The Gilded Age Reconsidered Once Again

Neil Harris

Like individuals, periods of history achieve reputations. With individuals, these reputations undergo change. Successive generations of biographers present dramatically different views of their subjects. Literary, political, artistic, and scientific standards shift. But almost everyone, ultimately, seems to get his or her due. The most incompetent administrator, the most forgotten poet, the most overruled jurist will eventually find a champion to discover unnoticed virtues or unknown difficulties mastered. Lord Cornwallis, Boss Tweed, the Marquis de Sade, Richard III—all have enjoyed at least temporary resuscitation.

Reviving an era is rather more complex. All of us understand that historical spans are amalgams, compounds that describe human experience unevenly. The Roaring Twenties did not roar for everyone; the Era of Good Feeling contained plenty of Ill Feelings; the Gay Nineties were the Depressed Nineties for millions of contemporaries. But in shorthand terms historical periods do enjoy more or less prestige, which depends on how historians describe them.

This is by way of brief introduction to my subject. We are meeting to study, to discuss, and probably even to celebrate late-nineteenth-century American Art. The exhibition and its catalog, The Quest for Unity, are subtitled, with neutral discretion, American Art Between World’s Fairs 1876–1893. At one time, however, this period had a more vigorous label. We are in the very heartland of an era that took its most popular name from a novel published three years before the Centennial Exposition: Charles Dudley Warner’s and Mark Twain’s 1873 book The Gilded Age: A Tale of Two-Days. Although the title was meant to evoke specifically the frantic speculation and fluctuating values that succeeded Appomattox and the ending of the Civil War, the term was too pungent to be limited to a mere six or eight years. In the hands of American historians the Gilded Age was broadened to cover the last third of the nineteenth century, occasionally beginning several years after the novel was actually published.

Just when the custom developed of applying this label is difficult to discover. It was not used generally in the late
nineteenth century. But at some point, perhaps by the mid-
1920s, it had acquired an indelible association with those
years, and Charles Beard employed it as a chapter heading in
his 1927 *Rise of American Civilization*. And it had acquired a
set of connotations. In political terms, corruption, reaction,
and retreat from serious obligations. In social terms, high
living and excessive expenditure. In economic terms, plutoc-
racy and popular misery. And in aesthetic terms, eclecticism,
sentimentality, facade-worship, and indecision. Overall, an
avoidance of serious issues and native themes.

Estrangement Between Art and Life

At the heart of the critique of the Gilded Age—and relevant
to this exhibition's theme, the Quest for Unity—one finds
the accusation that this era labored under a divided con-
sciousness, a dual sensibility—something akin to George
Santayana's memorable phrase, the skyscraper and the log
cabin. The American spirit seemed divided between its real
sources of energy and distinctiveness—political enthusiasm
and economic growth—and the deities of culture—the arts,
belles lettres—which were worshiped without much confi-
dence in their potency. Many commentators, then and later,
focused on this apparent estrangement between art and life.
For some it epitomized the meaning of the genteel tradition:
refusal to confront actuality in its mundane ugliness.

The charge involved popular as well as high culture. Henry
Nash Smith, surely one of the most sensible students of
American civilization, put it this way. The besetting di-
lemma of American popular culture in the late nineteenth
century, he wrote, as he introduced his anthology *Popular
Culture and Industrialism, 1865–1890* (1967), was "its inability
to reconcile traditional values with its dawning perception
of social fact. The cult of ideality," Smith continued, "a
degraded heritage from transcendentalism, achieved its con-
summation in the twin splendors of the Columbian Ex-
position (fig. 1)." "But what," he asked, "was the relation
of the White City to the Black City where industrialization had
produced, along with wealth, the dirt and crime of the slums?
From the standpoint of popular culture the question an-
swered itself; aesthetic value, like social justice, was unreal by
definition; the realm of ideas was a dreamland . . . as of
1890," Smith concluded, "the popular culture was more of a
handicap than an aid to the full development of the nation's
human resources."

This indictment of Gilded Age culture is paralleled, as I
just suggested, by other indictments of Gilded Age politics,
economics, intellectual life, and social development. What-
ever corrections, emendations, and alterations have been
offered—and they are many—they remain, for the most part,
qualifications. The popular reputation of the Gilded Age as
an epicene era of diminution—self-satisfied, coarsened, and
above all divided—survived as a datum of great power. As we
begin our viewing and our deliberations, I want to ask three
questions. First of all, how and why was the reputation
achieved? Second, when and how was the reputation chal-
lenged? Third, and finally, can art and architectural scholar-
ship be suggesting, in the last decade or two, a more powerful
way of transcending the reputation, for once and all? I shall
not, for the most part, be talking about the fine and applied
arts as such. I shall quote a few critics. But this exhibition's

Fig. 2. Joseph Keppler, *Reconciliation—June 17th, 1875, Uncle
Sam*—"There, shake hands heartily. You couldn't have chosen
a better day for reconciliation of North and South. I am glad to see
you together at Bunker Hill. for your fathers fought, shouldered to
shoulder, throughout the Revolution. But I wonder what my man
Grant would think of this meeting! Are you surprised that he is
not here? Do you ask where are his friends Conkling, Morton,
Poland, and the rest, with their dreadful Ku-Klux emblems? See
them yonder, swept away to be drowned in oblivion, with the
sectional hatreds of the past, the war’s bitternesses, *Crédit Mobilier*
frauds, 'rings' of all kinds, nepotism and Caesarism, by the rising
tide of national patriotism, beneath the light of these centennial
years." In *Leslie’s Monthly Magazine*, 10 July 1875.

importance lies, I think, in suggesting new kinds of connec-
tions and a new basis for considering the culture of late-
nineteenth-century America.

Social Criticism in Words and Pictures

In my view, the first source for the long-lived strength of the
popular view came from the period's own self-critical ener-
gies. Ironically enough, the Gilded Age gave birth to its own
grave diggers. A tone of contempt for establishments, existing
verities, and failed reforms grew from an unprecedented level
of social criticism in the late nineteenth century, a freedom
given to and taken by artists, writers, and journalists to mock,
puncture, parody, and otherwise assault majority values.

American arts and letters did have a vigorous tradition
of social criticism before the Civil War, of course. Haw-
thorne, Whitman, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, all were out
of sympathy with prevailing powerful social trends, political
values, economic policies, or foreign relations. But as writers
and artists they tended to mobilize around specific issues—
abolition, temperance, unions, urban growth—fighting de-
defined enemies for the control of public opinion. They were
engaged in and not alienated from larger social causes. Best-
selling authors, popular painters and sculptors, poets, playwrights—these of course tended to support stereotypes and majority views, avoiding social criticism or political self-doubts, and in general did not trouble still waters. Until the Civil War most American artists and writers lived in relative peace with either their patrons or the buying public. The criticism that was offered, on a high level, was specified and controlled; on a popular level it was mild and traditional.

But this situation changed in the 1860s and 1870s, as artists and writers began to distance themselves from the social system that had grown up around them. Satire, caricature, and irony evolved into familiar weapons. Increasingly, artists and writers did not fasten upon specific political targets but upon the spirit of an age. Several elements contributed to this warring stance. One was the appearance of a new profession, that of the journalist-cartoonist. The use of caricature to lampoon opponents was not invented during the Gilded Age, but the uses to which it was put by Joseph Keppler (fig. 2), Thomas Nast (fig. 3), Joseph Wales, Frederick Opper, and others in the pages of Harper's, Puck, Life, Judge, and metropolitan newspapers, was savage and effective. And in full color. The targets were frequently political leaders—such as Tweed or Blaine or Cleveland—but also ways of life—that of the newly rich, the dandy, the immigrant, the cleric, the reformer. Among writers of fiction, it became possible to attack a series of economic, religious, and social institutions through the manipulation of plots and characterizations. Although we are not yet in the muckraking era, which begins after the turn of the century, we see a preview in theEighties and Nineties. The radical novel, whose targets were institutions and practices rather than individuals or causes, was, to all intents and purposes, born at this time. Some of the authors are well known—William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Edgar W. Howe, Edward Bellamy. Others have not survived so well: J. W. DeForest, Edward Eggleston, Robert Grant, Edgar Fawcett, Rebecca Harding Davis, Paul Leicester Ford, and F. Marion Crawford. Their targets included great trusts, high living, political corruption, railroad lobbies, tenement houses, department stores, business fraud, and religious hypocrisy. Added to these writers were investigative journalists such as Jacob Riis and Nelly Bly, who uncovered corrupt practices and the trafficking in human misery. The picture presented was not a pretty one, and the intellectual at war with his world gave later commentators plenty of ammunition.

A second and related source of hostility to the era lay in the nature of the documentation provided. Through newspapers, magazines, and above all photography, the Gilded Age was the most vividly portrayed period that had ever existed. Whether these images were taken by war photographers such as Mathew Brady, society photographers such as the Byrons, reporters such as Jacob Riis, or art photographers such as Clarence White, our sustained photographic memory of American history begins in the Sixties and Seventies. Before that time, photographs, while important as occasional icons, were exceptional, dramatic highlights in a record less visually modern. Most of us agree with historians of photography who argue that the camera and the lens are as interpretive as any other artistic medium. But despite ourselves, we relate to photographs as to no other visual data. In our age the photographic image, whether still or in motion, is the instrument of persuasion. It records the Gilded Age in all its immediacy, and in much of its offensiveness. The figures of power and wealth are overfed, often overdressed. Slum scenes and the immigrant poor seem more unnerving, more pitiable in these images, which, earlier, could be only sketched and painted. Urban squalor and factory life take on a larger scale. Victims emerge to speak for themselves, without any need for literacy (fig. 4). When we compare this kind of documentation with the art of the period, and when our predecessors juxtaposed it with the painting, the sculpture, the architecture, and the decorative design, the divided sensibility that was already apparent is intensified. The arts seemed deracinated, distracted, perhaps peripheral to central issues.

A third source of hostility was the chroniclers who provided the influential accounts of the period. As early as the mid-1860s the era between the fairs had begun to seem something of an embarrassment. There is nothing special about this kind of reaction. As the literary historian Harold Bloom has reminded us, patterns of artistic parricide are well established. One generation rises to greatness by killing off the parents who brought them life, establishing their identity by repudiating and denigrating their predecessors. In the case of the Gilded Age, however, the reaction was quick and almost total. Very different groups found it wanting. On the one hand, bringers of order, neoclassicists, and political reformers condemned its eclecticism, apparent imitiveness, sentimentality, and occasional mysticism. On the other, rebel radicals, aesthetic experimenters who were tied to the trajectory of modern art and thought, condemned its conservativism, its
repressiveness, its apparent hostility to the daring originator. There appeared no consistency to the period’s taste, no obvious paternity. There were no real parents to identify, much less to rebel against. Individual champions or predecessors could and would be claimed—an Eakins, a Homer, a Ryder. But the period as a whole lacked any natural champions. Its uneasy compromises seemed easy to forget and its pretensions easy to abandon. Indeed it was the very complexity of its intellectual and cultural life, the lack of any comfortable fit within governing generalizations, and the profusion and variety of responses, we now see, which gave so much difficulty to those who wrote about it. It was easy to get the Gilded Age wrong, because getting it right required so much research and concentration.

Cultural surveys loaded their commentaries with qualifications and tended to be patronizing, at best. Thomas Tallmadge’s Story of Architecture (1927) allowed that the Centennial Year was “usually regarded as the end of an era of bad taste.” But Tallmadge himself, expressing his view in Churchillian language, found the 1876 Exposition only “the beginning of the end rather than the end itself.” The “overthrow of this atrocious regime,” as he put it, would come only when the work of Hunt, Richardson, and McKim had been given time to sink in. In 1928, in American Architecture, Fiske Kimball titled his version of the Gilded Age “A Confusion of Tongues,” lamenting that American architectural individualism was unrestrained by “the taste of a settled aristocracy, the tenacity of peasants, or the impotence of a herded proletariat.” It was an ingenious critique of American egalitarianism. Apparently Kimball thought art and democracy could not coexist, although he admitted generously that some useful things were done. But they were submerged “in the mass of vulgarity. The leaders were still few,” he continued, “the mass greater than ever before, still unleavened,” and the “welter of prejudice, ignorance, and wilfulness” confused “public display and domestic intimacy.”

It was, however, through the reform-minded historians of the Progressive Era and a corps of sensationalizing journalist-chroniclers that the 1870s and 1880s received their coup de grâce. Again this was an attack from very different sides. On the one hand there was a serious, radical historical tradition, taught and maintained for a twenty-year period by heirs to the Progressive Era such as Vernon Louis Partridge, Charles Beard, and Matthew Josephson, who were dismayed by the reactionary politics, corrupt bargains, domination of big business, suppression of labor, and concentration on amassing money. According to these later historians, who were also prose stylists and ideologists, plutocratic values produced a vulgarity that discouraged a humanistic native art in favor of foreign imports. As Josephson put it in The Robber Barons (1934) “drawn by the gold of America, the works of art continued to pile up and to be measured exactly like barrels of pork, bales of cotton, or railroad stocks and bonds.” For its patrons in the Gilded Age, culture was nothing organic but rather “touched with death. The presence of the noblest paintings left unchanged their aggressive and acquisitive appetites.” “A Molière, a Balzac alone,” wrote Josephson, “could paint the strong passion, the glittering eyes of greed,” of the tycoons whose Renaissance beds and Fragonard murals gave them “the droll aspect of the aborigine who decorates his person with the disjecta membra of Western civilization, with pieces of tin can for his earrings, or a rubber tire for a belt.” These historians barely mentioned contemporary American art in their syntheses; the conclusion was inescapable that the jackals and wolves of industry corrupted whatever they touched. Any artists they employed

Fig. 4. Jacob Riis, Under the Dump, Rivington Street, Italian Home, ca. 1891. The Jacob A. Riis Collection, Museum of the City of New York.
were simply mere pet canaries, to be suspected by later generations.

Beard's, Parrington's, and Josephson's assault on the period was complemented and strengthened by another group, who did not always share their radical, ideological stance. This group found the post-Civil War years to be an extraordinary repository of colorful characters, contrasts, and gaudy excesses, which would make any description immensely appealing to general readers. As journalists, some former, some active, they too were fascinated by the mixture of moralism, sentimentality, and hypocrisy that seemed to govern the worlds of both high and popular culture.

These writers working typically in the 1920s and 1930s, but sometimes earlier and later, include Gene Fowler, Dennis Lynch, Herbert Asbury, Moses Werner, Thomas Beer, Don Seitz, George Fort Milton, and Dixon Wecter—names that are largely forgotten today but that appeared with some regularity on the best-seller lists of the Twenties and Thirties. They took as their subjects Jim Fiske and Jay Gould, Lilian Russell, Buffalo Bill, Boss Tweed, P. T. Barnum, Tony Pastor, Harrigan and Hart, girlie shows, municipal corruption, Delmonico's restaurant, John L. Sullivan, high living, Steve Brodie—emphasizing extravagance, exaggeration, oddity, sports, crime, and pleasure. Serious art, like serious politics, was defined out of existence or made to seem irrelevant, doomed by decay, immigration, Puritanism, self-absorption, or the pursuit of wealth.

The literary skills of these men were often compelling, none more so perhaps than in Beer's brilliant pastiche of embarrassing obfuscities, *The Mauve Decade* [1890–1900]. As Beer put it, "a society which mistook amenity for civilization," could be presented by imaginatively linking such disjunctive elements as Jesse James, Queen Victoria, Tribymania, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Published in 1926, *The Mauve Decade* selected sexual prudery, vulgarity, censoriousness, repression, Anglomania, the contempt for science, the reverence for decorum, and a hostility to original ideas as the prevailing characteristics of national life during those years. Beer saw in this period, "the collapse of American thought. All that had been finely stawart in the Bostonian age had vanished, the reckless courage and self-willed individualism of Emerson, Thoreau, and Channing. . . . The confusion of morals with manners . . . helped the mental lassitude of the Americans to destroy what was honourable in the Bostonian tradition, and from the remains of the tradition welled a perfume of decay, cant and meaningless phrases. . . . Architecture in America was still nothing but a malady. . . ." Hotels "resembling ennobled bath-rooms without visible conveniences rose everywhere." In New York, in the most preposterous of Gilded Age settings "sedate French violinists were mellowed into playing ragtime at dinners of the barbarous Westerners then invading Manhattan."

Several of these writers had a further impact because they succeeded in shaping some of Hollywood's excursions into American history. The opulence of the Gilded Age was perfect for costume extravaganzas, brawling melodramas, and catchy musical scores. The two most influential historical films before World War II, D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and David Selznick's *Gone with the Wind*, feature powerful and satiric portraits of post-Civil War corruption and the luxurious excesses of the new rich (fig. 5). This group of writers and biographers, unlike Beard, Parrington, and Josephson, was not always unsympathetic with its protagonists, and there was much sentimental nostalgia attached to their presentation of late-nineteenth-century America as a world of energetic gaiety, the rascality redeemed frequently by generosity and personal attractiveness. But it is a picture that reinforced the image of divided consciousness seen elsewhere; the emphasis lay on consumption, superfertility, and display, with the arts and politics relegated to the peripheries of national life, distant from fundamental social forces.

**The Saving Remnant**

By the 1930s the Gilded Age had become, for a whole generation, the symbol of a national loss of innocence and quest for wealth, its politics corrupt, its art and literature a pale degeneration from the heroic days of New England's dominance. So stunning a set of negative conclusions was bound, of course, to invite challenges. If the views of the first thirty years of the twentieth century were characterized by a powerful uniformity of hostile images, those of the next forty would feature energetic, self-conscious, but ultimately unsuccessful efforts at reevaluation. How could the Gilded Age be re-deemed as a period whose contributions to American art and public life deserved respect?

A possible strategy was outlined most brilliantly in one of the first rescue efforts, undertaken by a young critic and historian who was just beginning his career, Lewis Mumford. Mumford employed an idea that can be traced back to Genesis and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and has enjoyed particular appeal among modern historians. This was the argument of the Saving Remnant. An age could be redeemed by a few master spirits, figures so great that they purified the corruption around them, Some were little known, hidden frequently from the sight of their contemporaries or subsequent chroniclers because their accomplishments were not recognized by the official guardians of culture. Thus, by withholding recognition from their greatest hostages to later...
reputation, the true enemies of the Gilded Age were precisely its official representatives. This idea Mumford suggested in one of the earliest reformulations of Gilded Age culture, *The Brown Decades* (1931). Having already resuscitated the sleeping giant of American literature, Herman Melville, Mumford proceeded to isolate a series of innovative and creative artists, builders, planners, and engineers—Frederick Law Olmsted, the park maker (fig. 6); the Roeblings, the bridge builders; the architect Louis Sullivan (fig. 7); the artists Albert Pinkham Ryder (fig. 8), Thomas Eakins (fig. 9), George Fuller, and Robert Loftin Newman—in a collective biographical portrait that challenged the taint of superficiality applied to the culture of the Seventies and Eighties.

Mumford admitted openly that these were not the most influential voices of the Gilded Age. “Its best works were often produced in obscurity,” he wrote. For this reason he had originally thought to call his work *The Buried Renaissance*, suggesting the prevailing view that a larval flow of industrial debris had swept the nation after the Civil War, burying “all the cities of the spirit, leaving here and there only an ashen ruin, standing erect in the crumbled landscape.” But beneath this garbage lay buried treasure, concealed by generations of superficial criticism. “It is time that we ceased to be dominated by the negative aspects of the Brown Decades,” Mumford continued. “Almost hidden by the dead leaves, the compost, the sour soil,” spring flowers such as Emily Dickinson grew, along with other figures Mumford was bent on removing from historical obloquy.

Indeed, so impressive was Mumford’s reconstruction of this period of art, architecture, and landscape planning, that he felt it necessary to explain why its virtues had been so long immured. His answer was that we were accustomed to looking at nineteenth-century American history through literary eyes. In this view, the Gilded Age appeared as a serious deflation. Contemporary estimates of its own writing and philosophy were ludicrously overblown and thus discouraged further efforts to understand what had happened. Ours is the first generation that can examine “these bedraggled years with a free mind,” Mumford suggested, and catch “amid the materialism, the mean ostentation . . . the gleam of an active culture.” But this culture at its best, Mumford insisted, was not literary. The standards of the Golden Day, the glory years of pre-Civil War America, could or should not be applied to the later era. Literature was a form that traveled easily; with small means a nation could command the best. Thus it flourished first, among the arts, in America. But after the Civil War had come the turn of industrial, graphic, and plastic arts. Here, not in criticism, poetry, authorship, or belles-lettres, lay the true glory of the Gilded Age, Mumford concluded.

His message, then, was multiple. First of all, the Gilded Age had enormous achievements that could be unearthed and resurrected. Second, these achievements were not primarily in politics, literature, or philosophy, but in engineering, architecture, and the visual arts. And finally, noted Mumford, in another strategy that would prove enduringly popular, there were parallels between this earlier time and the 1920s. “Beneath the foreign trappings of the 70s and 80s we have become conscious of a life not unlike our own: that is the first claim to our sympathy.” The most powerful of these parallels lay in the pervasiveness of a postwar consciousness. The Civil War’s analogy was World War I. Both conflicts had produced eras of blasted hopes and lost idealism. Disillusionments could make their presence felt through an entire civilization. But there were other parallels available in the technological changes—steel, electricity, railroads, textiles—that supported the surge of energy in the 1870s and 1880s and the radio, automobile, and electronic contributions that invigorated the 1920s.

Fifty years ago Mumford wrote eloquently about this period. Since then the reputations of many eras have risen dramatically. But the struggle to restore sympathetic attention to the Gilded Age remains an uphill fight, at least according to historians writing during the past two decades. Two of

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**Fig. 7.** Louis Henri Sullivan at Ocean Springs, Mississippi, date unknown. In Louis H. Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats* (revised 1918) and Other Writings (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, ca. 1947). New York Public Library.

**Fig. 8.** Albert Pinkham Ryder, 1905. Photograph: Alice Boughton. Photographs of Artists, Collection One; Archives of American Art.

**Fig. 9.** Thomas Eakins, n.d. Photographs of Artists, Collection One; Archives of American Art.
Mumford’s tactics have become favorite instruments for reexamination. One is the emphasis on the period’s parallelism with the current world; the second, the search for buried treasures. But the third tactic, his emphasis upon the particular role of the visual and applied arts, has never really been taken up. In my opinion it accounts for the continuing problem that cultural historians of this age have faced.

Two generations of American historians have, since 1930, reconstituted the politics, the economic life, and the institutional and intellectual activities of late-nineteenth-century America. Classics of historical literature have appeared, aware of and distancing themselves from the ideological bias of Beard, Parrington, and Josephson. Among them are Richard Hofstadter’s Social Darwinism in American Thought (1944) and The Age of Reform (1955); C. Vann Woodward’s studies of Southern life; and a series of monographs on politics, university history, professionalization, and such topics as hospitals, museums, business management, banking, and transportation. These studies have revised many existing generalizations and have suggested an unprecedented degree of originality, innovation, and effectiveness. Yet, despite the amount of original and specialized research, there has been little penetration of the larger generalizations. In the 1960s and 1970s, to meet the burgeoning college enrollments, new textbooks and anthologies appeared, presenting interpretations and documents of the Gilded Age. One, The Gilded Age (1967) edited by Ari and Olive Hoogenboom, admitted that the era was still labeled an age of excess, but emphasized the period’s transitional relation to modern times, for it was a time when positive governmental action transformed the federal bureaucracy, when modern problems of urban slums, crime, and sanitation were confronted, and when a major intellectual such as William James could create a synthesis of scientific thought and, simultaneously, experiment with hallucinogenic drugs.

But their larger conclusion was qualified and not too strong; the Gilded Age was simply remote from the present in some ways and close to it in others. John De Novo, who edited another anthology, called The Gilded Age and After, in the early 1970s, argued that this was “one of the more important periods of American history,” but also “one of the least understood.” Too often it was described as a time of political decadence when it was more accurately a time of political transition. Richard Bartlett, organizer of another anthology titled The Gilded Age (1966), termed the phrase harmful because it suggested to many that the last thirty-five years of the century were inconsequential to later development. Only recently, Bartlett wrote, “have historians begun a reappraisal of the Gilded Age,” and they have found it to be a “seedbed” of present civilization, whose primary theme was change.

These scholars, and others like them, were off and running with Mumford’s attempt to demonstrate parallelism between the late-nineteenth and the middle-twentieth centuries, as the first step toward revising the reputation of the Gilded Age. The most ambitious assault of the 1960s on older stereotypes was a series of books and articles by H. Wayne Morgan. Morgan tried to examine the origins of the mingled contempt and hostility to the Gilded Age and then sought to set the record straight. His volume, The Gilded Age, A Reappraisal, was published in 1963. Introducing the essays, which looked at taste, politics, reform, and economic leadership in this period, Morgan complained that the Gilded Age seemed “lifeless in historical print,” standing as it did between the mountain range of the Civil War and the lower plateaus of Populism and Progressivism. Few students had seriously attempted to view it in proper perspective, as it was to itself, and for the things that it produced in itself. Once again Beard, Parrington, and Josephson were blamed. Morgan reviewed some of the highlights—the mugwump reformers, the new mass audience for art and literature, the sustained period of peace, the economic progress—and argued that, nostalgia aside, “the Gilded Age has not received its just due from either a neglecting public or distorting historians.”

But how much good all this analysis did is still unclear. Twelve years after Morgan’s book, and long after the contributions of Bartlett, Hoogenboom, De Novo, and a series of monographic historians, Vincent de Santis, an historian at Notre Dame, assessed recent accounts of Gilded Age politics by remarking, “Seldom has any period in American history been kicked and scuffed as much by historians as the Gilded Age.” Despite the updating, the reexaminations, the corrections, college texts of the 1970s repeated, almost without embellishment, the view associated with the now infamous trio of Beard, Parrington, and Josephson. If, said de Santis, a Rip Van Winkle had fallen asleep between 1952 and 1975, he would find the Gilded Age presented in synthetic histories not different from the one portrayed by Henry Adams almost one hundred years earlier.

Art and the Search for Unity

Clearly we stand in the presence of one of the most enduring images of American history. If monograph after monograph cannot shake the fundamental grip of popular notions about Gilded Age politics, business, and culture, what can? The elements I outlined earlier—the self-critical energies of its own detractors, the literary power and political views of the
early formulators, the record keeping which vivified its apparent sordidness and vulgarity, the epigrammatic appeal of journalist historians, the final seal of Hollywood interpretation—may be too much to take on.

But one strategy that makes sense is to exploit exhibitions of Gilded Age art and material culture as instruments, not merely to recover American art history of the day, but through it to recover some insights into the period as a whole. This approach is to pick up Lewis Mumford’s neglected point that the generation of the 1870s and 1880s was especially skillful at employing the visual and plastic arts as expressions of value. Here, rather than in literary reevaluation or political revision, we can come closer to understanding its energies and divisions.

For most historians the arts are not central to periodization. They are usually peripheral elements that give color. Election returns, immigration figures, and foreign policy seem more fundamental. But speaking as an historian of American society, I think that both the taste and artifacts of this period can serve as effective tools of reevaluation. The exhibition has become, in the last decade or two, a powerful form of historical argument, a means of reassessment that possesses a vivid, concrete character that is difficult to ignore. What textual statements have been unable to achieve, museums may well be able to accomplish.

For art history at least, scholarly research has prepared a new understanding of this period as a cultural entity. Monographs and catalogs published during the last twenty years have readdressed the conventional wisdom that defined this period. Let me try to draw from the recent research three large areas of redirection.

First of all, the work of scholars such as Barbara Weinberg, Michael Quick, William Gerds, and Lois Pink—and I hesitate even to specify because a partial list is not meant to be all inclusive—makes it increasingly clear that American art cannot be understood, on almost any level, without close and continuing attention to its European counterparts. Through the nineteenth century an Atlantic civilization functioned with unusual levels of coherence and intimacy. Emphasis on native achievement and the formation of a national style, so long the obsession of many historians, has obscured the range of common tastes, teachers, and experiences uniting sculptors, painters, and artificers in New York, Philadelphia, Paris, Munich, and London. Changes in European reputation, technique, and values were felt rapidly within the American art world, both among those working within this country and the very large number who were, at any one time, either permanent or temporary expatriates. This was true not only because Europe remained the centerpiece of nineteenth-century high culture, which it did, but also because the conditions of life within which artists worked resembled one another in Europe and America, and the same stylistic traditions were available to both continents. Increasing urbanization and industrialization placed new value on the study of regionalism, rural customs, primitivism, and local color. The development of middle-class commercial and professional elites raised analogous questions of patronage. The growth of nationalism, imperialism, history worship, and ethnocentrism had an impact everywhere; so did the increasing power of scientific explanation, the more intrusive role of technology, and the creation of vigorous popular cultures built around mass production, mass entertainment, and mass consumption. Within quite differing political systems, mass literacy and universal education were becoming accomplished goals; broad secularization competed with religious congregations; radical political and economic doctrine gained broad

Fig. 11. Walter Gay in his Paris studio, n.d. Photographs of Artists in Paris Studios; Archives of American Art.
circulation; and the presence of a permanently alienated intellectual community was taken for granted. All these developments profoundly affected the high arts and infiltrated the applied arts.

Agreeing that this Atlantic civilization was international in character, art historians have begun careful exploration of its many levels of connection—technical, pedagogical, stylistic, and personal—without being judgmental, the curse of an earlier scholarship, which found European links vaguely shameful or at least retarding. The analysis has only begun. But exciting intersections have been shown at both high and popular levels—among major painters and sculptors but also among cartoonists and caricaturists, among illustrators and commercial artists, among theatrical producers, vaudevillians, journalists, and press barons. Artists are no longer indicted for lack of patriotism because of their internationalist interests. Cosmopolitanism, as Barbara Weinberg notes in one of her essays, is no necessary sign of disillusionment with native themes. It can also indicate mastery and self-confidence. The chauvinism that wondered how J. A. M. Whistler, Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent (fig. 10), Elihu Vedder, Gari Melchers, Walter Gay (fig. 11), or Edwin Austin Abbey could absorb themselves so thoroughly in Europe, or suspected Charles Sprague Pearce, and Ridgeway Knight, Elizabeth Nourse, and George Boughton for their foreign residences, no longer dominates our thinking.

A second effect of an enlarged art history is the extraordinary new data it has forced upon ongoing narrative. Put simply, it is clear that with the growth of money, population, and production techniques, an enormous amount of art was being produced by the late-nineteenth-century professional community. Auction houses, dealers, art associations and benefit societies, teaching institutes, museums, galleries, art magazines, illustrated books, loan exhibitions, interior designers, honorary societies, fellowships and competitions, and commercial opportunities multiplied. So impressive was the increase that the task of digesting it all will take a good deal of time. Some of the material deserves organization on a regional or municipal basis, as the networks stand revealed.

The records survive, and are available, thanks in large part to the Archives of American Art, as a mass of printed documents, ephemera, photographs, and manuscripts, growing impressively—or depressingly, according to your point of view—almost from month to month. With so much material it may be easy to create misleading summaries of the art life of the Gilded Age; the data are so rich that they tempt premature generalization. But it has become apparent that we are not dealing with one single culture, but with any number of cultures, even when we stay within the realm of fine and applied art. And even if this world is mapped and charted comprehensively, it never stands still.

As the exhibition makes clear, a lot happened between 1876 and 1893, but it rarely moved together, in a single direction. Change was protean. Enthusiasms sweeping one group of painters or designers did not sweep through every other group. Some of the complex density of the European art world, along with its training methods, had been transferred to America. In his recent survey of American symbolist painters, for example, Charles Eldredge has argued that an insistence that American art vision in the nineteenth century was fundamentally realistic with an objectivist bias, doomed an important band of visionary fantasists to undeserved oblivion. These artists repudiated naturalism and observation as the basis of their work, favoring instead a mystical subjec-


Fig. 13. Henry Hobson Richardson, Armchair, ca. 1880. Oak and leather, H. 33 1/2 by 29 by 28 in. Made for the Board Room, Winn Memorial Library, Woburn, Mass. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; gift of Woburn Public Library. A predecessor of American Arts and Crafts furniture, which emphasized honesty in construction and simplicity of material, its chip-carving is similar to designs on some seventeenth-century New England pieces.

Fig. 14. J. Locke, Cameo Vase, probably Eastern United States, ca. 1882–1892. Glass, H. 8 1/2 in. Mark, cut where pontil mark has been ground: J. Locke. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; gift of Mrs. Vee Franklin and Harriet Otis Crufi Fund. The branches of flowering dogwood that decorate this pink and white hand-carved cameo vase, and its ovoid shape, are reminiscent of Japanese art, which strongly influenced the Aesthetic movement.
tivity that tied them to Huysmans, Maeterlinck, Mallarmé, Marcel Schwab, Remy de Gourmont, and other Europeans thought to have had only the most limited impact on American culture. But this was only one of many eddies.

The vigorous pluralism of American art life in the last third of the nineteenth century has only begun to be documented. Once presented as a wilderness of indiscriminate eclecticism, the period's taste, as the exhibition reveals, turns out to be a complex web of self-conscious, intentional, and rather distinctive creative episodes, some interactive, others self-contained. And it is a taste surprisingly integrated, seeking great inclusiveness, making it possible to juxtapose glass, ceramics, furniture, wallpapers, textiles, and metals along with painting and sculpture. Not everyone considered applied or decorative art infra dig, but the decorative arts had begun to enjoy an impressive status inversion in response to reformist ideals and ambitious schemes for decorative consistency. The individual careers, the arts and craft communities, the patterns of support and merchandising, the nature of patronage interests, are still being reconstructed. But condescension has been replaced by respect for complexity. Serious scholarship, the great desideratum for this period of American art history, is now well established.

The third and final redirection relates the visual arts to the larger forces of modernization reshaping American life. Artists played unexpectedly significant roles in adapting to, translating, or ingeniously resisting these forces. In the wake of urbanization and industrialization, many new elements entered daily life, midwifed by technology. The streetcar, the typewriter, the timecard and factory whistle, the alarm clock, vaccination, conscription, income taxes, mass circulation newspapers and magazines, brand names, lunch hours, paid vacations, apartment houses, processed foods, spectator sports, railroad timetables, traffic jams, professionalized hospitals and penitentiaries—these are only some of the novel constraints and opportunities brought to the nineteenth-century world. Responses to these changes, to the immense increase in consumer goods, to standardized objects, to emphases on careerism, and to the competitive ethos and materialist orientation of modern living, varied enormously. For some time many have argued that older cultures, England's for example, led the fundamental resistance to mass culture, aided by important artistic and literary figures. The art community of the United States apparently ignored the challenges made by industrialism to older values in favor of self-absorption, precious protest built around atavistic chivalric codes, medieval Catholic philosophy, or expansively self-indulgent artisan ideals. But recent research reveals great variety and depth to Americans' sometimes subtle artistic protest and commentary, which call attention to the status of groups and genders or which fashion an alternate ideal with distinctly nonindustrial ingredients.

Art, literary, and craft figures such as Ralph Adams Cram, Ernest Fenollosa, Bertram Goodhue, Howard Pyle, Harold Frederic, Daniel B. Updike, Bliss Carman, F. Marion Crawford, and Joseph Pennell—again a partial list—expressed complex and qualified reactions to the onrush of modern attitudes and practices. The deployment, for example, of powerful motifs drawn from Asian and Middle Eastern traditions (fig. 12); the penetration of romantic, anti-industrial themes into children's art and literature; the fascination of book and magazine illustrators, who enjoyed enormous audiences, with revoking historical settings and costumes; the nostalgic associations called forth by designers of furniture (fig. 13), art glass (fig. 14), bindings, and architectural accessories (fig. 15), whose conventionalized naturalism formed
still another method of coping with this mechanized world; the young craft societies; the printing clubs and private presses; the potteries in the South and Midwest as well as on the East Coast (figs. 16, 17); the growing concern with ritualism and ritual objects—these are just a few voices in a chorus that grows quite considerably in the later Nineties. Aesthetic dissent may well have been commercially coopted, as some scholars have argued. But it suggests, minimally, that visual artists were, in some instances, responding to the new experiences of social discipline and economic incorporation. Some, at least, were aiming at the establishment of universals to control the new hierarchies and at creating systems of order that could resist the social fragmentation that had become clear.

I am not sure that late-nineteenth-century art is a good reflection of late-nineteenth-century life. This connection works better when we deal with the art of the early national and antebellum period. But late-nineteenth-century art can most certainly lead us into the late-nineteenth-century mind. It can be an instrument, as David Huntington's essay in this exhibition's catalog reveals, of reconstruing options and mental choices at a time when Huxley, Spencer, Darwin, Ranke, Bergson, Marx, Holmes, Dewey, and James were gaining their first American audiences.

Much of this reasoning, to be sure, is implicit rather than explicit in the art history. I suppose what I am calling for is a continuing effort by American art historians to invoke and involve the larger social order in their work. The range of figures and objects restored to our attention; the documenting of this cosmopolitan North Atlantic and Mediterranean world; the brilliant pursuit of correspondences, references, and changing orientations that the art objects reveal—these are indispensable elements of the new synthesis. But social and intellectual historians will continue to ask how broadly these vocabularies and artistic ideals actually circulated. What was the meaning of aestheticism to masses of Americans, when some might argue it was confined to a coterie of patrons and wealthy clients? What impact had the new capacities for reproduction and replication on notions of original art and standards of fashion? What was the relationship between illustration and painting? Between furniture and sculpture? Or between public art education and artistic practice? The role of the Expositions becomes more crucial than ever. Here the arts did gain the attention of a heterogeneous public, for at least a moment. But what did the Expositions do for popular taste as opposed to professional practice? Who nurtured the expectations and the memories, once the fairs had stimulated them.

These questions return, again, to the old-fashioned issue with which I began, the problem of a divided sensibility, a dual consciousness that separated art from life for the ordinary laymen and that didn’t seem to care. How seriously did artists and patrons take the search for unity, and whom was unity meant to include? Both at the start and the end of our period, critics worried about it. In 1872, one year before he published The Gilded Age, Charles Dudley Warner addressed a group of Hamilton College alumni on the subject, “What Is Your Culture to Me?” He warned that millions of Americans had become skeptical of claims made by scholars, artists, and defenders of culture. Some of this skepticism was based simply on contempt for or jealousy of the schools. But more serious was the “angry protest against the conditions of a life which makes one free for the serene heights of thought and gives him range of all intellectual countries, and keeps another at the spade and the loom, year after year. . . .” There is, Warner insisted, “no culture so high, no taste so fastidious, no grace of learning so exquisite, that it cannot at this hour find full play for itself in the broadest field of humanity. . . .” Art, Warner believed, could be “no longer the enjoyment of the few, but the help and solace of the many.” And thus when the ditch-digger asked the scholar, “What is the good to me of your knowing Greek?” the question must be taken seriously and answered responsibly.

And at the end of our period, in December 1893, a few months after the Columbian Exposition had closed, the great radical lawyer Clarence Darrow mounted a defense of realism in the crusading journal The Arena. “Not all the world is beautiful, and not all of life is good,” Darrow told his audience. “The true artist has no right to choose only the lovely spots, and make us think that this is life. He must bring the world before our eyes. . . . He must tell the truth; must tell it all; must tell it over and over again, till the deafest ear will listen and the dullest mind will think.”

Warner and Darrow stood at different ends of a spectrum, as they stood at different ends of this period. Where one feared social and economic conflict in a once close-knit society, the other feared social and economic tyranny in an once egalitarian commonwealth. One demanded fellowship; the other trust. But both, however simplistically or naïvely, were concerned with questions that had obsessed the first stereotypers of life in the Gilded Age, who judged the era so quickly and found it wanting.