

Book Review: 'Voyages of the Self: Pairs, Parallels, and Patterns in American Art and Literature'

by Robert L. Pincus

"Voyages of the Self: Pairs, Parallels, and Patterns in American Art and Literature" by Barbara Novak; Oxford University Press; 304 pages; \$35.

It's widely accepted that 19th century America produced world-class writers. Even those who haven't read them know the names Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain and Henry James. One or another person would add this or that writer to the list, but the point would be the same.

For the best American painters of the 1800s, it's been a tougher, longer road to recognition. As remarkable as they are, mid-19th century artists like Martin Johnson Heade, Frederick Church and Fitz Hugh Lane are nowhere near as familiar. Later painters like Albert Pinkham Ryder, Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins fare better, but still face skepticism on the world stage.

AMERICAN VOYAGES - Barbara Novak pairs writers, artists, and enhances our understanding of each in her book 'Voyages of the Self.' She illuminates Fitz Hugh Lane's radiant paintings, including 'Brace's Rock, Eastern Point, Gloucester' (circa 1864), top, and 'Boston Harbor' (1855-58). CNS Photo courtesy of Oxford University Press.

"One rarely finds earlier American art in European collections," writes Barbara Novak in the preface to a new edition of her landmark book, "American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism and the American Experience." "Even in the United States, art of this period is not naturally included in introductory surveys."

This book has been reissued in paperback along with her 1980 classic in the field, "Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-75," to coincide with a new book, "Voyages of the Self: Pairs, Parallels, and Patterns in American Art and Literature." No one has done more to further the place of this work

in museum collections and in history books. The artists Novak has championed are far more appreciated than they were when "American Painting" made its debut in 1969.

"Voyages," generously illustrated, is billed as the last in a trilogy, though there's no need to read her previous efforts to appreciate it. Novak distills, refines and expands upon her earlier books, looking at painters in relation to the literature and major philosophical trends of the day. She has always been committed to the big picture, the way, say, Emerson's insight that "we want the Exact and the Vast; we want our Dreams, and our Mathematics" found a parallel in the seascapes of his contemporary, Fitz Hugh Lane. In "American Painting," she revealed how Lane joined his love of precise technique and measurement to scenes that have a sort of spiritual hush to them.

The term luminist is now wedded to Lane and other American landscape painters from the 1850s and 1860s. And in "Voyages," Novak hones her ideas about them.

"In luminist painting," she writes, "the self has vanished along with time. ... With Lane's paintings, the canvas yields up its glow as you retreat, until from the end of the gallery it often seems as if the painting is holding up a pocket of air and light."

In six of the book's seven chapters she parallels the career of an artist and a writer: Homer with William James, Dickinson with Ryder and so on. (Thoreau, the exception, is paired with the idea of Indian Selfhood.)

Her insights about writers are as fine as those about artists. Of Whitman, she observes: "He liked, as he often said, to loaf. Yet to fault him for this is also to misunderstand the needs and demands of poetry, which

flourishes in a kind of potent idleness that to the unsympathetic seems lazy or self-indulgent."

Novak ruminates on Dickinson and Ryder's retreat from society, a characteristic they shared along with their tendency toward riveting imagery. "Reclusiveness is itself a kind of empowerment," she says, "a restriction of the outer world's access, a territorial enthronement."

Taking the idea of the self as a theme gives the book a flexible kind of unity. She pairs Whitman with Church as major representatives of the optimistic democratic self, with a penchant for epic scale work; she juxtaposes Homer with James as examples of the pragmatic self, with their more tempered view of art and writing, rooted in direct observation and immediate experience.

Novak calls her book "a narrative journey." True to this description, the chapters have a momentum that carries us from chapter to chapter, from the mid-18th century through the mid-20th century. And her way of conveying the stories of these artists and writers makes one want to view and read them anew. What better purpose can arts criticism and history serve?

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