The Notion of Mimesis in American Art

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In short

In order to define what is American in American art, it was never enough to distinguish it from European style and content, but to jeopardize the whole European concept of the image. It is a continuous reflex that whenever there is uncertainty about national art, it is the notion of mimesis that seems to be truly American.

Starting Points:

When in 1824 John Trumbull placed his *Declaration of Independence* in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol, critics challenged it by saying “but it did not happen this way”. Trumbull, of course, trained in the Grand Style amidst the intellectual atmosphere of the Royal Academy in London, did not intend to paint reality, but an idealized super-truth that depicts independence as a general idea.

American observers, however, expected from a painting a matter-of-fact representation of visual reality – noting more. The American mimetic *Bildbegriff* as imitation of visual experience can be traced back to colonial times in which limners and likenesses were sufficient for pictorial necessities, puritan attitudes towards art in general led to ascetic aesthetics and due to social condition no system of patronage emerged.

The different concepts of the image go back to Plato and Aristotle. Since Renaissance, artists tried to rise in social status by charging the image with meaning. Their claim to represent more than visual truth but an ideal truth is integral part of European art theory ever since. Colonial America without museums or academies in which to learn about this approach to images remained with the older mimetic notion. When it came to define an American cultural identity, one needed to position oneself against the whole concept of European ideal painting and favor what was considered American.

Goal:

The rejection of Trumbull’s paintings was also a rejection of European high style that was closely connected with courtly upper class. In search for identity, America understood itself as an anti-European refuge of straight forwardness. Therefore an American counter-style had to be established. But in lack of any other tradition in art, colonial portraiture by untrained professionals appeared appropriate. Therefore primitive art from Edward Hicks to Grandma Moses was considered truly American – still today.

The notion of mimesis can be followed in the preceding times via the *trompe-l’œils* by the Peale brothers and William Harnett to Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol. The latter repeatedly insisted that his pictures were what they look like and that there is nothing behind. Also art critics of the 19th and 20th century like Tuckerman and Flexner maintained the judgment that artists who were influenced by European style have somehow betrayed the American sense for truth, straight-forwardness and reality.

This paper suggests that whenever a distinct American art was claimed, artist and critics alike went back to a notion of the matter-of-fact image that seemed appropriate to represent what is truly American, i.e. non-European. To distinguish from European art means not only to distinguish from its style or content but from its whole concept of the image.