistical mechanisms of its organizers. Riley clearly articulates the real-world constraints of exhibition making, including curatorial and museum administrators shifting in and out of agreement, rejected loans due to diverse reasons (from ideological differences to worries about artwork safety), the institutionalization of artwork tracking and insuring, and the relationships between the press and the museum’s publicity department. All of these points have real effects on both the actual exhibition installation and the legacy of the exhibition, which, in turn, informs the development and maintenance of the art-historical canon. Riley outlines how key United States-based players, like MoMA director Alfred H. Barr Jr., MoMA president A. Conger Goodyear, and MoMA cofounder Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, were the driving force of *Three Centuries of American Art*’s eventual success. Although the French collaborators, who included staff at the Musée du Jeu de Paume and other government officials, asked to have greater input in the curatorial choices, MoMA leadership retained control of artwork selections. Riley also highlights how a number of key staff members, including MoMA registrar Dorothy Dudley, “built a record that allows a reconstitution of the negotiation process” (110). Her successes were seen in the “closed circuit of exchange,” in which each borrowed artwork “gained value as long as MoMA possessed it” (127). In the United States and France, staff, collectors, dealers, and even political agents all affected, in small and large ways, the exhibition and its exhibitionary life cycle.

Chapter 1, “What Was *Three Centuries of American Art*?,” lays out the complex web of interconnected histories, stakeholders, art-world leaders, and political alliances involved in the 1938 exhibition. Here, Riley shows that MoMA’s intent with *Three Centuries of American Art* was, in part, art-historical canon building, writing that “the chronological and spatial organization of the exhibition in the building created a teleological view of American art in which contemporary art was the logical culmination of the previous centuries of American art” (64). However, even this objective was not as straightforward as curators might have hoped. Riley shows that it was a messy and complicated process, perhaps made more so by the organizers and external exhibition supporters, from individual collectors to American diplomats, who wanted this show to improve the international reputation of American culture. Yet, as Riley rightly points out throughout the book, the exhibition presented and subsequently established a very white and male perspective of American art and culture. Although a small handful of African American, Japanese American, and white women artists were included, the exhibition remains largely representative of the patriarchal, white supremacist culture of the United States at the time.

Chapter 2, “Loaning across Oceans: Symbolism, Risk, and Value,” lays out the practical process of loaning artworks while also proposing a theoretical framework for understanding the connection between art-market values and museum exhibitions. Riley connects the pragmatic aspects of securing loans for an international exhibition, from the paper trail to insurance premiums, to the more abstract idea of making artworks into cultural commodities. Following Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas concerning cultural capital, Riley writes, “Through the loan, MoMA received access to capital in the form of artworks that enabled it to increase its cultural authority” (127). At the same time, lenders were banking on their work’s growth in value through association with MoMA.

Chapter 3, “Creating a Contemporary American Art History across Centuries,” straightforwardly outlines how museum exhibitions are directly connected to the creation of art-historical canons. Riley’s discussion of how MoMA’s curatorial choices have impacted ideas of American art history and its attendant canon elucidates a number of important points: the importance of *Three Centuries of American Art* as a historical overview of MoMA’s institutional narrative of modernism; the inclusion of fine art, popular art, and folk art in the exhibition in support of MoMA’s claims of a rich and long-established American culture; and the position of modern art vis-à-vis the ever-present shadow of Nazi Germany in 1938. Each of these points are also interwoven with political connotations, from loan cancellations to government pressure, since, as Riley writes, “MoMA curators positioned the US government as a patron of the arts, a vital role held by other established nations in the past” (166). The canon of American art presented in *Three Centuries of American Art* was not a single narrative generated by a genius curator. Instead, as Riley importantly shows, it was a loosely bound set of ideas shaped by numerous people reacting to their changing environments.

In the final chapter, “Art on Paper,” Riley discusses the innovative publicity machine at MoMA and how it impacted the exhibitionary life cycle of *Three Centuries of American Art*. A key figure at the center of this chapter is Sarah Newmeyer, then head of MoMA’s publicity department, who helped the museum “direct the press along prescribed narratives” (204). Riley shows how the public-relations arm of MoMA was not just reiterating the voices of the curators, as Newmeyer worked “to try to find points of connection across a worldwide audience rather than information that would be relevant only to audiences in, say, New York City and Paris” (207). At the same time, press outlets in the United States adhered to MoMA’s official marketing materials to varying degrees, further complicating the institutional story of a cohesive narrative of American art. Riley shows that, perhaps surprisingly, regional preferences persisted in the United States despite efforts to present a national vision of American art by Newmeyer and the MoMA team.

In the conclusion, Riley reinforces the importance of in-depth study and analysis of historical exhibition making to contemporary art history and museum studies, writing, “Just as in the 1930s, we are experiencing a moment of consequential change, and visitors can feel the walls pulse as museums look and sound different” (248). She highlights a number of other ways in which *Three Centuries of American Art* lived on beyond its 1938 installation. This exhibition not only bolstered the position of American art on the transatlantic stage but also solidified MoMA’s stature as a primary arbiter of American culture. The programs developed for *Three Centuries of American Art* morphed into MoMA’s postwar International Program, which once again (with political intention) sent

American art to Europe in the 1950s, further solidifying the canon of American art. Riley's book ultimately shows how MoMA curators, administrators, staff, and supporters, through persistence and inventive administrative techniques, strove to secure the still-new museum's position both at home and abroad during the make-or-break 1938 exhibition. As is now apparent almost a century later, *Three Centuries of American Art* became a political and cultural success, resulting in international recognition of American art and demonstrating the expansiveness of an exhibitionary life cycle.

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Notes

¹ Sandra Zalman and Austin Porter, eds., *Modern in the Making: MoMA and the Modern Experiment, 1929–1949* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). This book grew out of a 2017 College Art Association conference panel titled "Reintroducing the Modern: The First Twenty Years at MoMA, 1929–49," in which Riley gave a paper titled "Three Centuries of American Art: MoMA's First International Exhibition in 1938." However, her work was not included in the book.

² Kristina Wilson, *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of the Exhibition, 1925–1934* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998). Riley cites the former in her book but not the latter. An additional important text is Bruce Altshuler's *Salon to Biennial—Exhibitions That Made Art History*, vol. 1, 1863–1959 (New York: Phaidon, 2008).

³ This consideration of afterlife is also akin to recent scholarship on "image biography" and the operations of memes. See Peter Mason, *The Lives of Images* (London: Reaktion, 2001); Kristine K. Ronan, "Buffalo Dancer: The Biography of an Image," PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2016; and Kathryn Watson, "In the Hands of Meme-Makers, One Image Has Many Lives," *Hyperallergic*, August 7, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/506980/meme-templates-subcultures-reddit-social-media>.