

**Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America** by Catherine E. Kelly. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, 296 pp. ISBN: 978 0 8122 4823 4, Hardback, £43.00.

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Visual and cultural history is making a comeback in early American studies. With Zara Anishanslin's *Portrait of a Woman in Silk: Hidden Histories of the British Atlantic World* (2016) and Catherine E. Kelly's *Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America* (2016) published by competing academic presses in the same year, it seems that historians' thirst for understanding the origins of America's aesthetic consumer culture has yet to be quenched. Catherine E. Kelly offers an impressively tall glass of water to her readers in this effort.

Kelly seeks to trace "the history of the American republic of taste" (p. 11). She defines the "republic of taste" as a shared aesthetic affinity for the "material, visual, literary, and political cultures" of Anglo-Americans during the early national period (1780s - 1820s) (p. 2). She argues that taste became imbued with "explicitly republican significance" after the Revolution, as Americans questioned the ways taste could reveal the potential for citizenship, power, and authority (p. 4). Having good taste, refined manners, and a sophisticated appreciation of literature, art, and writing "advanced the public good": it encouraged virtue, elected high-minded government officials, and revealed Americans' love for their country (pp. 3-5).

The early Republic strove to fashion an American identity for itself after the Revolutionary War. Kelly immerses her reader in a world where middling and elite Anglo-Americans took on this mission with fervor. She profiles "aesthetic entrepreneurs," such as painters, art teachers, and museum operators (p. 11) who took advantage of Americans' desire for refinement—sometimes at risk of ruin.

Kelly unpacks the forms of looking, reading, and writing that defined republicanism. She traces the way in which George Washington fashioned himself to the tastes of his constituents and how they, in turn, fashioned him to their tastes after his passing. Kelly unveils a nation where children learned democratic principles not only from their schooling, but also from the way they expressed patriotism; like when they welcomed back the Marquis de Lafayette in 1824 with hatbands, pocket watches, and medallions emblazoned with the beloved war hero's likeness (p. 239). By taking us into museums, galleries, and academies, Kelly shows how the material objects that filled these spaces dictated ideas about race, class, virtue, and citizenship. The result is an argument about identity: as newly-minted Anglo-American citizens tried to fashion a national culture distinct from Britain, their lust for new objects and institutions unintentionally created a "solvent of commodification", thereby dissolving "fantasies about American exceptionalism" (p. 12).

Kelly is most effective when she focuses on the objects that serve as metonyms for the republic of taste. Her chapter 'Picturing Race' is one of her strongest; in which she analyzes how white artists painted the visages of white versus black people in portraits. She shows that even the especially skilled painter "stumbled over the portrayal of nonwhite skin" (p. 103). Artists would often exaggerate the thickness of black sitters' lips and would over-darken the color of

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their skin. Kelly details painting manuals that instructed novice artists in the correct color choice for a white sitter's face; pick the wrong color, they warned, and the offending artist could accidentally paint her subject "more hideous than a negress" (pp. 109 - 111). Kelly explains how ivory, the material used to create the popular miniatures of the day, cemented "luminous, transparent flesh" - or, whiteness - as the skin color of Republican virtue and taste (p. 109).

Kelly draws the majority of her source material from Americans living in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. She rarely examines sites of culture in agrarian areas or in states south of Virginia. It is true that the majority of her "culture vultures" lived in the larger mid-Atlantic and east coast cities during the early Republic, so her geographical emphasis is appropriate (p. 93). But such near-omission leaves the reader wondering what the vast majority of Americans - who lived in rural areas during her time-frame - thought about east coast culture and their own culture. What did the "republic of taste" mean to them?

While Kelly uses the word 'republic' to describe this culture-minded middling and elite group of white Anglo-Americans, what she is really describing is a class-based club. The privileged, who could partake in the republic of taste, enjoyed doing so, not only because they believed it made them better citizens, but also because they were part of the minority able to partake. Much of the fun of being a member of Kelly's "republic of taste" came from gleefully knowing others would never get in: very few dockhands or seamstresses could gain access to schools, museums, or galleries. Even fictional characters at the time knew what sort of attractions separated the refined from the rest. On the very first page of *Republic of Taste*, Kelly features a line from Lucy Sumner, an elite New Englander in Hannah Webster Foster's famed novel *The Coquette* (1797). Lucy detests the traveling circus in her city. Not only is it "risqué," it also attracts "far more patronage" of a lower lot than a woman of her standing "thought proper".<sup>1</sup>

But doesn't the cultural capital of the 'in' group become less powerful when too many people get let in? Kelly does not sufficiently answer this question. While she takes care to explain how aesthetic institutions and goods became increasingly available to the lower classes in the nineteenth century, she does not analyze whether this change hardened or softened class distinctions. Richard Bushman explored this argument twenty-five years ago in *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (1992). He argued that a middle-class "vernacular gentility" (or, in Kelly's terms, "republic of taste") created a "standard for exclusion" by 1850: the middle class reasoned that anyone could achieve refinement regardless of income level, so relegated those who refused to refine themselves to the unrespectable lower orders.<sup>2</sup>

Kelly's *Republic of Taste* reveals the irony of Americans' drive for cultural identity. While aesthetic zeal certainly granted early citizens a "vocabulary for articulating political difference" among themselves and between nations, a definite "American identity" could never be formed (p. 244). Americans never fully cut ties with European culture, nor could different genders, classes, and races in a country ever choose one style, aesthetic, or taste. Kelly convincingly demonstrates that the "republic of taste" was never a stable category, but an "ongoing project" that rages on today (p. 244).

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<sup>1</sup> H. Webster Foster, *The Coquette*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (New York, 1986), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992), p. xv.