

Art of the United States, 1750-2000: Primary Sources [book review]

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Abstract:

Art of the United States, 1750-2000: Primary Sources is a new anthology that introduces the field of American art from the nation's inception to the end of the twentieth century, through the words of its artists, critics, patrons, and cultural commentators. The volume is somewhere between a sourcebook and a textbook, bringing together selected excerpts of historical documents and images of key art works with introductions, robust headnotes, documentary illustrations and photographs, and maps across ten chronological chapters. These chapters trace the way ideas about authority, identity, representation, and form in art have shifted amid centuries marked by the development of new cultural institutions, violent clashes over the end of slavery and the expansion of American imperialism, and ongoing political struggle for equity and justice. Throughout the text, images are treated with extended captions that, while not formal image descriptions, could serve to make the visual elements of the work more accessible to readers with vision differences. A timeline appendix, covering the period of 1500-2000 with entries that highlight significant cultural, political, and economic events further contextualizes the letters, diary entries, reviews, reports, and other writings by artists and their historical contemporaries.

Keywords: book review | primary sources | art history | United States

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

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by John Davis and Michael Leja. The University of Chicago Press, April 2020. 544 p. ill. ISBN 9780932171689 (pbk.), \$39.00.

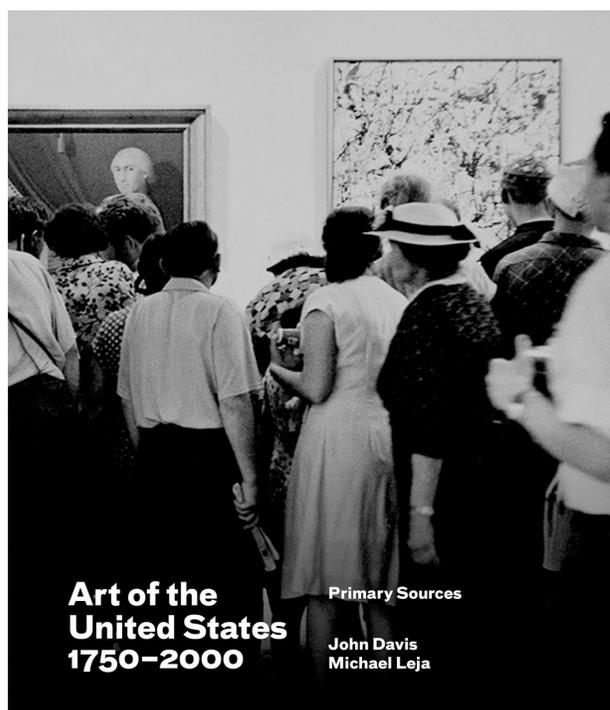
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Art of the United States, 1750-2000:

Primary Sources is a new anthology that introduces the field of American art from the nation's inception to the end of the twentieth century, through the words of its artists, critics, patrons, and cultural commentators. The volume is somewhere between a sourcebook and a textbook, bringing together selected excerpts of historical documents and images of key art works with introductions, robust headnotes, documentary illustrations and photographs, and maps across ten chronological chapters. These chapters trace the way ideas about authority, identity, representation, and form in art have shifted amid centuries marked by the development of new cultural institutions, violent clashes over the end of slavery and the expansion of American imperialism, and ongoing political struggle for equity and justice. Throughout the text, images are treated with extended captions that, while not formal image descriptions, could serve to make the visual elements of the work more accessible to readers with vision differences. A timeline appendix, covering the period of 1500-2000 with entries that highlight significant cultural, political, and economic events further contextualizes the letters, diary entries, reviews, reports, and other writings by artists and their historical contemporaries.

Any project that attempts to weave together a holistic historical narrative, spanning centuries, through primary sources in a single volume has to weigh breadth against depth. Opting for breadth and accessibility to new researchers, editors John Davis and Michael Leja have curated collections of primarily short texts and excerpts of lengthier pieces to illustrate the central themes of each chapter.



Additionally, while the editors have attempted to represent the vibrant diversity of the United States throughout its history in their selections of art works and texts, Davis and Leja note in the introduction that archival silences and gaps in the documentary record impact whose voices have been preserved from the nation's earliest periods and thus whose work could be included. Still, there are points where the text may have been strengthened by more explicit efforts at inclusion, such as the anthology's third chapter, "The Civil War and Its Aftermath: 1850-1870." While the chapter includes works about slavery and abolition by Eastman Johnson and John Quincy Adams Ward, it is absent of any contributions by Black artists or writers. Its exploration of the development of the American landscape as a genre and the "lure of Italy" as creative inspiration for American artists might have provided the perfect opportunity to include the work of Robert S. Duncanson, an African-American landscape artist whose paintings of Pompeii and Vesuvius from that period are now displayed in the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Ultimately, *Art of the United States, 1750-2000: Primary Sources* is an affordable and well-organized anthology that can serve as an introduction to primary sources for undergraduate students studying art history as well as casual readers interested in American art. It is well-suited for general academic collections as well as fine art libraries that support undergraduate study and could easily serve as a supplementary course-assigned text for an introductory American art course.