

**Dickran Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde. 1910–1925.* Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1975. 283 + xiii pp., illus., \$20.00**

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oiseaux. L'histoire de Fuertes est touchante car on sent qu'il est le dernier des « vieux maîtres » du genre, même s'il a réussi à renouveler la profession d'artiste-naturaliste. Il faut croire que cette vocation spéciale a été reprise par le photographe et le cinéaste. En ceci, le présent livre représente un chapitre clos de l'histoire de la peinture.

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Mme Norelli a redécouvert le côté artistique de l'histoire naturelle, activité aujourd'hui, sinon oubliée, du moins reléguée à l'arrière-plan de l'intérêt pour les beaux-arts. L'« illustrateur », devant servir d'autres fins que la pure invention esthétique, ne pouvait être, semblait-il, qu'un artiste mineur. L'imitation exigée par sa tâche circonscrivait forcément le libre jeu de son imagination, empêchant par le fait tout épanouissement « artistique ». Ce livre permet de réévaluer maintenant cette production à but scientifique. Nous sommes ainsi plus disposés à tenir compte des problèmes pratiques auxquels l'artiste avait à faire face pour peindre. Par exemple, savoir que tel artiste-naturaliste est descendu une falaise de 600 pieds, y est resté pris avec son modèle pendant une heure, et a chanté de joie pendant ce temps-là, rend l'illustration plus intéressante. Bref, la connaissance, devant la toile, devient appréciation et parfois même beauté. Nous regardons les images d'oiseaux en songeant aux braves explorateurs qui les ont rendues possibles par leur courage et leur talent.

On aurait pu souhaiter un texte plus long. En tout il n'y a que 33 pages, ce qui donne à certaines illustrations un caractère superflu. Aussi, nous n'avons pas appris tout ce qu'il y a à savoir sur ces mêmes artistes — ce qui n'était évidemment pas l'objectif de Mme Norelli; mais il aurait été utile, par exemple, de savoir qu'Audubon avait étudié avec Jacques-Louis David.

D'autre part, le sujet rejoint des soucis d'écologie en évoquant le souvenir d'une Amérique vierge et inexplorée. Mais les dessins de Wilson, Catesby et Audubon, tout en témoignant de cette Amérique, contribuèrent à sa perte justement en la faisant connaître. Une fois les régions visitées, les oiseaux étudiés et codifiés, les livres publiés, on peut dire qu'une étape fut franchie menant vers l'appropriation des terres vierges. Cet aspect aurait peut-être pu être plus longuement évoqué dans le texte.

En résumé, il s'agit d'un ouvrage bien fait qui a la capacité de susciter maintes réflexions. Il vaut son prix d'achat, ne serait-ce que pour ses très belles illustrations.

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Dickran TASHJIAN, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910-1925*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1975. 283 + xiii pp., illus., \$20.00.

No other twentieth-century movement has affected the course of art in the past fifty years as has that remarkable occurrence known as Dada. The "storm that broke over the world of art as the war did over the nations"<sup>1</sup> manifested itself in Zurich, New York, Berlin, Hanover, Cologne and Paris in the second decade of our century. Although in some centres Dada took a distinctly political orientation, all segments were unswerving in their dedication to anarchy, defiance of the past in all forms of literature and art, and the firm assertion of the total irrationality of art. The common cry was "Art is dead". As Professor Tashjian states in the Preface to his excellent book, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910-1925*, Dada "was neither a school nor a movement but rather an essentially chaotic phenomenon that cut across art forms and national boundaries".

It is one of the enigmas of our epoch that "While its (Dada's) major coloration was destructive and anarchic, its nihilism was paradoxically affirmative". From the complex combination of good-humoured irony, comic buffoonery and a totally destructive assault on all acquired techniques was born a new, positive freedom of individual expression which allowed all forms of art, from photography and cinema, to sculpture, painting, literature and advertising, to explode into new, previously unimagined spheres of creativity. To see some of the repercussions of the Dada phenomenon, one may consider the appreciation for the commonplace object manifested in the persistent use by many of today's artists of the "found object" (objet trouvé), and the "readymades". Kinetic sculptures, collages and "Op Art", to name only a few examples in the visual arts, stem directly from the audacious and imaginative choice by Marcel Duchamp of objects such as a bottle rack, a urinal or a bicycle wheel mounted on a kitchen chair and presented to the public as works of art. One might also mention Duchamp's various "rotative plaques" and "Rotoreliefs" of the 1920's and 1930's which predicted both kinetic and optical art. Werner Haftmann also points out the Dada experiments with the laws of chance and "automatism" (later emerging as Abstract Expressionism), and the "playful probing

1. Hans RICHTER, *Dada, Art and Anti-Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1965, 9.

of materials and things which... is taken for granted today as a part of the curriculum of every art school"<sup>2</sup> as being significant consequences of the Dada movement. Dada's "explosive typography", which suggested, as Mr. Tashjian remarks, the "chaos and disorder of life itself", revolutionized the field of typography. Automatic writing and nonsense poetry helped create the literature of the absurd, and even the cinema "benefited from these rebellious games"<sup>3</sup>. A recent exhibition by Claes Oldenburg at the Art Gallery of Toronto featured an assortment of oversized clothes pegs, cigarette butts, typewriter erasers and baseball mitts, complete with complicated preliminary drawings and studies for the above items. The fact that such a show is taken so seriously illustrates the acceptance of the outgrowth of Dada farce.

It may be said that perhaps no modern movement has been more elusive to historians, ever eager to define, determine consistent programs, and discover stylistic continuity, than has Dada. The American response to Dada between the years 1910-1925 has been especially neglected and it is greatly to the credit of Dickran Tashjian, a member of the Faculty of Comparative Culture at the University of California, Irvine, to have undertaken such an exhaustive study of the subject. Equally commendable is the fact that he has succeeded so well in bringing to light, in his interdisciplinary work, the contributions made by the avant-garde in America reacting to the stimulus of such men as Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia (who were dabbling in proto-Dada experiments in New York even prior to the official beginning of the Dada movement in Zurich's Cafe Voltaire early in 1916), Man Ray, the only professed American Dadaist, Alfred Stieglitz, the pioneer photographer and promoter of modern art, and the writers Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams and E. E. Cummings, to name only a few.

The task that the author set himself is an arduous one, for he proposes to show, through a meticulous investigation of material from the "little magazines" which informed the avant-garde of all that was new and controversial, and from letters, diaries, newspapers and memoirs of various artists, the negative and positive relationships between the Dadaists in Europe and their American contemporaries. He especially insists that the impact of this encounter worked to create a uniquely new American art. Professor Tashjian admits at

the beginning that few of the artists and writers to whom he refers ever became "full-fledged Dadaists". "Nevertheless", he says, "they all did respond by exploring the art/anti-art possibilities spawned by Dada". Many of their works "approximated Dada", were "proto-Dada" or had remarkable affinities with Dada values. He spends the remainder of his lengthy study trying to prove his point. The subject is as elusive as any definition of Dada, which the author refers to as "significant nonsense", a nebulous label indeed. The more adventurous American artists and writers, according to Mr. Tashjian, were chiefly influenced by the lively debates and articles on Dada found in the "little magazines". He has carefully sifted through such relatively unknown publications as *The Soil*, *Contact*, *Broom* and *Secession*, and the better known ones, *Camera Work* and its successor *291* published by Alfred Stieglitz, to determine the extent of these influences. Stieglitz's magazines were especially helpful in carrying the seeds of Dada to America and were its "breeding ground". *Broom* was published in Europe by two expatriots, Harold Loeb and Mathew Josephson (one of the most prominent of the Dada-influenced writers) for a period of three years (1921-1924) and so was directly in touch with the latest developments. Josephson's Paris tutor was the French novelist, poet and essayist, Louis Aragon, then a medical student. *Secession*, Gorham Munson's review, featured such Parisian Dadaists as André Breton, Paul Eluard, Philippe Soupault and Aragon. Actual Dada reviews and manifestos were abundant in Europe, but Tashjian, probably due to lack of space, mercifully does not consider their possible impact on the Americans.

Gorham Munson gave the dubious title of "skyscraper primitives" to the American artists and writers somehow influenced by Dada's romance with the machine, hence the title given to this book by Mr. Tashjian, who explains in a nice play on words that their "primitivism" was a unique one that "sought not the tropics but what we have come to perceive as our own concrete jungle".

2. Werner HAFTMANN, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, London, Percy Lund, Humphries and Co. Ltd., 1968, 185.

3. *Ibid.*, 183.

4. Some of the more important European reviews were: *Dada I and II*, edited by Tristan Tzara in 1917, *Nord-Sud*, edited by Pierre Reverdy in the same year; *Club Dada*, edited by R. Huelsenbeck, F. Jung and R. Hausmann and published in Berlin in 1918; *Der Dada*, edited by Raoul Hausmann in Berlin, 1919-1920; *Dada III*, published in Zurich and *Dada IV and V* in Paris by Tzara in 1919; *Der Ventilator*, published in Cologne under the editorship of J. T. Baargeld, Max Ernst and Jean Arp in 1919 and *Merz*, the most enduring Dada review, published in Hanover by Kurt Schwitters from 1923-1932.

The term “primitivism” is as difficult to define as Dada. It also leads to much confusion and surprising contradictions. Robert Goldwater has pointed out in his monumental work, *Primitivism in Modern Art*,<sup>5</sup> that Dada’s primitivist tendency (if one wishes to consider it so) lies in the notion that the internal factor, or primary impulse, alone counts in all acts, whether social or artistic. Inevitably, then, the Dadaist was sympathetic to the art of children and of the insane as “direct expressions of inner feelings”. However, he goes on to say that in actual practice their work, far from ignoring the art they wished to destroy, referred to it constantly “through startling juxtapositions of form or content, and in consequence their creations are of an extreme sophistication and have a minimum of directness and simplicity”.<sup>6</sup> It is with this comment in mind that one should approach Professor Tashjian’s cultural analysis of the period, for, as he wrote, “The response of American artists to Dada were anything but simplistic”. He seems to stretch a point when he says that, “The American artists involved with Dada were indeed primitives in being among the first in this century to direct their full attention to the rapidly accelerating technology of their environment” or that “This new primitivism was paradoxically urban in locus and sensibility”. It seems more relevant to consider American “primitivism” in the European context, as the author does in his conclusion when he notes that European Dadaists in their rebellion against all European art and culture turned to America, not “for its artistic possibilities”, but because it stood outside their world and, since America had always been considered “exotic”, it “provided anti-art material that was considered shocking and lively”.

Professor Tashjian begins his study with discussions of members of the Stieglitz circle, their attitudes on modern art (and the “anti-art of photography”) and their contributions to his reviews. These include the Mexican caricaturist, Marius De Zayas, to whom the author gives considerable attention, and the artist, John Marin. Francis Picabia merits a chapter to himself and well he might, for it was he who in 1917 had “established the pattern of American Dada”, for his criticism “swung between negation and affirmation”, a distinctly Dada trait. As the author states later, “negation and affirmation worked a mutual leverage on the fulcrum of nonsense”. The

5. Robert GOLDWATER, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, New York, Vintage Books, 1967.

6. *Ibid.*, 219.

work of Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray are also carefully considered and Mr. Tashjian is especially perceptive in his analysis of the critical issues about art raised by Duchamp’s “readymades” and the “Large Glass”.

The author is at his best in the three important chapters on writers William Carlos Williams, who untiringly pioneered the search for an affirmative, purely American literature, Hart Crane, one of the first to express the spirit of the new machine age in valid poetic terms, and E. E. Cummings, another of the most independent and talented young American poets of his era. Their see-saw brushes with Dada constitute perhaps the greatest connection between European Dada and the arts in America and these are the most rewarding sections of the book.

Undaunted and inexhaustible, Professor Tashjian continues his study with considerations of the art of Assemblage and Collage, and discusses Joseph Stella, Arthur Dove and John Covert. Finally, the author has a chapter on those artists devoted to “Painting the Machine”. This iconography was, of course, especially fascinating for the Dadaists, as it had been for the Italian Futurists before them, and is significant in the commitment to the new urban environment. Painters Morton Schamberg, who unfortunately died in the flu epidemic in Philadelphia in 1918, and who might have been an influential figure had he lived, Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth are also singled out for special attention. Professor Tashjian’s rather terse final chapter, “Aftermath and Conclusion” does not have the authoritative punch that one hopes one would discover after such an erudite study.

One must admit that, in trying to cover such a vast amount of material involving such a variety of cultural activities, the author has rather supersaturated the reader with information. Copious annotations, which take up some forty pages at the back of the text, and a comprehensive bibliography reflect the untiring patience and thoroughness with which Professor Tashjian researched his subject. The deadly seriousness of his purpose is all too obvious and one would have appreciated occasional humorous relief more in keeping with the witty and carefree freedom of the “esprit Dada”.

The text is complemented by almost one hundred black and white illustrations which are well-reproduced and provide us with many unfamiliar photographs, drawings, paintings, and sculpture, as well as with some very familiar works, such as Duchamp’s “Fountain” and “Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2”. The jacket illustration is a reproduction of Charles Demuth’s 1925 painting,

"I Saw the Figure Five in Gold", which the author describes in his chapter on "Painting the Machine". He might have chosen, perhaps even more appropriately for the cover, one of John Marin's skyscraper series. The one which "graced the cover" of the June, 1915 number of *291* (Figure 1) would have been delightful, especially as it is

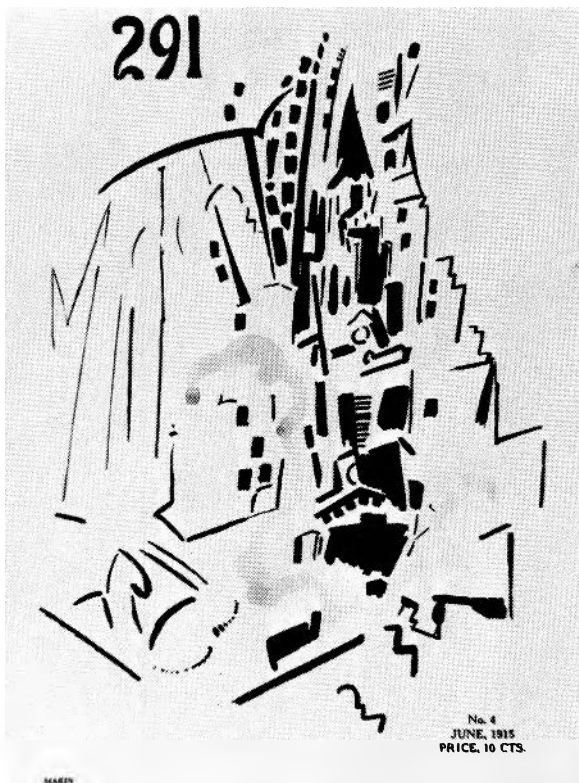


FIGURE 1. John Marin, cover of *291*, No. 4 (June, 1915). Courtesy of The Philadelphia Museum of Art; The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection Archives.

with that issue that Mr. Tashjian says the review "spiralled straight into Dada". "Skyscraper Primitives" is one of the first works in the literature on the cultural milieu in America in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Since the undisputed centre of modern art has been in America for the past thirty years, it is imperative to search for its roots. Professor Tashjian has made a notable contribution to that search.

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Herbert W. HEMPHILL, Jr., *Folk Sculpture, U.S.A.*  
Brooklyn, N.Y.: The Brooklyn Museum, 1976,  
76 pp., illus., \$8.25.

In reviewing this volume, which is really an exhibition catalogue, it is necessary to address two aspects: the extremely significant essays which have been included, and the many illustrated works which comprise, for the reader, the exhibition. There are three internal essays, a foreword, an introduction, and a very useful bibliography. The book thus becomes a symposium which will launch the reader into a subject of strong contemporary interest, and for this reason would be uncommonly useful as resource material for a course on folk or popular art.

A genuinely important essay is "Folk Sculpture Without Folk", by Daniel Robbins, Visiting Professor, History of Art, Dartmouth College. Robbins gives a brief historiography of folk art, and especially of naive art (which can occur when there are no "folk"). He sees Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938) as having "brought intellectual order into an area that previously could only be described as chaotic", (p. 12) and discusses the various tendencies of taste which have made folk art function as a kind of "found object" or play the role of lightning-rod for our dreams of a simpler society. He concludes, somewhat wistfully, that "among the many influences and relationships that have contributed to the formation of American folk art, we — collectors, dealers, curators, or historians — must add our own influence." (p. 30)

Michael Kan, Curator of African, Oceanic, and New World Cultures at The Brooklyn Museum, in "American Folk Sculpture: Some Considerations of its Ethnic Heritage," discusses Black and New Mexican Spanish ethnic styles as specialized New World developments rooted in African and Spanish traditions. Black forms include the effigy vessels of South Carolina, certain voodoo images like "Baron Samedi" smeared with chicken blood and found in New Orleans, and Afro-American staffs and walking sticks with their West African reptilian motifs, as well as profoundly sensitive folk works like the Black figures from Hamilton, Ohio. The superb *bultos* and *retablos* (sculptural and flat images) from the *santeros* of New Mexico and southern Colorado represent the flowering of an isolated culture with their hatted saints, numinous *virgencitas*, and the awesome images of skeletal Death with a bow and arrow, which were pulled in carts by penitents and flagellants.