

Bernard Smith, *Modernism's History*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1998, 376 pp., no illus. \$60 Cdn

Ellen L. Ramsay

Volume 27, Number 1-2, 2000

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069737ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069737ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Ramsay, E. L. (2000). Review of [Bernard Smith, *Modernism's History*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1998, 376 pp., no illus. \$60 Cdn]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 27(1-2), 156–159. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069737ar>

and Helen Rosenau, may suggest just how relevant this material is today.

Although not the author's explicit aim, perhaps, the book does raise some interesting questions for contemporary architects and architectural historians. It alerts both to possible determinants of their services and practices that reside outside their constituted professional arena. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries an architect might be no more influential on the construction and understanding of the built environment than a poem by William Blake, a treatise by a physician or the "observations" of a donor or governor. Also highlighted are the multiple roles of those involved in the complex ways in which hospitals were conceived and constructed. A single person might be a donor, governor, architect, benefactor and beneficiary; hospitals might be built for visitors as much as for the sick; as an "exhibition space," as well as an apparatus for air and warmth. Likewise, as Stevenson so often demonstrates, a building is also a part of an urban space and public sphere, and one would do well to pay heed to this enlarged view. Finally, *Medicine and Magnificence* invites future scholars to explore more fully some of the topics and themes brought to view by the breadth of this work and the fractured taxonomy of hospital and asylum architecture that it discusses. "Moveable" and "Flying" hospitals not only conjure the bizarre and fantastic; they also, in this era of medics without borders and refugee camps, suggest the useful and timely. While the depiction of the visitors/inhabitants, donors, physicians and architects is vivid here, there remain to be considered the sick, poor, aging and home-

less who often came to reside in these buildings. And there are hints that sexuality and gender were clearly important aspects of how contemporaries understood these buildings. Readers will be intrigued by comments about "medicine that was literally patriarchal, that is of the line of Abraham" (p. 29) and others, provoked by the women spectators depicted in Hogarth's "The Rake in Bedlam," that "the identification of other people's curiosity was ... ultimately a gendered one in the eighteenth century" (p. 96). Such provocative hints given passing reference here will no doubt inspire future research.

In *Medicine and Magnificence* readers might find familiar images and names; they will, however, find unexpected interpretations and unusual lines of argument, as well. They will also find suggestions for other ways of thinking about architectural production and unconventional formats in which to do so. It is well worth reading carefully.

SHERRY MCKAY
University of British Columbia

Notes

- 1 Marc-Antoine Laugier, *Essai sur l'architecture*, 2nd edn (1755) quoted in Christine Stevenson, *Medicine and Magnificence* (New Haven and London, 2000), 5.
- 2 I am thinking of Michel Foucault's comments on the insights offered by Borges' description of "a certain Chinese encyclopedia." "Preface," *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970), xv.

Bernard Smith, *Modernism's History*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1998, 376 pp., no illus. \$60 Cdn.

Bernard Smith, a professor and critic who has carved out a considerable reputation in the writing of Australian art history, now turns his hand towards the European modernist tradition in his recent volume, *Modernism's History*. His name was established with the publication of *Place, Taste and Tradition* (1943), an account of Australian art since 1788, one of the earliest Marxist accounts of art in the English language. Smith's book evaluated the development of Australian art in its social, political and cultural context, as well as analysing the influence of individual artists and art movements in Europe, North America and the South Pacific. *Place, Taste and Tradition* was also the first overview of Australian art since William Moore's *Story of Australian Art* (1934). Other volumes by Smith followed, including *Education Through Art in Australia* (1958), *European Vision of the South Pacific* (1960), *Australian Painting 1788–1960* (1962), and the invaluable *Documents on Art and Taste in*

Australia: The Colonial Period 1770–1914 (1975). Together with numerous other volumes and articles on Australian art, Smith has charted a reliable course for scholars to follow. Along with years of teaching at the University of Melbourne and the Power Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Sydney, he has achieved a substantial position in the historiography of Australian art. Smith's recent foray into the mainstream modernist tradition should, therefore, be viewed with great interest. His voice from the margins of the European tradition in Australia may be expected to leave its mark, and one may hope that this volume is the first of such endeavours.

Bernard Smith sets out in *Modernism's History* to establish a new period style for the modernist tendency in art between ca. 1890 and ca. 1960. He asserts that the modern period in art is no longer "modern" and must be characterized as a style cycle equal to that of the Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque and Rococo; towards this end he coins the term "Formalesque" to describe the period in art which was oriented towards formalism and ultimately towards abstraction. The Formalesque may then be

divided into three phases. The early phase of the Formalesque entailed the influence of both the occult and the “exotic” (or “primitive”) as sources between ca. 1890 and ca. 1915. A mid-Formalesque period emerged between ca. 1916 and ca. 1945 as the Formalesque was gradually institutionalized. A late Formalesque appeared from ca. 1945 to ca. 1960, to be superseded by post-modernism, which Smith sees as the final efflorescence of a counter-movement in twentieth century modernism that had been growing in opposition to the Formalesque since Dada and Surrealism. The book is roughly organized according to these three phases of the Formalesque and attempts to provide a coherent overview of the art, modernist and anti-modernist, of this period.

The modernist Formalesque falls under the general rubric of “cultural imperialism,” a term Smith elaborates on towards the end of the book although he introduces the concept in the earliest pages. He uses his singular world position in Australia to provide two concrete examples of this imperialism in a study of modern art in Japan and in South Africa, treating the Formalesque as a Eurocentric force interacting with indigenous cultures. Towards this end he traces three distinct “moments” of cultural imperialism. The first is the adoption of the Formalesque at the expense of indigenous styles. Then there is the assimilation of the art to meet local needs and intentions. And finally, in a post-colonial context, there is the moment when contemporary indigenous people begin to create work that combines the traditional with the techniques and aesthetic of the Formalesque. This latter process produces tensions between a nascent nationalism and the universalizing tendencies of the aesthetic. Smith’s next innovation is to coin the term “Eurusan” to describe the culture which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, one that integrated tendencies of Western Europe and the United States. This he calls the Eurusan Formalesque. He argues throughout that formalism was a nineteenth-century cultural achievement and only ended its hegemony in 1968 when modern art ceased to be modern. He then interlinks the Eurusan tendency to the contemporary interest in indigenous arts.

This book owes some of its theoretical premises to the work of Edward Said. In particular, Smith looks to Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) for his construction of the “Other” in the Formalesque and, as in Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), takes the next step to include oppositional art forms. Smith observes a “contrapuntal” reading throughout: “We need a synthetic view, a view that might see European art from indigenous Polynesian, Melanesian or Australian viewpoints (6).” He also examines the distinctions between art in the sense of fine art and art in the general sense, including craft, which has been used to elide so much of indigenous art. One of the most striking points Smith makes in his contrapuntal reading of art is that early modernism incorporated aspects of indigenous art

into its aesthetic with the result that later indigenous artists were able to empathize with the indigenous element in the early modernist tradition. This empathy aided in the universalizing trend of what Smith calls the Eurocentric tradition. The development is mapped out very carefully in the book, which ties the interest in primitivism to the history of modern imperialism. Smith charts a course from Cézanne to Monet, Van Gogh and Matisse, examining the influence of Said’s Orientalist notions on each and tying them to French colonial expansion in each specific case. European art developments, therefore, are related to Third World conquest, and the rise of primitivism can be matched with the growth of empires.

The art of Gauguin becomes crucial for Smith in understanding the international influences in twentieth-century art. For Smith, Gauguin was an unwitting part of cultural imperialism, despite his resistance to the imperialism he encountered in Tahiti. The impact of his work can be traced in three broad streams. First, there is the occult Formalesque of Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich. Then there is the picturesque Formalesque of the Fauves and Matisse. And finally there is the Cubist Formalesque of Picasso, Braque and their followers. Among the features of this new art are:

a freer emphasis upon form, texture and colour treated as relatively independent entities; an immanent trend towards abstraction; a flattening of the picture plane; a new stress upon the physicality of the work; and its presentation as a concrete material object possessed of its own “reality” and not as a representation of nature (103).

It is, however, Smith’s concern with “meaning” in the Formalesque, whether in its dimensions of primitivism or the occult, that makes his analysis stand out among those of other art historians. Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, de Stijl, Cubism and Expressionism are all related by him to broader political and literary avant-garde movements within the period style of the Formalesque.

The Formalesque also gave rise to oppositional expressions. Dada, Surrealism and die Neue Sachlichkeit became central as radical critiques of the Formalesque. Smith sees Marcel Duchamp’s work as the precursor of all art that critiques the Formalesque, including current tendencies such as post-modernism. He asserts that art after Dada began to privilege meaning in art, whereas Dada had presented no meaning; an anti-art. Surrealism and die Neue Sachlichkeit then developed as the last avant-garde tendencies within and oppositional to the Formalesque, ones in which meaning took precedence over form. This then concludes the early phase of the Formalesque.

The Formalesque next entered a mature phase where it ceased to be avant-garde and went through a process of institu-

tionalization. Smith takes us from France to Russia, Germany, the United States and England for a study of the ways in which art ceased to be avant-garde during the 1920s. In a lucid and entertaining account, Smith describes the adoption by art museums of the Formalesque. The section on the United States provides new insights into nativist factors in taste contesting modernism during the first half of the twentieth century. Throughout the remainder of the book, attention to nativist taste provides a useful foil to the international tendencies of modernism and inserts a pertinent political dimension into the debate.

Before commencing on the third stage of the Formalesque, Smith examines oppositional and avant-garde forms of art in the 1930s. He resituates the often neglected decade as central in this stage and, in an excellent and succinct section on the Mexican muralists, Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, asserts that these artists were the first in the century to confront the pre-Renaissance artistic tradition of their country and the presence of indigenous peoples. Thus, Mexican mural art became the first truly post-colonial art of the twentieth century. While some of the information here may be found in other sources, there is much original contribution to analysis. The section on the Soviet Union is particularly interesting as Smith digs beneath the phenomenon of Stalinist Socialist Realism to uncover its origins in the conservative opposition to the Constructivists in the 1920s. In this section of the book, the author examines both avant-garde and rearguard tendencies in the art of the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, Mexico, the United States, France and Britain.

In the section on the Late Formalesque, Smith examines the shift in the art world's centre from Europe to the United States. He describes the struggle between the protagonists of formalism, and the anti-formalism of both Dada and Surrealism on the one hand, and nativist American scene painting on the other hand. There is a useful section on Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and action painting with references to the scholarship of Fred Orton, Serge Guilbaut and Ronald Paulson. He also analyses art institutions and exhibitions during the McCarthy era, including the exhibitions sponsored by the International Council of MOMA and the U.S. State Department.

The last and perhaps most challenging section of the book deals with the "Eurasian," discussed above. Smith is aware that the term "Eurocentric" is available to describe the tendency of this art, but intends the term he uses to resemble "Eurasian" to denote a more specific matrix of relationships. This is useful in highlighting the influence of Asian artists on Western artists. Here, Smith draws on some distinguished critics who called for a new period style to be developed during the 1960s in the last heydays of formalism. Just as the Great War of 1914-18 is cited as heralding the beginning of twentieth-century modernism, so

the Vietnam War is invoked as ending the hegemony of formalist painting, to be followed by the ascension of popular culture as a "Eurasian-inspired cultural imperialism even in its most oppositional modes" (265). Here the complex and controversial art of Joseph Beuys is discussed in some detail as an example of Eurasian art at its best in the vigorous post-war art scene in Germany. There was a growing consensus in Europe and Asia, asserts Smith, that "during the 1980s the U.S. segment of the Eurasian visual culture declined in influence and quality" (268). In a very convincing penultimate section entitled "The Turn to Meaning," Smith again takes up the theme of meaning in art from the 1960s to the present day. Smith charts seven influences from allied fields of thought, including psychoanalysis, Marxism, anthropology, feminism and linguistics, to provide his examples of tools used in the new search for meaning in art during the 1980s and 1990s. In his conclusion he states:

The attempts that have been made by Barthes and Derrida to subordinate the visual arts to a linguistic imperium serve to remind us of the great artistic achievements of the Formalesque style, conducted on the assumption that presence is prior to meaning ... However ... the visual arts cannot be accommodated comfortably within either an epistemology of presence or an epistemology of meaning ... they can exist creatively only within a dualism that endows an arresting presence of forms with infusions of meaning. It is by their forms that they are constructed and by their meanings (when made) that they enter into the public realm of interpretation, a process to which there is no end and no authoritative conclusion (304).

The quote serves to illustrate the philosophical sophistication with which Bernard Smith approaches his subject.

The concluding chapter of the book then brings us back to the theme of Orientalism with its examination of cultural imperialism and the Formalesque. Smith describes the global spread of Eurasian art with its threads of connection to military and economic imperialism, while leaving room for relative autonomy in the cultural realm. Here, Smith takes two concrete examples to stand as models for the greater intermixing of cultures: that of Japan as model of an Asian society and that of South Africa as a model of a "settler society." The argument is quite complex, for cultural imperialism is divided into three further "moments," roughly equivalent to "stages." In the first moment of cultural imperialism, traditional indigenous styles are devalued and rejected. In the second moment, the Formalesque style is brought to the colonized, while at the same time there is an effort to reinstate the status and value of the traditional indigenous styles which had been rejected. In the third moment, art is created which combines the traditional arts of the colonized culture

with the techniques and aesthetic of the Formalesque. While this new art risks condemnation as “kitsch” or “tourist” art, critics may more appropriately recognize it as a “hybrid” culture: “There are no pure arts any more than there are pure ‘races’” (309). He asserts that only now in the post-colonial period is the third moment being assessed positively.

A shortcoming of *Modernism's History* may be seen as its use of some of the norms of the Formalesque it describes. For instance, art's history here is still predominantly the history of male artists and the roll call of artists' names will sound familiar to anyone who knows the standard surveys of western art (with some exceptions). Having said this, however, I should note that Smith welcomes new research into feminist art. He himself includes a brief but sympathetic section on “Feminist Art” in which he suggests that the feminist art of the 1970s challenged the hegemony of the Formalesque more than any other development. He also argues that it was a liberating discourse that transcends the “essentialist” critique given to it by post-structuralists of a decade later. While Smith includes post-colonial theorist Edward Said and welcomes work on post-colonial art (he discusses the work of Mexican, Japanese and South African artists in this volume), perhaps the inclusion of feminist post-colonialists such as Gayatri Spivak might have caused Smith to reconsider before applying an overarching label to the diverse range of work that constituted twentieth-century art. A desig-

nation of a period style may still be useful, but it is more likely to be “Modernism” followed by “Post-Modernism” than “Formalesque.” The word “formal,” taken from “formalism,” is quite limited when describing the art of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Those art historians to whom Smith might most appeal are less likely to accept the necessity of another quest for a grand period style, since period styles are seen as the product of a Eurocentric and imperialist canon. These criticisms of the volume are thus offset by a willingness on Smith's part to embrace new work in the field.

The overall aim of the book is bound to provoke interesting debate. The very fact that Smith proposes a period style may renew questions about the value of developing objective historical categories. Whatever one's perspective on such categories, one is left with the satisfaction of having encountered a new perspective on modern art and with having travelled down familiar paths with unique insight. Bernard Smith's study is a complex and multilayered work which incisively opens up new areas with questions addressed to the now grand tradition of modern art. He has used his Australian perspective to advantage, providing us with a rare post-colonial viewpoint. The writing is lucid and scholarly, and his openness to new work is to be commended.

ELLEN L. RAMSAY
York University