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The "New Woman" Revised: Painting And Gender Politics On Fourteenth Street



Synopsis

In the years between the world wars, Manhattan's Fourteenth Street-Union Square district became a center for commercial, cultural, and political activities, and hence a sensitive barometer of the dramatic social changes of the period. It was here that four urban realist painters—Kenneth Hayes Miller, Reginald Marsh, Raphael Soyer, and Isabel Bishop—placed their images of modern "new women." Bargain stores, cheap movie theaters, pinball arcades, and radical political organizations were the backdrop for the women shoppers, office and store workers, and consumers of mass culture portrayed by these artists. Ellen Wiley Todd deftly interprets the painters' complex images as they were refracted through the gender ideology of the period. This is a work of skillful interdisciplinary scholarship, combining recent insights from feminist art history, gender studies, and social and cultural theory. Drawing on a range of visual and verbal representations as well as biographical and critical texts, Todd balances the historical context surrounding the painters with nuanced analyses of how each artist's image of womanhood contributed to the continual redefining of the "new woman's" relationships to men, family, work, feminism, and sexuality.

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Customer Reviews

Interpreting the paintings of four artists who worked in the area and observed the daily inhabitants, Todd presents the plight of women as shoppers, sales clerks, and office workers on 14th Street in New York between the two world wars. Considering time and place, it is a natural combination that the author handles deftly. Biographies of the artists Kenneth Hayes Miller (the oldest of the group

and an early influence on the others), Reginald Marsh, Raphael Soyer, and Isabel Bishop are contrasted and critiqued in light of their own backgrounds and beliefs. Eight color plates and 150 black-and-white illustrations display a rich assemblage of their work and also serve the text's discussion of the changing conception of "new woman," from the 1890s Gibson girl to later flappers and sirens. Women's history collections will need this wholly absorbing study, which also provides a well-documented resource for art criticism of the urban realists and a view of New York's working class.- Ellen Bates, New YorkCopyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Ellen Wiley Todd is Associate Professor of Art History, American Studies, and Women's Studies at George Mason University.

I found this book provides an unusual and interesting look at art before it became merchandized and exploded in value. It looks at the influence of the artist in identifying what to paint and how and why - rather than just a pretty picture or a design object for interior decoration. Focuses on New York City in Depression. Scholarly work, with an impressive amount of research with pictures reproduced not commonly or easily found.

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