Reviews

HELMUT BRINKER
Secrets of the Sacred: Empowering Buddhist Images in Clear, in Code, and in Cache
Lawrence: Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. 224 pp.; 116 b/w ill. $50.00

Over the centuries Buddhists across East Asia have put relics into images. And they have put relics into pagodas, and images into pagodas, and pagodas into images. And they have put small images into larger images. Indeed, the list of objects installed within images is a long one and includes sacred texts, talismans, surrogate viscera, coins, cloth cuttings, personal documents, and so on. But the relation between relics and images is a particularly close one, as evidenced in the phenomena of “whole-body relics”—mummies of Buddhist masters—which are venerated in both China and Japan.

Scholars have come to view the cult of images and relics as lying at the very heart of Buddhism. Hundreds of monographs and articles have appeared on the topic over the past few decades that document, through time and place, the innumerable permutations on the relic-in-image, text-in-image, text-as-relic, and relic-as-image theme. When it comes to explaining this practice—why Buddhists enconce a variety of sacred (and sometimes nonsacred) objects inside images—scholars tend to say the same thing: it was done in order to “enliven” or “vitalize” or “empower” the images and thus render them suitable for worship.

Secrets of the Sacred is Helmut Brinker’s last book; he died unexpectedly in July 2012 after a long and distinguished career. The volume, which emerged from a series of lectures delivered at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, brings together his many years of scholarship and thinking on the subject of Buddhist sacred images, drawing at times from his previously published work. The book is divided into two chapters: “From Image to Icon: Unseen Caches for Animating the Sacred” and “Mysteries of Buddha Relics and Esoteric Divinities.” The first focuses on the widespread practice of placing relics, texts, and the like inside images, while the second engages with the role of images in East Asian Esoteric Buddhism. But there is considerable overlap between the two chapters, since Esoteric images were also “animated” through the installation of various objects, and Brinker’s understanding of Esoterism tends to influence his approach to image veneration writ large.

The small volume covers a lot of ground. Much of the material consists of “greatest hits” from the genre, and accordingly has been discussed, sometimes at length, by others: the legend of King Asoka’s distribution of relics, the Udayana narrative of the first Buddha image, the Seiryôji Sakyamuni image, Eison’s portrait sculpture, the Anguosi sculptures, the Famensi reliquaries, and so on. Brinker has done a fine job of bringing this material together in a single, handsomely illustrated volume, and his notes reference the subject’s large secondary literature. However, his analysis does not always reflect the latest work on the topic, even when these sources are referenced in his own bibliography.

The tendency to disregard recent scholarship is most notable in his treatment of Esoteric Buddhism. He writes, for example, of Esoteric Buddhism, also designated as Vajrayâna (“Diamond Vehicle”) or Tantric Buddhism, emerged last of the three major doctrinal divisions of the Buddhist faith, the two older being Theravâda (“Teaching of the Elders,” also called Hinayana, or “Small Vehicle”) and Mahâyâna (“Great Vehicle”). In China Vajrayâna became known as mîjiao (J: mikkyô, “Secret Teachings”) or mîzong (“Secret School”). This highly intellectual form of Buddhism, depending largely on “mysteries” (C: xuan), was taught and transmitted by Tantric masters. (p. 51)

There are several problems here: Chinese and Japanese renderings of Vajrayâna and “Tantra” are rarely attested in premodern East Asian sources; mîjiao and mîzong are not their translation equivalents. In addition, the term mîjiao—commonly rendered “Secret Teachings” or “Esoteric Teachings”—had quite different connotations in China than it did in Japan. East Asians did not view the Esoteric Teachings as the last of “three major doctrinal divisions,” and it is a mistake to equate Theravâda and Hinayâna, irrespective of the audience. On the next page Brinker repeats the dubious claim that the Japanese Tendai master Saicho “mastered” Esoteric Teachings in China before returning home. The meaning and nature of Esoterism in East Asia has been the subject of extended discussions of late, including those by Ryûichi Abé, Richard McBride, Charles Orzech, and myself, among others, and Jinhua Chen has raised serious doubts, now shared by many, concerning Saicho’s Esoteric bona fides. These works and others undermine confidence in the historical veracity of the Japanese sectarian accounts of the transmission and status of Esoterism in East Asia, as well as the scholarly narratives that were predicated on those accounts. Brinker never alludes to these controversies.

Nevertheless, the volume does a valuable service in bringing many new and fascinating Chinese archaeological finds to the attention of a broader audience. Here I would include the important materials uncovered at Fachisi, Jingzhisi, Dayunsi, Qingshansi, and, most impressive of all, Famensi; Brinker’s work may be the first exposure that many nonspecialists have to these riches. The Famensi treasures are, quite appropriately, foregrounded in chapter 2, and the final twenty-five pages of the book are dedicated to a detailed description and analysis of a single piece from Famensi, a sculpture of a kneeling bodhisattva holding a tray that was intended to display the Buddha’s finger relic in the royal palace. Brinker’s analysis of this spectacular example of Tang metalwork is predicated on a theory that has become popular among Asian scholars, namely, that the lotus throne of this monument represents the “unity of the two mandala worlds” (Japanese: roka bunri), that is, the base’s upper dome depicts the Diamond Realm (Vajradhâtu) Mandala while the lower dome depicts the Womb Realm (Garbhdhâtu) Mandala. This theory was promulgated by the scholars and archaeologists who oversaw the initial excavation and examination of the Famensi crypt, and it is now found repeated in a wide variety of publications. But as some have pointed out—most notably I-mann Lai, whose 2005 dissertation is mentioned in Brinker’s bibliography but whose argument is otherwise ignored—there is a fundamental problem: no textual evidence exists showing that the two-realm theory was ever known in China, and while the Vajradhâtu array is attested on the base of the kneeling bodhisattva, attempts to identify the Garbhdhâtu Mandala are convoluted at best.

In reading Brinker’s volume I found myself confronted repeatedly with the problem of what is to count as “explanation.” In
other words, what serves as an answer to the question: “Why do Buddhists do as they do?” Brinker opens the volume with a series of broad questions concerning the nature of Buddhist images:

Theologians and pious believers alike were deeply concerned with the degree of reality and potency dwelling in a pictorial representation. Again and again they raised the question. How and when does a motionless image transform from mere material form into a sacred icon? How and when does a statue or a painting of a divinity become more than just an inanimate piece of wood or stone, or colors on silk or paper? How and when is an icon an animated manifestation of the divinity complete with body and spirit, presence and power? (p. 3)

The answer, readers are told, is that the transformation from mere image to living icon is effected through the relics, small images, and other sacred substances embedded within. Brinker writes, “Miniature figures of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other divinities would also be placed in the hollow interior of icons, as integral to their animation, and were thought to enhance the power of the unseen sacred and to increase its degree of presence in the image” (p. 10). And later, in a discussion of the Ichiju Kinrin from Kotokuji, Brinker says, “Animated by these sacred and secret objects within its body, the icon becomes operational” (p. 68). And so on. This explanation may pass for common knowledge among scholars today (such statements are commonplace in the secondary literature), yet it seems to be largely conjecture. There is, in the end, surprisingly little in the ethnographic or textual record to support this theory. Yes, all kinds of things were put inside images, including relics, cloth viscera, coins, and bits of this and that. But what concrete evidence do we have that such objects were thought to animate the image? The theory seems reasonable and plausible to us, and that is my point: it might just be what we imagine they were thinking.

Indeed, I suspect that the problem—the deep concern about how a mere material form can become a sacred icon—is more ours than theirs. It is true that Buddhist scholars addressed these issues from time to time; such concerns may have contributed to discussions regarding the multiple bodies of a buddha, for example. Yet given the astounding ubiquity of image worship, when it comes to the process of enlivening or vitalizing images through consecration rituals, Buddhist texts have much to say about what to do but not why. Before rushing in to fill this silence, we might stop to reflect on its significance.

In fact, scholars vacillate between two different accounts of why Buddhists insert objects within images: the first is to enliven them; the second is to form a bond with them. Brinker repeats both, not mentioning how he decides which explanation fits any particular case. In practice, it is done on the fly: relics, viscera, texts, and talismans are intended, supposedly, to animate the image, and coins and cloth cuttings are intended to forge a bond. The ad hoc nature of this distinction should be enough to give us pause. I would suggest a third theory: people put things inside images because that is what their parents, or their grandparents, or a trusted teacher, or a local priest or itinerant monk taught them to do. This, I believe, is the most ethnographically precise, psychologically potent, and theoretically elegant account of how image worship works. All else is mere dressing. Which is not to deny that consecration or “eye-opening” rituals were not an important moment in the ritual life of an image; it is just that those on the ground were more concerned with practice than with theory.

In the end, specialists who are looking for something new, either in the way of innovative proposals or groundbreaking analysis, might be disappointed in Brinker’s book, especially if they are familiar with recent literature on the topic. But the more general reader is ably served by Brinker’s ability to assemble a vast amount of important and fascinating material on East Asian Buddhist icons.

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DE-NIN D. LEE

The Night Banquet: A Chinese Scroll through Time

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The Night Banquet of Han Xizai is among the most recognized Chinese handscrolls in the field of art history, yet like many related works from the same period it has eluded monographic treatment. Although numerous scholars have studied and published their research on this painting, De-nin D. Lee’s The Night Banquet: A Chinese Scroll through Time is the first book-length study in English devoted to this painting in its entirety, from the frontispiece to all of the colophons and seals. The main reasons for this omission include several uncertain elements, such as date, authorship, content, and a commonly agreed-on system for identifying the painting’s various figures. Kao Musen, for example, has argued that reading the scroll from back to front could alter the identification and even the basic narrative commonly interpreted by scholars.1 The generally accepted understanding of the painting is based on the legend of the Southern Tang emperor Li Houzhu (r. 961–75), who in order to spy on the retired minister Han Xizai’s (902–970) lavish, decadent lifestyle sent the painter Gu Hongzhong to document the rumored nighttime extravagances. The way the story was constructed has parallels with recent Western visual theories of the “gaze” and “voyeurism,” which provide Lee a point of entry, as do books such as Arjun Appadurai’s edited volume The Social Life of Things that provide the theoretical structure for her study.2

In employing these Western theoretical perspectives, Lee compensates for the scarcity of materials associated with the painting, while investigating the traces left by generations of collectors and guiding readers through the painting and its provenance. Her detailed viewing experience not only focuses on the painting itself but also includes the frontispiece and all colophons and seals. Only a privileged few in ancient times could enjoy this kind of highbrow, leisurely viewing experience of long handscrolls such as The Night Banquet. Readers of Lee’s book interested in ancient Chinese painting will experience the same kind of enjoyment. As she indicates, most early Chinese paintings are now part of museum collections worldwide, and these institutions typically unroll the whole or a portion of the painted section of handscrolls, thereby denying viewers the privilege of examining the accompanying documentation mounted with such scrolls. Lee employs a chronological sequence in her study, leading readers in an examination of first the painting, followed by the colophons and seals from the time of the painting’s creation through to

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the mid-twentieth century. This approach is analogous to the experience afforded to private viewers, who would unroll the scroll section by section, reading and studying every detail of the painting, its subject matter, the paper or silk ground, then adding their own commentaries and connoisseurial remarks and impressing their own artists’ and collectors’ seals. The “reading” experience was thus comparable to the “viewing” experience.

Lee’s text consists of five chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter, “Structure, Imagery, Authenticity,” adopts a traditional art historical approach, with its emphasis on the painting, investigations of dating and authenticity issues, and conclusion that the work is indeed of the Southern Song, an already well-accepted opinion. The second chapter, “The Confucian Gaze and the Voyeuristic Gaze,” begins with the gourd-shaped collector’s seal stamped at the lower left corner of the painting, which reads “Shao-xun” and belonged to the Southern Song official Shi Miyan (1164–1233). Lee surmises that the painting thus might have been owned by the Shi family, conceivably as a gift to Shi’s father Shi Hao (1106–1194) from the Southern Song emperor Xiaozong (r. 1163–89), implying that Xiao-zong may have viewed Shi Hao as a contemporary Han Xizai.

Beginning with the third chapter, “Confucian Gaze: ‘A Drunken Man Cursing in Public,’” Lee investigates the colophons added by later collectors, concentrating on the Yuan dynasty figure Ban Weizhi (fl. ca. 1295–1341), and adopting Ankeney Weitz’s description of “political hermeneutics of art” (pp. 62–63). Continuing with this analysis in chapter 4, “The Connoisseurial Gaze: ‘Like Ancient Jades . . . Worth Treasuring,’” Lee examines how the colophons pertained more to their authors’ circumstances than to the scroll they embellished. In other words, the colophon writers had a greater concern with their standing in history than with the painting itself. Chapter 5 begins with the late Ming collector-calligrapher Wang Duo (1592–1652) and ends with the painting entering the Qianlong emperor’s (r. 1736–95) collection.

Chapter 5, “Looking through Modern Eyes: ‘Fortune Fit for a Nation,’” documents the painting’s destiny during recent chaotic periods of Chinese history as the country transitioned from colonial rule to modern nation-state. The Night Banquet departed from its imperial owner Emperor Xuantong (Pu Yi, 1906–1967), returned to the market, and was eventually purchased by the legendary painter-collector (and clever forger) Zhang Dajian (Chang Dai-chien, 1893–1983), who impressed nine seals on the painting, two of them next to Shi Miyan’s “Shao-xun” seal toward the end of the scroll that read “Fortune fit for a nation” and “Times of separation come all too easily.” Like ancient private collectors of means, Zhang shared this painting with his good friends, including the merchant and collector Pang Yuanji (1864–1949) and the scholar Ye Gongchuo (1881–1968), who added their own colophons and seals. Zhang’s personal fortunes and destiny were intertwined with this tumultuous time. After World War II, to fund his immigration to South America, he reluctantly parted with the painting. With Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai’s (1898–1976) blessing, The Night Banquet was eventually returned to China, where it is now preserved in the Beijing Palace Museum.

Lee’s epilogue, “Epitaph and Afterlife,” guides readers into contemporary times, introducing two works inspired by The Night Banquet Wang Huaqiqing’s (b. 1944) two-panel paintings Han Xizai’s Night Revels (1996, plate 15), and Wang Qingsong’s (b. 1960) photograph Night Revels of Lao Li (2000, plate 16). Lee relates both paintings to the political environment of contemporary China.

Lee’s research strategy presents a new opportunity to examine a subject that long ago reached a dead end. Past efforts have focused mostly on the painting and directly related issues, so Lee’s first and second chapters overlap to a certain degree with prior scholarship. Later colophons and collectors’ seals, topics addressed from chapter 3 on, are details that scholars of ancient Chinese painting would investigate while “reading” the scroll, but other than for determining provenance would seldom consider important because of the enormous time lapses between the creation of the painting and the addition of seals and colophons; the exception occurred in treating the Song dynasty.” Lee’s presentation of evidence—their incorporation of Western theoretical notions such as the “gaze” and “voyeurism,” Lee’s presentation of evidence—brings us back to the political tension and Wang’s artistic creation (p. 117). When she turns to Wang Qing-song’s The Night Revels of Lao Li, Lee is more successful in her argument, perhaps because the evidence is more apparent. Alongside these potentially politically inspired works, it is useful to note other works referencing The Night Banquet and various ancient Chinese paintings that also address contemporary issues, and which would have further enriched Lee’s reading of The Night Banquet. For instance, the Chinese artist Yu Hong’s Spring Romance (2007–9), a reinterpretation of Courtes Lady Preparing Newly Woven Silk, attributed to Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–26) (currently in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), affords a female/biographical gaze into the life of a current Chinese artist. The Taiwanese artist Huang Rui-fang’s (Vincent J. F. Huang) Last Penguins (2008) exudes religiously tinged references to Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper in its rendering of penguins engaged in “night revels”—copying scene by scene the original Night Banquet—on very thin ice, a commentary on global warming. Works with such topics are less prone to overinterpretation by modern scholars who sometimes superimpose political contexts onto works of art, as in Lee’s reading of Wang Huaqiqing’s work, while dismissing other works for lacking political meaning.

Overall, The Night Banquet: A Chinese Scroll through Time is a well-researched and sensitively structured work. Lee successfully merges several subfields of Chinese art history—visual analysis, collecting history, and connoisseurship—under the rubric of “cultural life.” While this new approach is partially enabled by her incorporation of Western theoretical notions such as the “gaze” and “voyeurism,” Lee’s presentation of evidence—primarily on Chinese literary and historical sources is a much more convincing approach than the superimposition of concepts that require a near-perfect fit with a significantly different cultural context. Lee deserves kudos for taking into consideration André Malraux’s idea of the “museum without walls” to expand her discussion of The Night Banquet to contemporary times. As a result, a once dead-end research topic finds a “Peach Blossom Spring”—to refer to the fourth-century Chinese recluse poet Tao Yuanming, who journeyed into an unknown utopian world.
Numerous tribes; once "cornered," these textiles, baskets, and other handicrafts of them by Anglo collectors.


See, for example, Fu Shen, The Indian Craze, 1890–1915 (Ithaca, N.Y. 14853).

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ELIZABETH HUTCHINSON

The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890–1915

Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009. 277 pp.; 8 color illus., 80 b/w. $89.95; $24.95 paper

In 1918 the American critic Van Wyck Brooks called for the recuperation of a “usable past,” a repository of home-grown history, biography, and literature, by means of which contemporary writers might forge new cultural foundations.1 Early twentieth-century American art and cultural history is indeed rife with calls for historical reexamination that might ease the often vexed embrace of modern life. In The Indian Craze, Elizabeth Hutchinson shows that Native American art and handicrafts and their makers were foremost among those groups and cultural phenomena reduced to tools for accommodating social change—what we might call “usables.” From about 1895 through 1920, in their home decorations, department stores, art criticism, and in government-sponsored boarding schools for Native Americans, European Americans looked to Native baskets, bowls, and rugs in much the same way practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic looked to objects created within the contemporary Arts and Crafts movement—as symbols of a solidarity, purity, spirituality, and integrity increasingly missing from everyday life in Progressive Era–urban America. And Natives themselves, as Hutchinson observes, often participated in the “craze,” as they sold their wares and in some instances reclaimd and profited from the mythologies bestowed on them by Anglo collectors.

Hutchinson’s first chapter examines the vogue for the “Indian corner,” a fixture in middle-class homes consisting of the masks, textiles, baskets, and other handicrafts of numerous tribes; once “cornered,” these items came to stand for a monolithic Indian type. Possessors of Indian corners tended to see them as antidotes to modern industrialized life, granting a sense of control in a culture of advanced capitalism and urban estrangement—and, of course, making a tidy unity of the many expressions of a darker-skinned Other. The author makes an analogy between homogenizing and domesticating indigenous art and taming the Indians themselves; in decontextualizing and aestheticizing Native handicrafts, these ambitious decoration schemes tell us less about Indians than they do about Mrs. Leland Stanford, Phoebe Apperson Hearst, and the rising tide of professional collectors (female American philanthropists of the period gravitated to Native American art as tokens of a lost cause they could champion as a reform crusade). It mattered little that some vendors used dyes and other tricks to produce an Indian “effect” with selected materials. As long as they were able to assign the Native American to the realm of the archaic and the preindustrial, the possessors would be able to clear their congested psyches. Native art was one commodity within a culture of commodities, and retailers such as Wanamaker’s (which at one point even showed all Indians producing handicrafts in its stores) made the Indian corner a template for therapeutic consumption.

Part of the strength of The Indian Craze is that where other studies have seen the Native embrace of European styles and the meeting of market demand as despoiling factors, and thus largely unworthy of study, Hutchinson understands that assimilation and deculturation are central to the history and historicizing of indigenous American art.4 She makes clear the irony that, for their makers and champions, early twentieth-century Native handicrafts—the very stuff Clement Greenberg would have considered kitsch—came to embody an abstract purity that would later characterize New York school modernism of the Cold War era. In this way The Indian Craze nicely complements and serves as a prequel to Bill Anthes’s important book Native Moderns.5

Hutchinson’s second chapter examines the catalyst provided to handicrafts in the so-called Native Industries Curriculum, promoted by Estelle Reel, superintendent of the Indian schools, from 1900 to 1910. The curriculum was practiced in only a handful of the government-sponsored boarding schools (including Hampton, Virginia; Oneida, New York; and, perhaps most famously, Carlisle, Pennsylvania), but it was notable because of the bold argument that handicrafts education was a way Indians could simultaneously learn their histories and become model citizens. Championing basketry as a means for economic self-sufficiency, Reel’s program also perpetuated the myth that artistic sensitivity was somehow innate to Native Americans. Hutchinson notes that, in promoting dignity in work, Reel’s curriculum repeated the views of contemporary industrialists eager to reap the rewards of laborers operating at maximum efficiency. The Native Industries Curriculum facilitated the relentless tedium of labor while arguing that it served as an energizing, taste-elevating panacea. In advancing tribally diluted production in assembly-line fashion as practice for “mainstream” business etiquette, art lessons at the boarding schools approached a sort of class hegemony found among those Arts and Crafts practitioners who similarly perpetuated the joy-in-labor myth. Throughout the book, in fact, Hutchinson outlines the often-overlooked paraligts between Native American handicrafts and the Arts and Crafts movement, amply proving the role of the latter in furthering the craze of the former. Both Reel and Angel DeCora, whose art and advocacy are the subject of the book’s last chapter, borrowed from the Arts and Crafts movement in their promotion of art as a civilizing agent. The author makes a persuasive case that the commercial impulse in Native handicrafts was indebted to William Morris, John Ruskin, and Gustave Stickley. Arts and Crafts ideals could inform divergent aesthetics, and Hutchinson’s book points to—even if it does not focus on—the paradox that the movement influenced the horror vacui clutter of the Indian corner and Native exhibitions, as well as the sanitized abstraction of DeCora’s book designs and Gertrude Käsebier’s “spare, clean” studio (p. 141).

Reading Hutchinson’s explanations of handicrafts producers and promoters valuing, broadly speaking, intuition over intellect, one might wonder why she does not consider Symbolist art and literature for stylistic and thematic precedents. However, the author admirably demonstrates that the powerful embrace of Arts and Crafts ideals—more than those of any other contemporary movement—parallelled and validated the essentializing, formalist vocabulary increasingly enlized by writers on Native subjects. As Hutchinson observes in her third chapter, critics, artists, historians, and educators such as Arthur Wesley Dow, Elbridge Ayer Burbank, and Grace Nicholson repeatedly aestheticized Indian form at the expense of content, discussing universalizing ideas about individualism and creativity instead of specific narrative. A subtle but important point is Hutchinson’s contention that this trend anticipates Greenbergian modernism by several decades. Using the example of Pomo basketry, Hutchinson sees what she usefully dubs the myth of “modernist primitivism” (p. 118) in the way that Native American handicrafts validated trends in mainstream formalism and helped give abstraction, paradoxically, a suggestion of cultural relevance in the fight against stale academic painting.
In his teaching and textbook *Composition* (1899), Dow found in Native American art not only a historical basis for abstraction but also a tool with which students might get in touch with their inner, "natural" self. It is in this sense, I believe, that turn-of-the-century American Indian art and handicrafts most obviously morphed into a usable aesthetic, much as American history and letters, shortly thereafter, became for Van Wyck Brooks a usable past. Like anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing, Dow equated indigenouness with a vague but nonetheless passionately championed nationalism, as if one’s Americanness might correlate with the depiction of putative Indian form and subject matter. Hutchinson provides examples of Native Americans gaining autonomy through their art, but she presents far more evidence of a process of deculturation transpiring through art history surveys, text-books, and museum displays. Particularly instructive is the example of the National Arts Club, which was progressive in its advocacy for Native "applied arts" but kept Native artists out of all important exhibition decisions. At the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904, Native Americans had even less control over the appropriation of their art. Hutchinson is probably at her descriptive and persuasive best in her use of installation photographs to illustrate the mitigated gains achieved by indigenous artists.

The exploitation of the Indian subject is especially apparent in Hutchinson’s chapter on former Dow student Käsebier, a Pictorialist photographer and founding member of the Photo-Secession. In a group of images she made of Native Americans (largely from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows) in her studio, which she published in her 1901 article "Some Indian Portraits," the artist positioned figures before her own photographs, grafting their supposed vitality, purity, authenticity, and creativity onto her own presence as a female artist. Hutchinson maintains that Indianness was less an aesthetic than an attitude for Käsebier, with the Native presence in her photographs presenting ideas of an inviolate primitivism also found in the modernist art to which her own work aspired. Käsebier’s studio practice is one case of many examples given in *The Indian Craze* of artists, teachers, and critics evoking not so much their ostensible Native subject as a European American use or appropriation of it. But, in addition to standard mainstream manipulation of the Native subject, the Käsebier photographs also evoke the role of an empowered female artist effectively controlling the men in her studio (she dictated their costume and poses). Unlike the Arts and Crafts movement, with its largely traditional female roles, Käsebier’s professional practice concerned not time-honored domesticity but work itself. The author also makes the case that the Indian portraits reverse the "usual formula of male pursuer and female pursued" (p. 155). Particularly insightful is Hutchinson’s discussion of Käsebier’s public display of exoticism and eroticism (she literally undressed several of her Indian subjects). Future research might build on this point and probe the extent to which the artist’s use of Native men facilitated the nascent ideal of the financially and socially empowered "New Woman." In Käsebier’s paradigm—as Hutchinson points out—the New Woman mixes social reform with sexual desire.

With her images of Indians in the studio, Käsebier also personified an allusive creativity and a childlike innocence—and in so doing, the artist foregrounded her own modernist bohemianism at the expense of Native American culture. Arguing that the photographer and her subjects bonded over their shared sense of marginalization, the author suggests that Käsebier enlisted them as collaborators in the artistic process. In appropriating and typecasting Native myths of creativity and craftsmanship, Käsebier advanced herself as a modern woman artist. The subject of Hutchinson’s final chapter, Winnebago artist-illustrator Angel DeCora, who created the Indian art curriculum at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, navigated a similar trajectory. DeCora believed that Native Americans’ art could be an agent of both assimilation and cultural preservation. Echoing the advocacy and reformist sentiments of the Society of American Indians, she believed that artistic education, and eventually artistic production, offered Natives a sort of double panacea—a way out of poverty and a means through which to understand and preserve Native identity. She maintained an egalitarian classroom at Carlisle and encouraged her students to realize the marketing appeal of their aestheticized Arts and Crafts-like sensibilities. In her art and pedagogy, DeCora was caught between progress and the past, between tribal pride and mainstream assimilation. Hutchinson introduces a subtle but important point here: the things we today might call "selling out"—DeCora’s Western, classifying version of a Native style, even the extra income she earned by limning putative Native motifs on china pins—is culturally revealing as the stuff of art history. As the meeting point of often divergent, politicized aesthetics, handicrafts occupy important roles in the study of both Native art and early twentieth-century American modernism. This proposition alone makes *The Indian Craze* a critical and welcome addition to art historical literature.

DeCora’s paintings make indigenous themes accessible via more-or-less typecast sentimental subjects and closely cropped, co-expansive spaces near the imagined beholder. Influenced by her teacher, the American tonalist painter Dwight William Tryon, DeCora’s moonlit compositions locate Native subjects within painterly fields in which any potential threat is mitigated, any hint of nobility offset by the sense of transcendence promised by the contemplation of the Art for which the pictures came to stand when exhibited, illustrated, and addressed by critics. Selected works by DeCora—especially her illustrations—however, resist the decontextualizing implied by such aestheticizing. In an illustration accompanying a story in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in late 1899, the female subject holds her hair, one of many parts of her identity that will be excised when she enrolls in her government-sponsored school. Hutchinson shows that DeCora was in fact highly invested in hair, dress, and gaze as signs of and challenges to Native American identity: they are the fraught visual emblems of assimilation.

Hutchinson foregrounds just how complicated and compromised DeCora’s position could be, a dynamic especially apparent in her book illustrations and frontispieces. With her book covers, rug designs, and exhibition layouts—the so-called applied arts—DeCora reached many more people than was possible by simply exhibiting her paintings. In her illustrations for Natalie Curtis’s *The Indians’ Book* (1907), DeCora introduced a composite Indian style merging myriad tribal motifs with nascent Euro-American modernist devices. In so doing, Hutchinson suggests, the artist proposed that attractive, thoughtful, and even modernist design could come from Native American cultures. In other projects, such as her 1913 design for an emblem for the Society of American Indians, she subjected a pre-Columbian eagle relief to a stylized generalizing as abstract as anything produced in the period. In the space between traditional Native American work and decontextualized aestheticism, DeCora introduced a racial synthesis that, unlike most formalism, did not suppress narrative but rather released it. Such a point may not seem entirely revelatory to some specialists, but it is introduced here with a clarity and persuasive force it has rarely if ever been given.

Part of what makes *The Indian Craze* a significant and well-executed investigation is that it balances the production, collecting, teaching, and exhibiting of Native handicrafts against and within the primacy of creativity and expression that has come to characterize American modernism. DeCora, Reel, and Käsebier understood all too well the mixed blessing of the "craze" of which they were part. They evince a sort of ambivalence toward their respective missions that ties them closely to a contemporary cast of characters dubbed "antimodernist" by the American studies scholar T. J. Jackson Lears in his influential volume *No Place of Grace.*4 Hutchinson discusses Lears early on, and frequently, but at times the nomenclature—antimodernism versus modernism versus modernity—can be confusing. At one point Hutchinson rightly takes issue with previous
scholars who have interpreted European Americans’ “modernist primitivism” as an escape strategy paralleling the reactionary strategies of Lear’s dramatis personae (p. 16). She argues persuasively that the modernist embrace of indigenousness was less a flight from the present than a way to render it palatable and intelligible. Yet in selected passages, she defines the antimodernist impulse as escapist, conservative, and antiprogressive (pp. 14, 16, 164–65). Despite the prefix “anti-,” however, Lear’s antimodernism is not an oppositional stance before a modernist mind-set but rather an intensification of its most salient points, its experiential emphasis in particular.

Hutchinson’s “modernist primitivism” represents less a flight from social problems and difficult transitions than a way to ameliorate and accommodate them—less an escape than an excursion from which one knows one will return. If modernism emphasizes and seeks to concretize experience—lived or painted—antimodernism occurs when one forms a club, writes a book, or attempts to have the experience. Lear’s antimodernists embarked on medievalism, Orientalism, Arts and Crafts, and paramilitary crusades in order to find meaning and catharsis in an overcivilized present. Hutchinson’s writers, collectors, and artists sought such a transcendent realm. In her search for authenticity, for a back-to-basics purity, Kasebieh was one of many to find in all things Native American a flash of spontaneity in a land of overchoirographed moments, a type that could conceivably reenergize early twentieth-century United States of America. I would thus argue that she and Reel, DeCora, and Native handcrafts promoter George Wharton James are no less antimodernists than Henry Adams, who, in his medievalism, went to Mont St-Michel and Chartres to reclaim his lost innocence and missing vigor and thus energize himself. In comparison to the invaluable contributions The Indian Crazeme to the fields of art history, American studies, and Native American studies, however, my concern about Hutchinson’s use of Lear is relatively minor. Indeed, more than perhaps any other study to date, this book joins a select list of recent volumes in restoring the substantial Native presence, and handcrafts in particular, in early twentieth-century modernism.

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Notes
2. In her acknowledgments, Hutchinson cites the teaching and scholarship of, among others, Janet C. Berlo, who also blurbs the book. Berlo’s groundbreaking studies can be praised on grounds similar to those merited by The Indian Crazee.

KIRSTEN PAI BUICK
Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History’s Black and Indian Subject
$94.95, $29.95 paper

RENEE ATER
Remaking Race and History: The Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller
$49.95

JACQUELINE FRANCIS
Making Race: Modernism and “Racial Art” in America
$40.00 paper

Three recent books by Kirsten Buick, Renée Ater, and Jacqueline Francis exemplify what Francis terms “critical race art history” (p. 13): carefully contextualized analyses of minority cultural production that work against transhistorical and essentialist conceptions of race and gender. At the same time, they also undertake the more difficult project of examining the artists’ participation in and even compliance with dominant culture. As such, they are important not only for the history of African American art but also for the larger history of the art of the United States. These volumes thus represent vital early efforts to create a kind of “post-black” art history. In her text for the 2001 Freestyle exhibition, curator Thelma Golden first applied this designation to contemporary “artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact, deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.” Admittedly, “post-black” is a charged and highly problematic nomenclature, evoking as it does disingenuous ideas about a color-blind United States of America, even though few of its advocates would ever intend or sanction such usage. The limitations of this terminology only hint at the significant challenges facing those who would redraw the art historical map.

Kirsten Pai Buick’s long-awaited book on mixed-race nineteenth-century sculptor Edmonia Lewis is the culmination of a body of work that began with a now-classic 1995 essay in the journal American Art. Because she has taken on the task of writing “two books that are mutually supporting and interdependent” (p. xiii), Buick interlaces her reconsideration of Lewis with extended critiques of the ways in which the discipline perpetuates long-standing stereotypes of minority art. In the preface, “Framing the Problem,” she outlines the aims of her project with the aid of epigraphs quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, and Toni Morrison. The “child of the fire” quotation from Emerson signals Buick’s desire to position Lewis not as a passive recipient of cultural discourse but as an active agent who tactically performed and negotiated her social identity. Douglass’s famous public denunciation of the very concept of a “Negro Problem” at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, together with Morrison’s critique of the marginalization of minority subjects serve to highlight the stigmatization of African American, American Indian, and women artists within the discipline of art history.

The “problem of art history’s black and Indian subject” that makes up the book’s subtitle, therefore, shares much with Kobena Mercer’s discussion of the “burden of representation” by which the artworks of subaltern artists are always expected to function as indices of racial, ethnic, or gender identity. By contrast, Buick maintains that Lewis’s oeuvre was not concerned just with matters racial but also contributed to the same cultural trends that preoccupied her white contemporaries. In particular, the author illuminates the sculptor’s investment in a search for a national, “American” art, as well as the “prevailing ideologies . . . [of] sentimentalism, true womanhood, and the vanishing American” (p. xvi). In keeping with the author’s goal of demonstrating Lewis’s active management of her own vocation, chapter 1, “Inventing the Artist,” frames her narrative of the artist’s life as the story of her career rather than her biography, with its more passive associations. Lewis’s Oberlin education provided her with essential training in the protocols of sentimentalism and true womanhood, against which the young woman often and controversially chafed. Lewis’s hosts at Oberlin also connected her with abolitionist networks that advanced and promoted her work, although Buick also highlights the
artist's independence from and defiance of would-be benefactors like Lydia Maria Child. For the author, the sculptor's immigration to Italy proved variously critical for her career: it liberated her from dependence on an abolitionist clientele, granted her membership in an international art community, and, most important, reclassified her as more American than racial for a Roman art-viewing public. Buick argues, finally, that Lewis's embrace of Catholicism and her production of exclusively Catholic works from the artist's large circle of American Art article. Buick maintains, counter to the use of Stuart Hall's terminology.7 The Death of Cleopatra and among her targets are such patent "autoethnographic" forms of "playing Indian" similar to red-face performances by white males.5 Buick draws attention to the sculptor's choice to focus on domestic subjects of courtship and marriage, which purposes Longfellow's poem as the locus of sentimentalism and true womanhood. In "Identity, Tautology, and The Death of Cleopatra," finally, Buick embarks on even more detailed critiques of other scholars who equate Lewis's subject matter with her identity. In particular, she maintains that Albert Boime and Judith Wilson marginalize the artist by figuring her, respectively, as a "self-hating" minority who wished to pass as white, and as a proto-pan-African cultural subversive.6 Instead, Buick asserts that "Lewis used her portrait of Cleopatra both to express and subsequently block the queen's identification with black women" (p. 206). By this, the artist's whitening of the Egyptian queen's physiognomy distances her from her subject matter and black women from a historical figure who often served as an antitype of true womanhood. Buick concludes Lewis's portrait of Cleopatra defines an effective and useful when it looks forward to model how to produce a more integrated art history than when it looks back to rail against past scholarly practices. Second, Buick often fights outdated battles. A more significant issue is Buick's decision to devote nearly half (93 of 222 pages) of her main text to toppling the prior literature, which is more typically the hallmark of a doctoral dissertation. My concern here is twofold. First, her critique is both more effective and useful when it looks forward to address minority artists in relation to "mainstream" cultural practices.8 Most especially, Charmaine Nelson's 2007 book, which specifically examines Lewis's Cleopatra in relation to discourses of sentimentalism, is a striking omission. Unlike the other two volumes here under review, Renée Ater's Remaking Race and History: The Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller does not explicitly take up the broader historiography of African American art, but this does not make her book any less significant. The author situates Fuller in the context of Pro-
gressivism and its contradictory attitudes about social reform and racial hierarchies. To this end she fittingly emphasizes the modern sculptor’s more public artworks and organizes three chapters around pieces commissioned by black leaders like Thomas J. Calloway and DuBois for American Negro exhibits at various fairs: the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition of 1907, the National Emancipation Exposition of 1915, and America’s Making Exposition of 1921. Ater demonstrates how the artist and her patrons, working within Progressive frameworks, sought to “reclaim the dignity of African Americans” (p. 1), “situate blacks in the history of progress” (p. 6), and “alter public perception of the ‘Negro problem’ ” (p. 7).

Chapter 1, “‘Foremost Sculptor’ of the Negro Race,” is largely a conventional biography with emphasis, as in Buick’s volume, on how the artist actively managed her career. A pair of portrait photographs, for instance, emblematically Fuller’s canny negotiation of public expectations that she be both a genteel black woman and a “race artist.” Ater efficiently chronicles Fuller’s academic training, her greater measure of independence during a period of advanced study in Paris, the formative professional support from Calloway, DuBois, and Auguste Rodin, and her difficulty in locating patronage Stateside.

Created for the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition, the “Warrick Tableaux”—fourteen dioramas with over 130 human manikins—is the centerpiece of the next chapter, “Segregation and Inclusion.” As a set, these historical vignettes narrated a saga of racial uplift through middle-class respectability, self-improvement, and the institutions of church, school, and home. Ater ably reveals these exhibits’ complex relation to Progressivism. On the one hand, Fuller and her sponsors perpetuated prevailing racial hierarchies by, for example, associating skin tone with degree of civilization. Moreover, the Warrick Tableaux were housed in a Negro Building, whose segregationist status drew other black leaders’ censure. On the other, the dioramas differed sharply from other representations at the fair, in which blacks generally appeared as mere staffage in idealized plantation pastorals. They also tactically appropriated and repurposed a medium strongly associated with racial classification.

The appearance of Fuller’s bronze, multi-figure allegory Emancipation, at the National Emancipation Exposition in New York, dominates chapter 3, “Memory and Commemoration.” In contrast to the reconciliationist character of most semicentennial celebrations, both the artist’s monument and DuBois’s pageant “The People of Peoples and Their Gifts to Men” reinserted emancipation back into the commemoration of the Civil War. Ater points out how much the sculpture departed from its predecessors by eliminating the figure of Abraham Lincoln in order to offer a representation of self-emancipation, by eschewing conventional emblems of liberty for a more conceptual and modern depiction of its subject, and by showing her figures in a state of partial nudity in order to create “an image of evolutionary potential” (p. 80).

The following chapter, “Race and Americanization,” liberates Fuller’s famous Ethiopia from ahistorical readings of this piece as an early symptom of diasporic, pan-Africanist consciousness and contextualizes it within the immigration-themed fair for which it was created. With its emphasis on Americanization and citizenship, the America’s Making Exposition was a reactionary product of the Red Scare era of 1919. But although many elements of the “Americans of Negro Lineage” section accorded with the organizers’ dictates, both Fuller’s artwork and DuBois’s pageant “The Seven Gifts of Ethiopia to America” starkly misaligned with the fair’s melting-pot rhetoric. Both claimed the glories of ancient Egypt for African Americans. At the same time, Fuller visually rebutted other period allegories of Africa, such as Daniel Chester French’s unflattering treatment for the United States Custom House, and offered fairgoers instead an inspiring image of racial self-emancipation.

Like Buick, Ater effectively demonstrates how minority artists like Fuller were able to work productively and find agency within the boundaries of dominant ideologies. Although on its face it is the least methodologically ambitious of the three, Remaking Race and History realizes its most important contribution as an exemplar of a more integrated art history. The author is especially gifted with comparative stylistic and iconographic analysis of period sculpture. Her crisp prose and clear argumentation, furthermore, make her book optimal for all levels of university instruction.

Although this most certainly would have changed the nature of her project, I would have liked Ater to take on a more sustained analysis of the work of Fuller and her contemporaries in relation to gender, especially considering the marked prominence of her black female figures. Greater attention to this major area of inquiry would have allowed the author to open up a bit more daylight between Fuller and her (largely) male patrons; at times the sculptor emerges in the volume as the talented visualizer of DuBois’s ideas. Even more than Buick, then (and like Francis), Ater misses an opportunity to produce more multidimensional scholarship that indicates how race and gender are always mutually constituted.

In Making Race, Modernism and “Racial Art” in America, finally, Jacqueline Francis departs from the format of these single-artist monographs to examine the interwar careers of Malvin Gray Johnson, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Max Weber, all of whom worked in an Expressionist vernacular situated between academic naturalism and more radically abstract painting. Her volume presents her subjects as “key producers, interlocutors, and sometime critics of a notion [of ‘racial art’] that emerged in the interwar decades and reverberates through present-day multiculturalism” (p. 122). The author persuasively shows that all three men alternately embraced and distanced themselves from this exoticizing and essentializing discourse.

Following her introduction, Francis examines in chapter 2 how many Americans imagined modernism as a set of cultural practices imported from foreign shores, strongly associated with “primitive” non-Western cultures, and “grounded in essentialist logic” (p. 44). Accordingly, she writes, “‘Modernist’ was a double designation for Johnson, Kuniyoshi, and Weber, one generated by audiences’ approbation of both their compositions and their primitivized bodies” (p. 30). This reconsideration of the history of American modernism is the most substantial contribution of Francis’s project; it places Making Race alongside other efforts to revise the discipline in order to put subordinate artists on a more equal interpretative footing, such as Mercer’s edited series Annotating Art’s Histories: Cross-Cultural Perspectives in the Visual Arts. The author is thus right to demand, “Why [hasn’t] . . . the discourse of racial art been positioned closer to the center of the American modernist narrative?” (p. 31).

Francis addresses Johnson’s and Weber’s paintings with religious subject matter in chapter 3. By deploying Expressionist techniques and forting with racial caricature, these artists participated in prevailing discourses about racial emotionalism and authenticity. But, like Buick, Francis does not figure them as passive and uncritical inserts of dominant racisms; instead, Johnson and Weber made their work legible and attractive to an art-world clientele, and even participated in a kind of tactical anti-assimilationism. As elsewhere in her volume, then, Francis maps these painters’ ambivalent relationship to “racial art.” Neither entirely universalist nor assimilationist, she writes of Johnson’s conversation with one interviewer in 1930, “his comments signaled his desire to be part of an encompassing artistic tradition and fraternity” (p. 77).

“The ‘Type/Face/Mask: Racial Portraiture’” takes up all three painters’ varied antinaturalist techniques in rendering physiognomy, although it is not exactly clear what distinguishes the three categories enumerated in the chapter title. Further exploring these artists’ ambivalence, Francis readily notes that “Johnson, Kuniyoshi, and Weber . . . painted in ways that do not insistently oppose racist exaggerations” (p. 80). As in the previous chapter, however, the author
maintains that their use of racial and ethnic caricature is not simple endorsement; for Francis, portrait grotesques could challenge claims of verisimilitude, muddy notions of racial essentialism, and reject “New Negro” calls for idealized images of blackness.

Analytically thinner than the others, chapter 5, “The Race of Landscape,” scrutinizes Weber’s interwar Long Island pastorals, Johnson’s late work inspired by a 1934 trip to Virginia, and Kuniyoshi’s New England bucolic vignettes of the 1920s and Western desertscape of the 1930s. Even though all three took part in a genre of painting heavily freighted with both modernist and nationalistic “American” connotations, their work still perpetuated many expectations of “racial art” to varying degrees. In her conclusion, finally, Francis tersely reveals how the racialism of the Axis powers compelled both these artists and other art-world observers to abandon the notion of “racial art” for universalist discourse.

Making Race contributes to multiple disciplinary fields on several fronts. To begin with, it is an important prehistory of more contemporary dilemmas concerning the critical reception and pigeonholing of artists of color. And, of the three volumes here under review, it is most likely to revise “mainstream” histories of art; as Francis persuasively argues, “racial art was a troubling chapter of early American modernism” (p. 147), and no narrative of period cultural production should fail to include it. As such, this book joins a much broader and ongoing effort to more carefully chart the many braided channels of the broad river of American modernism.

Finally, its comparative methodology further challenges the long-standing model of a dominant, “white” modernism and numerous parallel but distinct minority modernisms. “Studying race comparatively,” writes Francis, “also removes minority studies from the niche they occupy in most scholarly fields that reify difference” (p. 15). Accordingly, it is unfortunate that readers will be unable to see paintings by African American, Japanese American, and Jewish American artists physically mixed together on the pages of the same volume, for even though Francis provides evidence that Weber and his contemporaries alike considered him a “racial artist,” the artist’s estate lamentedly refused to grant the author permission to publish reproductions for this project.

My primary concerns with Making Race largely stem from the abbreviated nature of a volume with barely more than 150 pages of main text. While the author duly documents shifts over time in public attitudes about Expressionist styles, for instance, she might have done the same for the changing reception of modernism more generally. Francis might also have strengthened her claims by providing more substantial evidence, from period criticism or elsewhere, that her protagonists’ use of caricature served as a form of cultural critique rather than sanctioned dominant stereotypes. And although she often dutifully notes the patronage of artistic performances of “racial art,” such as Johnson’s paintings of African American spirituals, the precise audience for other works under discussion is sometimes elusive. How, for instance, did various Jewish American commentators respond to Weber’s genre portraits of Talmudic scholars and other Hasidic subjects?

The texts by Buick, Ater, and Francis are sorely needed correctives to the ongoing marginalization of the histories of minority cultural production. “When survey texts add American minorities to art history,” writes Francis, “they remain sidebar items because they are not integrated into the main story” (p. 14). Echoed by Buick’s caution against “the traps of identity politics” (p. xvi), this concern has been circulating for at least a generation now; it has been twenty years since Stuart Hall lamented that “what replaces invisibility in the representation of blackness “is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility.”10

What is new about these volumes are the authors’ laborious efforts to forge alternative approaches. All three books attest that minority artists at once productively negotiated and accommodated to dominant ideologies. As such, these volumes share much with other subaltern art histories, such as Elizabeth Hutchinson’s book on transcultural practices by Native American and Anglo artists and consumers, an affinity Ater herself observes in an endnote (p. 152). Ater and Francis further establish that the physical contexts in which artworks circulated, whether in segregated exhibitions (Fuller, Johnson) or spaces marked as “modernist” (Weber, Kuniyoshi), mattered greatly to their reception.

But the challenges to producing art histories that transcend the center-periphery topographies that continue to characterize the discipline are many, as these authors themselves observe. First and foremost, practitioners of an African American art history inherently risk “naming themselves into a corner,” to quote Eddie Chambers.11 In her introduction, Francis expresses precisely this concern, which she had first articulated in a 2003 state-of-the-field essay in American Art: “Our attention to the status of women and minority Americans’ cultures and histories is understandable because they have been understudied. Nonetheless, I fear that we are concretizing the margins” (p. 15).

This very review arguably perpetuates the segregation and marginalization of black artists, as I might have just as easily examined these texts in conjunction with other histories of American sculpture or American modernism. Then again, the Art Bulletin has a slender history of African American content—three feature articles on the topic in the past decade, and three more in the prior one—and in this instance I felt that the visibility afforded to these books by the journal outweighed other considerations. Furthermore, crafting an integrated art history is a difficult task because of a relative lack of conceptual frameworks that synthesize fields without eliding questions of race in a color-blind discipline, as well as for more practical reasons. To produce work that not only spans but also recombines scholarly fields requires mastery of not one but two or more rapidly growing bodies of knowledge.

Compounding these challenges are other disciplinary conventions. In particular, Ater and Buick demonstrate the difficulty of trying to prevent the facile conflation of an artist’s oeuvre and her racial identity within the confines of art historical biography. While it may be unfair to characterize monographs on single black artists as fundamentally segregationist, all three authors struggle to “balance . . . biography . . . with a social history of . . . art” (p. 2), as Ater characterizes her project. Each wants at once to provide fuller portraits of subjects long obscured and inchoate and to situate them within mainstream disciplinary narratives, but each differs in emphasis and tactics. And each shows the near impossibility of producing at once a work of archival recovery and a more synthetic, transfield art history.

In Buick’s estimation, conventional biographical analyses have the effect of binding Lewis’s work to her racial identity; even more, they are also fool’s errands that only perpetuate falsehoods about her oeuvre: “An overview of Lewis’ career is impossible because so many of her works are lost and so much of her biography at this point is missing” (p. 34). Furthermore, and as Buick demonstrates, Lewis herself was circumspect and often contradictory about her origins and personal history. As if in direct rebuttal, Ater argues forcefully against this approach: “One deeply troubling aspect of critical theory’s insistence on an unknowable subject is that too often it renders men and women of color invisible in art historical texts and excludes them from the construction of art history” (p. 7).

Francis, finally, departs furthest from art historical norms by organizing her volume not by artist but by genre: religious subjects, genre portraits, and landscape painting. Even here, however, the author recognizes the need to put flesh on her protagonists; thus, while she observes that “my approach in this book is not strictly biographical” (p. 5), she allows that “Johnson, Kuniyoshi and Weber need to be introduced to most others [who are not American art specialists]” (p. 16). But although Francis most successfully situates her minority subjects in artistic mainstreams, Johnson in particular is the faintest presence of the various African
American artists here under discussion, although this is not for her lack of efforts in the archive.

Ater, Buick, and Francis may not have completely solved the problem of how to write a usable “post-black” art history, but as a group they represent an instructive range of interpretative possibilities. As one of the discipline’s youngest progeny, the history of African American art needs more projects like these that not only contribute to the rich layers of archival scholarship its siblings have had decades to accrue but also make a persuasive case for a more significant place at the art historical table.

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Notes