

Nancy Heller and Julia Williams, *The Regionalists*. New York, Watson-Guptill, 1976. 208 pp., 142 illus., \$35.00

David Burnett

Volume 5, numéro 1, 1978

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077328ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077328ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Burnett, D. (1978). Compte rendu de [Nancy Heller and Julia Williams, *The Regionalists*. New York, Watson-Guptill, 1976. 208 pp., 142 illus., \$35.00]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 5(1), 70–71.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1077328ar>



FIGURE 1. Marsh, *Patoongnuya Coming into an Igloo*, ca. 1937. Marsh, p. 39.

Obedient to their nationalist programme, they focused on the forms of landscape itself. Marsh, on the contrary, was interested in the North as a human environment, and the Padlimiut Eskimos themselves provided her main subject. She was by no means uninterested in the landscape, but in her integration of the Padlimiut, their architecture, and their environment, she paints the *human* North.

A second difference has more to do with technique and point of view. Harris especially (although it was a common attitude among the Group of Seven) had a distinctly anti-European thrust to his nationalism, and he tried hard to rid his own painting of European and English influences. Marsh's paintings, however, are in the tradition of the refined English watercolour. In her hands, the tradition is seen to be sensitive to light, colour, and atmosphere, carefully but not slavishly observant of detail, reticent yet warm in observing people, striving for clarity in pictorial composition, but in a delicate manner that makes many of Harris's Arctic paintings look contrived and cerebral by comparison. Marsh's ten years of training and teaching at the Hornby School of Art in England had well prepared her to handle the surprises of light and colour and space that awaited her in the Canadian Arctic.

It should be noted that all of the reproductions in the main section of the book are too blue. *Padlimiut Washday: Drying Skins* (p. 35) is particularly harmed. In the original painting, the long, slender poles used for drying skins are painted in warm browns and greys. Stuck in the snow at varying angles and at different depths in space, they cross and diverge or approach being parallel in intriguing ways. They combine in a delicate three-dimensional composition of dancing forms which contrast in colour with the neutral background of sky and snow. Because of the blue soaking in the book's printing, the browns have lost their strength and warmth, the contrast is weakened, and much of the complexity and beauty of the painting is lost.

The publishers unfortunately give us no indication of the size of the watercolours reproduced in the main section of the book. (They range from $8\frac{5}{8}'' \times 11\frac{3}{8}''$ to an impressive $20\frac{3}{4}'' \times 29\frac{1}{2}''$.) They give us no indication of what fraction of the artist's *œuvre* these constitute. (They comprise most of it.) They tell us nothing of the whereabouts of the works. (Most are now in the new museum and art gallery at Yellowknife, NWT.) The tiny, colourful plant studies in the Introduction are beautiful and intricate. They were painted about life size, but the publishers do not tell us this, nor do they identify the plants in any way. With very little effort and expense, Oxford University Press could have made this charming book more useful to art historians and to the general reader.

PETER LARISEY
Carleton University
Ottawa

NANCY HELLER AND JULIA WILLIAMS
The Regionalists. New York, Watson-Guption, 1976. 208 pp., 142 illus., \$35.00.

For many years now the American Regionalists have been victims of critical abuse and historical neglect. The foreshortening of historical perspective combined with the powerful demands of a

'mainstream' has cast this realm of American art into the rôle of a background against which the achievements of the 'forties and 'fifties can stand in sharper relief. The historical and critical profile of the Regionalists are, however, becoming more sharply defined.

The motivation is no doubt partly art historical, with its own generative impulses, and partly also a response to a more widespread interest in the period itself. Within the visual arts, the interest is not simply explained as a need to redress an imbalance, for there can be no serious question of discovering a major reputation for any artist associated with the Regionalist movement. The interest is a necessary one, especially when recent American art no longer needs to prove itself by contradiction with tradition.

The Regionalists is a large, handsome, and extraordinarily well illustrated presentation. Built around its large-format plates, forty-eight in colour and ninety-four halftones, it brings together a wide-ranging selection of works from public and private collections. Thomas Hart Benton, Charles Burchfield, Grant Wood, Reginald Marsh, and John Stuart Curry are given particularly generous scope by the illustrations.

The relatively brief text begins with a short discussion of how Regionalism may be defined, followed by four thematic groupings of Regionalist work: 'The American Land,' 'Small Town America,' 'Urban America,' and a somewhat uneven *mélange*, 'Myth, History and Social Commentary.' The text, however, is awkward in a number of respects, and the difficulties start with the authors' attempts to differentiate within the broad category of American Scene Painters the two sub-categories of Regionalism and Social Realism. Particular stress is put on a distinction between Regionalism as the positive and Social Realism as the negative side of the American Scene. This turns out to be something of a blunt critical instrument, and the problems of operating with it become immediately apparent as the authors attempt to explain how particular artists may sometimes fall into one category and sometimes into another. The problem of the approach can be exemplified by the consideration of Hopper and

Georgia O'Keeffe; both artists are called 'formalists' and thus would stand outside both the Regionalist and Social Realist categories. Hopper's subject matter, however, demands his inclusion, despite the fact that his 'emphasis on isolation and sadness' is seen to fall outside the 'positive' character of Regionalism.

The authors hammer home the thesis, or hypothesis, that the Regionalists were basically unconcerned with social comment and primarily concerned with accentuating the positive. Thus, with Benton, a true Regionalist, they say that the figures in his paintings 'almost always seem to be enjoying themselves.' But this statement really denies the visual experience of the paintings. Why, we wonder, are the agricultural subjects invariably turned away from the spectator or have faces hidden by hats or shadows, as if retreating into the anonymity of their work? In the chapter on 'Small Town America,' Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* is linked with certain work of Grant Wood and, more indirectly, with that of Charles Burchfield; likewise, examples of Burchfield and Wood doing positive scenes are described in relation to Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*.

Even when they deal with artists of really interesting quality, Benton and particularly Reginald Marsh, the authors treat individual inventiveness with a strange flatness, continuing to show more concern with how the variety of an individual's work does or does not quite fit into their theoretical definition of Regionalism. This approach leads to many missed opportunities and inaccurate descriptions, such as the prim comment on Marsh's *Beach Scene*: the figures are 'in all kinds of peculiar positions,' or the 'cigarette-puffing, suspicious young men' in the *Merry-Go-Round* etching, which, as I see it, evinces one cigarette-puffing, dirty old man. Along with an unwillingness to elaborate on the good pictures, there is a humourless acceptance of others, such as Hogue's *Erosion No. 2* or Cadmus's *Gilding the Acrobat* which are, if not downright funny, just plain bad.

It is perhaps too easy to find weaknesses in a book that may be shorter in text than the authors would have wished and which must

present to a general audience a familiar subject still lacking a full, scholarly, and critical literature. The main difficulties, though, arise primarily from a methodological approach too often found in modern art historical and critical writing, a working from the general to the particular, from the hypothesis to the painting, with an insistence on the rightness of the results even if one's eyes are burning to relate something quite different.

DAVID BURNETT
Carleton University
Ottawa

JOHN SERGEANT *Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses. The Case for Organic Architecture*. New York, Whitney Library of Design (Watson-Guptill Publications), 1976. 207 pp., illus., \$28.25.

Cette étude de John Sergeant devrait être bien accueillie dans plus d'un milieu. Les historiens de l'architecture se réjouiront d'y trouver rassemblée une somme importante d'information sur la période la plus fructueuse de la carrière de Frank Lloyd Wright. Même s'il ne présente pas une documentation absolument inédite – très difficile à obtenir aussi longtemps que les archives de Wright demeureront inaccessibles – l'auteur a néanmoins fait œuvre utile en colligeant une information parue dans des publications nombreuses et dispersées, souvent difficiles d'accès, comme des journaux et des bulletins locaux, voire même des conférences radiophoniques. Un certain nombre d'entrevues et des échanges de lettres de l'auteur avec neuf clients de Wright et avec quelques-uns de ses collaborateurs ajoutent parfois un complément d'information aussi bien sur l'activité de l'architecte que sur sa philosophie, car cet ouvrage est autant consacré à la pensée de Wright qu'à ses travaux de construction. Pour leur part, plusieurs architectes et urbanistes seront sans doute heureux de découvrir – ou de redécouvrir – dans les théories formulées par Wright et dans les projets qu'il a conçus non seulement des solutions aux

problèmes avec lesquels ils sont eux-mêmes quotidiennement confrontés, mais aussi des affinités avec plusieurs concepts qui se partagent présentement la vedette. À la suite de Lionel March – qui a d'ailleurs signé la préface – John Sergeant tente de réhabiliter l'urbaniste chez Frank Lloyd Wright et de montrer que sa conception de l'habitat respecte les conditions écologiques, réduit la consommation d'énergie et encourage la participation de l'individu à la formation de son milieu.

Dans cette élégante publication copieusement illustrée, l'auteur embrasse sous le thème de la maison usonienne toutes les recherches de Wright sur l'habitat humain depuis le milieu des années 1930. Ces recherches, qui nous montrent un architecte tout aussi intéressé à résoudre des problèmes techniques comme le chauffage et l'isolation thermique que préoccupé de l'avenir de la démocratie, ont donné lieu à la construction de maisons qui, il est vrai, n'ont presque jamais atteint l'objectif premier de la maison usonienne, soit l'habitation d'un coût modéré. Toutefois, ce n'est pas par leurs caractères, lesquels sont toujours fondamentalement les mêmes, que les maisons les plus coûteuses se distinguent des maisons les plus économiques, mais plutôt par le luxe de leurs espaces. Pour réunir toutes ces recherches sous une même étiquette, il était encore plus important de faire valoir, comme le fait l'auteur, que la maison usonienne était conçue pour la société américaine telle que convertie aux réformes prêchées par l'architecte durant les vingt-cinq dernières années de sa vie. Du même coup, ce type d'habitat devient indissociable de *Broadacre City*. Wright refusait de construire ses maisons sur des emplacements en milieu urbain. «Acreage is indispensable», faisait-il savoir à ceux qui se proposaient de recourir à ses services.

Dans le premier chapitre l'auteur se sert de la maison Jacobs (1936, Fig. 1) pour illustrer les caractéristiques de la maison usonienne et il retrace les expériences antérieures de l'architecte qui l'ont conduit à une nouvelle forme d'architecture domestique. Manifestement les *zoned houses* de 1934 et la maison Willey de la même année comportent plusieurs caractéristiques du