

Mary O'Connor and Katherine Tweedie, *Seduced by Modernity: The Photography of Margaret Watkins*. Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, 352 pp., 172 duotone photographs, \$49.95 Cdn.

Debra Antoncic

Volume 33, Number 1-2, 2008

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069559ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069559ar>

[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

Antoncic, D. (2008). Review of [Mary O'Connor and Katherine Tweedie, *Seduced by Modernity: The Photography of Margaret Watkins*. Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, 352 pp., 172 duotone photographs, \$49.95 Cdn.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 33(1-2), 138-140. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069559ar>

Book Reviews

Comptes-rendus de livres

Mary O'Connor and Katherine Tweedie, *Seduced by Modernity: The Photography of Margaret Watkins*. Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, 352 pp., 172 duotone photographs, \$49.95 Cdn.

This book on the photography of Margaret Watkins is the first in-depth study of a relatively unknown Canadian photographer. Supported by a selection of black-and-white reproductions, it falls somewhere between a biography and a photographic collection in book form. The authors have consulted extensive archival materials, including essays, poetry, notes, and family letters, to produce an engaging account of an extraordinary woman within the larger context of the major social and cultural preoccupations of the twentieth century.

Born in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1884, Margaret Watkins was the daughter of a prominent local businessman and grew up in a privileged household surrounded by female relatives. This life of material comfort ended abruptly when Margaret was fifteen, when illness and financial difficulties forced her father's dry goods business into bankruptcy. In order to augment the family income during straitened circumstances, Margaret produced a variety of handicrafts and domestic objects for sale locally. The authors connect this early production to her mature work in photography as evidence of an artistic and resourceful nature. Surviving letters and archival documents also attest to the artist's interest in music and her eagerness to escape the confines of home and family.

Watkins left Hamilton in 1908 at the age of twenty-four and initially found work at the Roycroft Arts and Crafts Community in East Aurora, New York. Loosely modelled on the Arts and Crafts philosophy of William Morris, the community of artists and artisans was led by the charismatic Elbert Hubbard and Alice Moore Hubbard. Among the surviving ephemera in the Watkins archives are cards with sayings and maxims produced by both Hubbards. The fact that Watkins held on to these is taken as evidence of the importance their philosophy and work ethic held for her although she moved on to the Sidney Lanier Camp in Maine in 1911. As O'Connor and Tweedie describe it, this camp was more explicitly anti-modernist and catered to a wealthy clientele seeking escape from the pressures of modern life. Watkins stayed until 1913 and returned each summer for several years, acting as the camp photographer.

Based on the evidence of the photographs taken of dramatic productions and daily life at the camp, the authors describe her working aesthetic at this time as Pictorialist. Watkins' first formal instruction in photography was in Boston, at the Arthur Jamieson portrait studio, where she was employed in 1913. In 1914 she attended the Clarence White Summer School of Photography, also in Maine, thus beginning a close association with

White that would continue until his death in 1925. A founding member, along with Alfred Stieglitz, of the Photo-Secession Group, White continued to work in a Pictorialist mode although he encouraged his many students to experiment with objects close at hand. The authors describe how this freedom at the school produced unusual results in photographs of dining room chairs, milk bottles, and running water. Watkins later became an instructor at the school, and her students included Margaret Bourke-White and Paul Outerbridge.

With this expanded technical training, in 1915 Watkins was able to land a job in New York as assistant to the portrait photographer Alice Boughton. A small inheritance helped financially as Watkins began to establish her own photographic practice, initially continuing to work in the Pictorialist mode. *Seduced by Modernity* includes several examples of this type of photographic portrait, which reproduces the aesthetic of traditional paintings. At the same time, Watkins turned her attention to the mundane objects around her and produced some of her most iconic images in studies of the domestic realm. Her own kitchen and bath are featured in several now famous photographs such as *The Kitchen Sink*, *Domestic Symphony*, and *Spirals*, all of which date to 1919. A selection of this still-life genre was featured in an October 1921 issue of *Vanity Fair*, part of a series on new approaches to photography that made explicit connections between this work and modernist or cubist artistic trends.

Perhaps inadvertently, the *Vanity Fair* feature also drew attention to the potential alliance between avant-garde photography and advertising. Quoting Patricia Johnston's research on Edward Steichen, the authors explain that in the early 1920s advertisements included illustrations rather than photographs, but this situation had changed dramatically by 1928. O'Connor and Tweedie credit Watkins with developing a "photographic language for advertising" in her photographs produced from 1924 to 1928, working in the field at the same time as the better known (and more financially successful) Steichen. Along with Steichen, Watkins worked for the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency and also produced advertising photographs for Macy's.

For those interested in establishing and promoting photography as a fine art, the commodification of photographs in advertising introduced a potential problem. As Roger Hull has argued, Steichen was uniquely successful in retaining his reputation as an artist while also working as a commercial photographer. Hull credits Steichen's status to the careful separation of his work in advertising from his fine art photographs.¹ According to O'Connor and Tweedie, Watkins did not differentiate the two fields in the same way and considered commercial work as equivalent to fine-art photography. She even included photographs produced for advertising in exhibitions. Emblem-

atic of an independent woman supporting herself from her own talents and ambitions, this failure to position her work as fine art may help explain Watkins' long absence from the photographic canon.

The authors are quick to address this problem by arguing for a fundamental alignment between commodity culture and aesthetics within the "larger project of modernity." Nevertheless, the foundations of the history of photography in the West have been erected on the conceptualization of photography as creative expression and the promotion of photographs as singular objects produced by an individual creative genius. This critical construction was formulated in the 1930s by Beaumont Newhall under Alfred Barr at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.² Watkins' commercial work, no matter how rigorously shaped by formalist aesthetics, was perhaps tainted by lingering associations with commerce.

But Watkins' legacy was also clearly disadvantaged by her physical absence from New York during this crucial period. Embarking on a European trip in 1928, she never returned to North America, living the rest of her life in Glasgow. From this base she joined a Cook's tour along the Rhine to Cologne in 1928, where she attended the International Press Exhibition (*Pressa*) and was exposed to the most radical and advanced European photography and design of the time. Her notes indicate her reaction to the extraordinary dynamism of the Soviet display, orchestrated by El Lissitzky, in stark contrast to the lacklustre American exhibit—a "monument to complacent prosperity." Watkins also attended the *Film und Foto* exhibition in Stuttgart in 1929 and the International Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931, and took a guided trip to Moscow and Leningrad in 1933.

The authors have included a sampling of photographs taken on these excursions, including images taken surreptitiously at *Pressa*, where photography was forbidden, and many of the more than six hundred images taken in Russia. Details of her working practice are not included, however, and the reader is left wondering how Watkins was able to photograph covertly if she was using the large format Graflex, visible in the distorted self-portrait used as the cover image. The authors might also have explored the technical aspects of other subjects, such as the aerial photographs of the Glasgow shipyards and the interior shots down into the hull of a ship, which would have required strength and agility along with technical finesse to manage the bulky equipment.

Another limitation of the book is the tendency of quoting directly from other sources, at times resulting in disruptive and awkward passages of supporting text. Except where the prose is extraordinarily evocative or when Watkins herself is being quoted, paraphrasing would have been a better option. In their efforts to produce a full account of the artist's life, the authors also read a great deal into brief musings and attribute motivations

and ideas with little substantiation. One example may suffice: "As the war came to an end, her focus on kitchen objects may be seen as an attempt to focus on the tangible that was present as opposed to the absurd horror of the trenches" (p. 119). This propensity is particularly evident when the authors assert political motivations and an awakening social conscience, such as the description of Watkins' trip to Russia and her experiences during the Second World War.

The authors have mined a range of theoretical perspectives in fleshing out Watkins' life and work. Feminist theory, literary theory, and critical writing on the city and modernity have been deployed in order to analyze her life and artistic production, and at times this profusion of perspectives clouds the text. The authors try valiantly to let the photographs drive the narrative, with mixed results, and their interpretations are sometimes tenuous. Further, the otherwise comprehensive bibliography is missing some important critical writing on photography in the context of political economy.

For the authors, writing from a feminist perspective, the financial concerns and professional limitations that Watkins confronted throughout her life can be attributed to her position as a woman in a patriarchal society. While they acknowledge aspects of penalty and privilege, the authors frame Watkins' life and legacy as disadvantaged by gender from the opening passages of the book. As an unmarried female, she was the target of gossip and innuendo following the death of Clarence White and the ensuing court battle over ownership of several of his photographs. According to the authors, this scandal drove Watkins to leave New York two years later. Also following this narrative, she was forced to stay in Glasgow to care for aging female relatives, and this exile led ultimately to the loss of her career. Exhibited regularly in the 1920s in several international photographic exhibitions, her work dropped from sight until the 1980s.

The authors enumerate the debilitating effects of family demands and poverty, yet the details of her life reveal that she came from a bourgeois background, received a small inheritance from a cousin, and at times benefited from other family connections, remaining in the family home in Glasgow until her death in 1969. The authors also neglect to consider fully the historical circumstances of the Depression and post-war Britain and how difficult the period was in economic terms and not just for women. Perhaps the limitations of capitalism might be considered the larger culprit.

Rejecting literary critic Marshall Berman's definition of modernity as lived experience within a Western capitalist society that transcends gender, the authors have instead turned to feminist scholarship for perspectives on the implications of modernity for women. They argue that Watkins, as an artist and a woman, functioned as both producer and consumer (and if she were still living, her collection of vintage photographs

might have elevated her to the role of art patron as well). But there are also strong hints that Watkins resisted the forces of capitalism, turning first to the anti-modernist communities of the Roycrofters and the Lanier Camp, and later was sustained by a bohemian circle of artists and writers among her New York friends. Aspects of her working practice also attest to this resistance, evident in images such as *The Kitchen Sink* and *Phenix Cheese*, 1923. While the latter was produced for an advertisement, these photographs challenge commoditization by exposing the detritus of life: dirty dishes, food consumed, skin rubbed raw by harsh soap and hard work. Subject to ridicule and derision from critics at the time, the scum of milk floating in a bottle and a sink full of dirty dishes clearly struck a nerve.

With a nod to gender due to an association with the domestic realm, these images are largely interpreted by O'Connor and Tweedie as studies in formalism, although they do allow for the possibility of multiple readings. From the many photographs included, it appears that formal concerns were an overriding interest for Watkins. This focus attests to the lingering influence of Clarence White, whose philosophy that design is more significant than subject matter appears to have served her well. Watkins was clearly looking attentively at the world throughout her long life, and her interest in formal composition can be discerned in almost all of the work included here. This interest develops in the early portraits and still-life photographs of the 1920s and remains a persistent feature of the later work as well.

The sheer number of photographs provides a significant overview of Watkins' production, and, therefore, the book is a welcome addition to the history of photography and the partici-

pation of women in that history. Details of several photographs are included in a more contemporary, full-page format, but the majority are smaller images that closely approximate the historical presentation of photographs. It is in these many small-format reproductions that the interest in formalism is most clearly on display.

It might appear at times that feminist scholarship has successfully resurrected numerous forgotten or neglected women artists, yet this recent publication reveals that the project is far from complete. As a cautionary note, it is remarkable how easily an artist like Margaret Watkins, well known during her New York years, could be overlooked for so long. For O'Connor and Tweedie, this neglect is explained by gender, but I would argue that this is only part of the story. The lack of a significant patron or critic, her divided citizenship, her absence from the site of her most active artistic production, and an output that transgressed the boundaries between fine art, advertising, and documentary also played a role. With this book, the process of re-evaluation is well underway.

DEBRA ANTONCIC

PhD candidate, Queen's University

Notes

- ¹ Roger Hull, "Emplacement, Displacement, and the Fate of Photographs," *Multiple Views: Logan Grant Essays on Photography*, 1983–1989, ed. Daniel P. Younger (Albuquerque, 1991), 188.
- ² Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton (Boston, 1989), 23.

Ruth Iskin, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 298 pp., \$96.00 U.S.

Ruth Iskin's book sets out to explore and to analyze the relationship between Parisian consumer culture of late nineteenth-century Paris and the painting of Manet and the Impressionists. By focusing on the implicit and explicit manifestation of material culture in the works of these artists, the book aims to reinvent familiar themes and to revise key critical assumptions that have dominated art-historical research in this area in recent years. In particular, the book challenges the idea that women were excluded from the urban spaces of the modern city and illuminates ways in which avant-garde painting of the late nineteenth century both depicted and addressed contemporary women. Chapter one charts an important socio-cultural background that informs much of the later discussion in the

book. Drawing on examples from nineteenth-century advertising literature, Iskin offers insight into the cross-fertilization between Impressionist painting and popular imagery associated with consumer culture of the period. While the analyses of advertising imagery are illuminating in their own right, Iskin acknowledges that Impressionist painters did not explicitly depict the newly flourishing department stores in their works and that media images were not a direct influence on avant-garde art. Much of the book's argument is, therefore, driven by the need to find evidence for the "implicit but pervasive presence of Parisian consumer culture in the art of Manet and the Impressionists" (p. 7). It seeks to accomplish this by identifying both media images and avant-garde painting as part of an overarching "visual discourse of consumption" (p. 17) in which distinctions between high art and mass consumption became blurred.

A methodological question arises, however, as to the explanatory relation between the social discourse of mass con-