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Re-Envisioning the Everyday: American Genre Scenes, 1905–1945

By John Fagg

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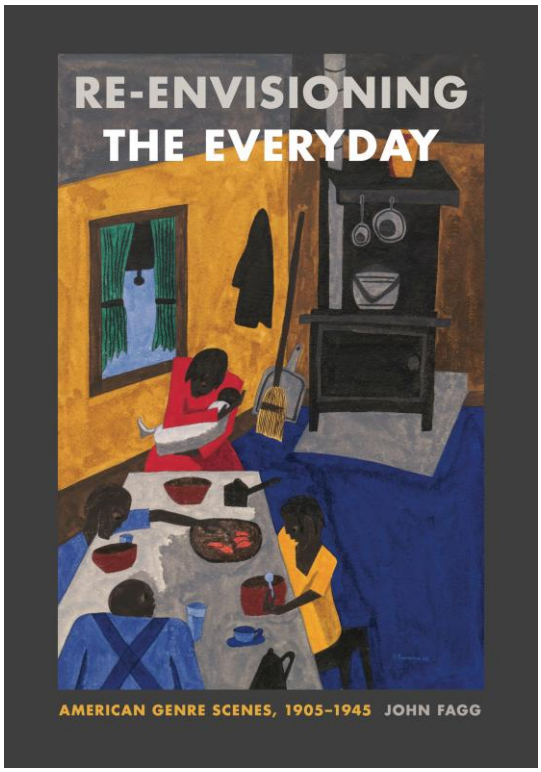

What happened to genre painting? Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, did evolving social, political, economic, and aesthetic conditions reduce genre painting to a quaint, passé form? Or did painters adapt the mode to new conditions?

These questions form the conceptual core of John Fagg's impressive *Re-Envisioning the Everyday: American Genre Scenes, 1905–1945*, which traces the queries throughout an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion, focusing on artists Jerome Myers, Edmund C. Tarbell, Elizabeth Shippen Green, John Sloan, Norman Rockwell, Ben Shahn, Jacob Lawrence, and others. Fagg considers more specific questions as well, such as whether early twentieth-century genre painters could pull the mode into the new century or if the tradition would pull them backward. Could Sloan, for instance, employ genre modes to further his progressivism, or did the outmodedness of genre prevent social and economic critique? And how was genre defined against newer and modernist narrative modes?

Fagg's main claim is that genre painting remained an important though contested mode of painting during the first half of the twentieth century. The book makes a significant contribution to the history of American art by demonstrating how artists, critics, and curators summoned genre, both as a historical, bygone mode and as a relevant, penetrating one, to work out the terms of narrative painting and commercial illustration during the first third of the twentieth century.

The book features meticulous and encyclopedic research. Focused as it is on art criticism, periodicals, and historical exhibitions, virtually every paragraph is packed with archival and primary-source evidence. Though Fagg quotes or references well-known art historians

and critical theorists (such as Elizabeth Johns, Walter Benjamin, and Homi Bhabha), period critics, journalists, and curators drive the book's argument. Though the scholarship is dense, the book rarely feels too long.

The introduction opens the conceptual terrain of genre painting. Rather than chart art scholarship on the topic—from, say, Patricia Hills to Sarah Burns to Elizabeth Johns—Fagg considers here the "porousness" of the category (8). Quoting literary scholar Wai Chee Dimock, he invites us to think of all genres as "open sets endlessly dissolved by their own openness" (9).[1] Scholarship on genre painting, Fagg states, "is at once fixed in its certainty and fuzzy in its language" (9). The introduction broadcasts the objectives of the chapters that follow, which are not to determine what is and what is not genre painting but, rather, to closely analyze period criticism on genre painting's relevance in the twentieth century. The book, Fagg claims, "tells a story about a way of painting or seeing when it no longer meets the world, but also about the resilience of that way of painting and seeing" (3).

Chapter 1, "Genre Painting in a New Century: Jerome Myers, Edmund C. Tarbell, and Elizabeth Shippen Green," examines how the three artists referenced genre traditions—those codified by George Caleb Bingham, William Sidney Mount, and Richard Caton Woodville during the antebellum era as well as those established by later artists, such as Eastman Johnson and John George Brown—for disparate purposes. "A sense of grafting, or of borrowing, mediating, or repurposing, runs through the art discussed in this chapter," Fagg writes (18). Importantly, he focuses as much on how critics of the period—like Frank Jewett Mather, Charles Caffin, and James Huneker—cast genre as a player in their respective stories about American art.

Fagg shows how Myers worked at the margins of genre painting to navigate competing claims on his art. Because Myers painted New York's immigrant neighborhoods, some critics associated him with urban reform. But other critics, especially Mather, hoped that Myers would revive the genre tradition. This is why, Fagg explains in detail, Mather paired Johnson's *The Old Stagecoach* (1871) with Myers's *Street Carousel* (1906) for a two-page spread in a 1907 issue of *Literary Digest*.

Meanwhile, Tarbell's interiors, Fagg claims, must be understood in the context of Boston's appreciation for Johannes Vermeer during the first two decades of the twentieth century. His brand of genre painting served Boston's cosmopolitanism, linking the city to Europe through art-historical references to Old World representations of refinement and poise.

The chapter closes with an analysis of how Green employed genre conventions in her illustrations and advertisements for *Harper's Monthly* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Fagg analyzes one of her advertisements for Ivory soap (1919) as a gendered domestic interior that hearkens back to the class tensions between servants and ladies of the house often featured in nineteenth-century genre paintings. At the same time, because her illustrations operated within the modern institution of mass media, they "reenergized motifs that had become moribund" (18). The chapter, therefore, successfully advances the book's main theme, which is to examine how anachronism was artfully deployed by artists and critics both for and against modernity and modernism.

Chapter 2, "John Sloan's Intimate Tenements," examines "Sloan's genre scenes as a simultaneously revelatory and constrained interpretation of everyday life in the tenements"

(55). Fagg establishes that "genre" is an appropriate term for some of Sloan's works by identifying in them objects and motifs common in the tradition: "buckets, brooms, rags, clothespins, clotheslines, houseplants, needles and thread, flatirons, groceries, crockery" (55). Moreover, Sloan often includes windows, passageways, and nooks in his interior spaces and paints domestic materials and objects, such as aprons, curtains, and glassware, with a delicate brush.

Sloan's genre scenes, Fagg concludes, are both "revelatory" and "constrained" because, as with the other art examined in the book, they addressed a particular modernity, as it surfaced, in what many deemed a hackneyed pictorial mode. It is important to emphasize that Fagg's point is not simply that genre was a worn-out fashion that Sloan was reluctant to abandon; it is that genre was a pictorial mode essential to Sloan's progressivism. To develop a period realism that satisfied personal, cultural, and political definitions of "everyday life," Sloan spliced together French Realism, European modernism, and genre conventions—or "picture writing," as some critics called it (63). In a nod to Raymond Williams, Fagg notes that artists with an interest in everyday life searched for a "structure of feeling" appropriate to their worldview as well as the priorities of critics and patrons (5).[2] To structure that feeling, Sloan and others drew from genre conventions and pushed the boundaries of the tradition.

The aim of Chapter 3, "Brand Ordinary: Norman Rockwell and the Commercial Illustration of Everyday Life," is to "decenter [Rockwell's] art or at least relocate it within a living tradition of American genre painting that ran right through 1905–1945" (2). Fagg observes that Rockwell's mature work operated in the context of an everyday life constructed by a media industry catering to the white middle class. Commercial magazine illustration was a sphere of "verbal and visual discourse" that resembled that in which historical genre paintings were produced, reproduced, and received (93). Rockwell operated within a national mass culture, made possible by photomechanical reproduction, that was a more modern version of the "emblem books, almanacs, cartoon caricatures, or political jokes" that gave antebellum genre paintings visual and discursive context (93). Fagg references "transmedial storytelling," a term from media theory, to describe how genre paintings, graphics, and text cooperate in a worldbuilding project.

Fagg is interested in why, therefore, Rockwell, but not Myers or Sloan, was excluded from 1930s exhibitions that established a canon of genre painting in the United States. These exhibitions, especially *American Genre: The Social Scene in Paintings and Prints, 1800–1935*, which opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1935, are the subject of Chapter 4, "The 1930s Genre Painting Revival." Lloyd Goodrich played a significant role in the revival, first as a contributing editor of *The Arts* magazine and then as curator of the Whitney Museum. Fagg tracks how, in their pursuit of a national culture during the interwar years, Goodrich and others institutionalized American genre painting.

Fagg documents how genre conventions, reinvigorated by museum acquisitions and exhibitions, informed the contentious development of American Scene painting and Social Realism during the Depression era. As we well know, this was the decade when controversies about the boundaries and instrumentality of everyday life reached a fever pitch. For some (like Henry Appleton Read and Virgil Barker), genre traditions sustained nostalgia for a quaint Jeffersonian past; for others (like Moses Soyer and Meyer Schapiro), they represented a backward past, blind to social progress and racial justice.

Two brief but significant passages stand out in this chapter. First, Fagg observes that some African American art of the 1920s and 1930s was produced within institutional frameworks similar to those that shaped the genre revival. He explains that the Harmon Foundation, one of the principal patrons of African American art during the period, steered artists toward genre conventions that many now view as encouraging racial stereotypes.[3] Fagg writes, "By depicting African American life in idioms proximate to those in which it had previously been ridiculed [in the nineteenth century], Johnson, Motley, and others could subvert, but also risked affirming, stereotypes" (129).

Fagg also points out that by situating historical genre painting as the wellspring of American Scene painting, Goodrich clouded how 1930s observers viewed the historical work. "American Scene painting, and notions of honesty and simplicity bound up in its subject matter and representational form," he writes, "became a lens through which to view nineteenth-century American art during the interwar years" (138). In other words, Fagg asks us to consider how the regionalism, whiteness, and masculinity of the American Scene prevented 1930s viewers from identifying the more complex functions and meanings of some antebellum genre paintings. This is a critical point that merits further elaboration, as discussed below.

Chapter 5, "Ben Shahn and Jacob Lawrence: Beyond Genre Painting," examines how the work of these artists both acknowledged and sought to surpass genre conventions. Fagg might have chosen any number of artists to showcase in this chapter, since realist narrative painting was abundant at this time. In the introduction, he explains that Shahn and Lawrence stand out because they "expanded their vision of everyday life through murals, series, reference to photographic archives, prose-poetic captions, and elements of abstraction, while remaining at least in touching distance of the tradition" (3).

Fagg focuses on Shahn's *Sunday Paintings*, twenty-one works exhibited at Julien Levy Gallery in spring 1940, which he reads as less overtly political and more "folksy," "quiet," and "banal" than the artist's earlier works (160). Fagg attributes the shift in Shahn's work to his exposure to the genre-revival exhibitions in New York, the discontent of some writers with the cloistered worldview of Social Realists, and his extensive travels through the Midwest and South. These trips, funded by New Deal agencies and made between 1933 and the *Sunday Paintings* exhibition, caused Shahn, Fagg argues, to shed his urban cynicism. Reflecting on his travels, Shahn stated, "I realized everything I had gotten about the condition of miners or cotton pickers I'd gotten on 14th Street" (163).

Quoting Robert Coates, Selden Rodman, and others, Fagg shows how the critical reception of the *Sunday Paintings* noted a surprising "detachment from the spheres of work and politics" in the new work (164). Shahn's *Vacant Lot* (1939) is held up here as evidence of his turn toward at least a genre-adjacent mode of representation. The curator James Thrall Soby noted of Shahn, "'From a savage commentary on a West Virginia coal strike he could turn to the poignant *Vacant Lot*, so penetrating in its evocation of childhood isolation and absorption in play'" (163).

This passage raises some important questions about how Fagg defines genre painting. *Vacant Lot* has just one small, obscure figure; it is aesthetically modernist, in that its colors and forms are reduced to a point just shy of abstraction; and it features almost no narrative or social codes to contextualize or deconstruct. In other words, *Vacant Lot* is a *flat*

painting: it represents little of the information we expect of a conventional genre painting. If a boy playing ball is all that is needed for a painting to be a genre painting, as Fagg proposes, then the category is not all that meaningful. In the same way that Goodrich's conflation of American Scene painting with genre painting might be said to do a disservice to more complexly coded historical works, calling *Vacant Lot* a painting that extends the genre tradition might be said to neuter the work performed by some genre paintings and by the scholars who have unpacked their coded meanings.

Re-Envisioning the Everyday is a superb book that opens up new ways of thinking about American painting and illustration during the first decades of the twentieth century. Fagg's arguments and visual analyses are supported with references to period criticism and scholarship in media studies, literary history, and art history. At times, though, scholars of earlier American genre painting will sense that Fagg misrepresents it as a mode that was out of touch with the complexities of those earlier eras. He writes in the introduction, for instance, that historical genre paintings "tend toward gently humorous and sentimental types and motifs as well as moralizing messages and harmful stereotypes. . . . At its best, genre painting bears a close—if condescending, rose-tinted, or in other ways distorted—relationship to the everyday life it depicts, interprets, and constructs" (2). But artists like Bingham, Mount, and Woodville produced many critical paintings that represented the hardest aspects, not the quaintest, of American democracy and capitalism as they took shape. To be fair, Fagg acknowledges as much in a brief passage that gives proper due to Johns's foundational book, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (1991). He concedes that antebellum genre paintings might be more layered than they appear: "In Shahn's genre paintings, as in Mount's and Woodville's, men standing around talking might not just be standing around talking" (166). Had this point been emphasized at the beginning of the book, and occasionally amplified, Fagg might have offered a more nuanced differentiation between genre, American Scene, and Social Realist paintings.

Having said that, Fagg's analysis of Lawrence does exactly this. The artist, he argues, extended genre painting's inherent complexity to deconstruct notions of home and domesticity, especially in his series *The Migration of the Negro* (1940–41), which disavows "genre painting's orderly, cozy, and intimate construction of domestic space" (180). "The genre tradition," Fagg adds, "invested ordinary things with layers of allusion and association, encouraging and schooling viewers to look for encoded, bifurcated meanings in scenes of everyday life" (191). This is a more satisfying analysis of how an artist invested historical genre paintings' shifty spaces with modern and racially conscious emotional content.

Can there be a theory of genre painting? Not unless there is a theory of everyday life, and that is a tall order. However, *Re-Envisioning the Everyday* is a major contribution to the topic and a remarkable compendium of information about US art and art criticism during the first third of the twentieth century.

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Editors' Note: John Fagg is a contributor to this issue's In the Round, with "John Sloan's Slow Awakening." Justin Wolff is a member of *Panorama*'s Advisory Council.

Notes

[1] Wai Chee Dimock, introduction to "Remapping Genre," special issue, *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (2007): 1379.

[2] See Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–36.

[3] See Mary Ann Calo, *Distinction and Denial: Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920–40* (University of Michigan Press, 2007), 139.