

# U.S. SOCIETY & VALUES

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# FROM THE EDITORS

**T**he 20th century has been one in which artists in the United States have broken free from Old World antecedents, taking the various cultural disciplines in new directions with impressive, innovative results. Music, film, theater, dance, architecture and other artistic expressions have been enhanced and transformed by the creative drive of American men and women, particularly in the years following World War II.

A rejuvenation in music, new directions in modern dance, drama drawn from the U.S. heartland, independent filmmaking across the landscape, the globalization of the visual arts — all of these are part of the contemporary scene in the United States.

With the approach of the new century and the new millennium, the arts in the United States are often on the cutting edge. They are in ferment with no dominant interpretations. The articles in this Journal reflect that diversity of artistry and thought, in the assessments of each discipline, the style of the respective critiques, and even in the sense of what art and culture are within our society.

While the arts and culture in the United States continue to engage substantial attention, energy and resources of this society, this happens largely outside the direction of government. The United States has no “ministry of culture,” thus reflecting the conviction that there are important areas of national life where government should have little or no role.

This series of articles, sidebars on exemplary trends and lists of sources is offered as a gateway through which readers may begin their own journey of exploration. Like the field itself, it is impossible to predict where that journey will end. ■



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Classical music in the United States stands on the verge of an enormous rejuvenation, with contemporary composition boasting a combination of vitality and accessibility. The author, classical music critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, identifies some of the individuals in the forefront of this creativity. Leonard Slatkin, music director of the National Symphony Orchestra and one of the leading exponents of contemporary American music, is the subject of an accompanying sidebar.

**U.S. POP MUSIC**

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Popular music is a multifaceted mosaic that challenges simple description.

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A brief profile of prolific U.S. choreographer Mark Morris accompanies this article.

**THE VISUAL ARTS: ON THE CUSP OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

This is a time of flux within the U.S. art world, says critic Eleanor Heartney, in which contrasting and even contradictory developments can coexist and cross-fertilize.

In her essay, Heartney defines American art, and discusses the globalization of art, the impact of electronic media, the changing nature of public art and the expanded role of museums. A short accompanying profile focuses on the work of contemporary painter Elizabeth Murray.

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# SHARED VALUES



## SOARING SPIRIT

BY PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON

*F*or more than 200 years, the arts and humanities — the cultural signature of this nation — have distinguished us as individuals and united us as a people. Our economy is measured in numbers and statistics. Those are very important. But the enduring worth of the United States is truly defined by our shared values and our soaring spirit. The arts empower us to express ourselves and to understand and appreciate the expressions of others. Through the study of literature, history and philosophy, we learn to build on the riches of our past to create a firm foundation for a better future. Together, the arts and humanities help teach us to celebrate the cultural diversity unique to America, and help us transcend differences in race, ethnicity, age or creed. Who are we as individuals? Who are we as a society? We learn from the arts and humanities — as nowhere else — about the vastness and depth of human experience.

They are our great equalizers. We inherit them, and we can all participate in them.

*E*ach day our world evolves farther from our notion of the familiar, and we must adapt to its changing nature. In this challenging time, we look to our artists and scholars to continue to inform our decisions and our actions. Musicians, actors, philosophers, playwrights, painters, writers, sculptors, dancers and historians share with us their talent and training. Through their unique perspectives, they strengthen our understanding, inspire our finest achievements and give voice to our deepest aspirations.

Whether or not one plays an instrument, reads poetry, learns to pirouette, or spends hours alone in a local art gallery, we all have the capacity to be moved by a song, a poem, a story, a dance, a painting. We can feel our spirits soar when we see an intriguing film, or the sudden illumination of a new idea, or an old idea treated in a new way.

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*B*ecause we discover our greatest possibilities through the exploration of the human spirit, we must encourage our young people to build on this cultural legacy, and seek their highest potential in the arts and humanities, alongside their other passions. Children inspired by their own creative achievements excel in other areas of learning, developing the skills and the confidence to create better lives and brighter futures. To take one example, we have significant data demonstrating that young people who come from different cultures, with different languages, have their language facilitation — their ability to learn English, to read in English, to think and relate to people in a new culture — dramatically accelerated if they are more exposed to the arts.

Today, on the threshold of a new millennium, these vital pursuits — in our individual lives and in the life of our democracy — are more essential than ever to the endurance of our values of tolerance, pluralism and freedom, to our understanding of where we are and where we need to go. Let us remember that the arts and humanities are a necessity, not a luxury, and that every American deserves to have access to them.

Instead of cutting back on our modest efforts to support the arts and humanities, therefore, I believe we should stand by them on the national, regional and local level, and challenge our artists, musicians and writers — challenge our museums, libraries and theaters to continue to achieve and create. And, in the private sector, we hope to see the continuation of the extraordinarily successful partnerships that have been forged between business and the arts, as well as the generous support rendered by foundations and individual donors in urban America and in the heartland alike.

*I*ndeed, we should challenge all Americans in the arts and humanities to join with their fellow citizens to make the year 2000 a national celebration of the American spirit in every community, a celebration of our common culture in the century that is past and in the new millennium, so that we can remain a beacon not only of liberty but of creativity, long after the fireworks have faded. Let us resolve to sustain this national commitment to artistic and intellectual life for the generations to come. ■





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# GOVERNMENT AND THE ARTS

## A CONVERSATION WITH JANE ALEXANDER

IN OCTOBER 1993, U.S. STAGE AND SCREEN ACTRESS JANE ALEXANDER SET HER CAREER ASIDE TO ASSUME THE CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS (NEA), THE U.S. GOVERNMENT'S PRINCIPAL GRANTOR OF FUNDS TO SUPPORT THE VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS AROUND THE UNITED STATES. WHEN A NEW U.S. CONGRESS, REPRESENTING A DIFFERING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, CONVENED IN JANUARY 1995, ONE OF THE ISSUES RAISED WAS THE QUESTION OF WHETHER SUCH PUBLIC FUNDING SHOULD CONTINUE AT ALL, AND IF SO, AT WHAT AMOUNT. ALTHOUGH SHE TRAVELED WIDELY, MONITORING THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF CULTURE ACROSS THE NATION, THE BUDGET ISSUE DOMINATED MUCH OF HER STEWARDSHIP, AFFECTING PUBLIC FUNDING AT LOCAL, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT. YET THROUGH ALEXANDER'S EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND MANAGEMENT SKILLS, THE NEA CONTINUES TO EXIST, IF AT A REDUCED BUDGET OF \$98 MILLION FOR FISCAL 1998. PRESIDENT CLINTON HAS PROPOSED A FIGURE OF \$126 MILLION FOR FISCAL 1999.

ALEXANDER RESIGNED THE CHAIRMANSHIP IN OCTOBER 1997, AND RETURNED TO HER STAGE CAREER IN THE SPRING OF 1998, IN A DRAMA CALLED *HONOUR*. IN THIS INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL J. BANDLER, SHE REFLECTS ON HER TENURE AT THE NEA AND ON THE CHALLENGES FOR GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF THE ARTS THAT LIE AHEAD.

**Q:** With all that you were aware of about the arts landscape, from your experiences as an artist, when you arrived at the NEA, what did you learn about culture in the United States that was new to you? What surprised you?

**A:** When we think of how the U.S. Government supports the arts, most of us focus on performing arts companies or museum exhibitions. What surprised me was that the NEA supports so much more, everything from arts organizations that deal with youth after school to community centers to individual craftsmen, from whale bone sculptors in Alaska to Cajun pirogue makers in Louisiana.

**Q:** In other words, it gets down to the grass-roots level.

**A:** Oh, yes, it's very grass roots. I discovered, for example, in a little dance organization in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, three young women who were going to New York City for the summer to learn and to train with the Alvin Ailey Dance Company. So what is amazing is what the arts mean, and how they permeate all levels of society.

**Q:** Are the arts taken for granted by Americans?

**A:** Yes. They're taken for granted, and they're also misunderstood in terms of how they're funded. Most people think that most arts organizations are self-sustaining and aren't in deficit, and that most artists make a very good living. And of course the opposite is true.

**Q:** By the same token, do they realize the minuscule amount of public funds steered to the arts as opposed to corporate, foundation, private contributions?

**A:** No, I don't think so. I don't think they understand the ratio. Actually, corporate support is still not as much as what the individual givers contribute. Foundations are a very small percentage of giving overall. Individuals in the United States, like you and me, are the ones who sustain the nonprofit arts.

**Q:** Go to any city — Cincinnati [Ohio], Atlanta [Georgia] — and look in the back of the printed program for any performance. You'll get a cross-section of the local donors. They take care of their own.

**A:** To a certain degree. But it's getting harder and harder as expenses rise.

**Q:** With the economy improving, are contributions also on the ascent?

**A:** Not necessarily. What I was trying to point out

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to corporate executives during my years at NEA was that they need to step up to bat even more. There are some that do. Take Sara Lee Corporation in Chicago as an example. It is an international corporation in its diversification, employing vast numbers of people worldwide. It dedicates a certain proportion of corporate giving to the arts. That was part of the thinking of its founders. All corporations in America should do that — across the board. After a certain profit margin, you should give a percentage.

Q: Do people feel they need the arts in their lives? Are they fully aware of the role the arts play in their everyday experiences that may be subtle or intangible?

A: Well, if you took the arts away, then people would certainly realize it. I remember going to East Germany during the Cold War. There was some state-supported art in East Germany at the time, but it was a very, very gray, literally, gray-looking country. You didn't feel a lot of vibrancy of color or anything like that. Imagine going to a Caribbean country and not seeing any painting or hearing any music. It would be shocking. I think that that's what would happen here.

Q: A glass artist named Kate Vogel suggests that one problem might be that we tend to view the arts in the United States as on a pedestal — that culture is lofty. That may cause some inaccessibility or fear of inaccessibility.

A: That's true. It might be people's perceptions. It is very difficult for the average citizen to scrape together the money to go to the Metropolitan Opera. But if they really want to do it, they do, by finding discount tickets that do exist. [Ed. note: Most theater, dance and musical organizations in the United States allot a certain number of tickets for each performance to be sold at a discount through a structured arrangement that is well publicized in their communities.] More than that, what's been interesting in my travels has been that even the smaller communities I visited — places like Greenville, South Carolina — were developing their own rather extensive performing arts centers and

visual arts centers. I was surprised at that. I was surprised that the capital outlay for new buildings came from public-private partnerships. I was excited by it, although I didn't see plans for long-term maintenance.

Q: But there was excitement.

A: Yes. And everybody seems to want something like that in their own back yard.

Q: In local communities, don't you also find fusions of arts groups — four or five arts organizations or performing groups forming coalitions?

A: Yes. And that's been very helpful for most of them. In Canton, Ohio, you have a cultural center, which has under its roof the museum or gallery, a big hall for music, a smaller hall for theater and more.

Q: And you found this wherever you went?

A: Oh, yes. There was a lot more than just NEA grants. Communities were creating all sorts of projects. Many arts advocates on the community level across the nation are pushing harder and harder not to have their grants cut.

Q: Expand a bit on the role of the arts in the community.

A: It so happens that culture works best, in many respects, when it's localized, so that every neighborhood, ideally, can have its own little place — so that kids can go after school, adults can go when they were free, so that there'd be a theater and a space for dance and visual arts, and a place for arts education. That's the ideal. That is so rare to come by. But in my mind, I saw a whole nation of this, people just expressing themselves. It doesn't



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mean they have to sell it all. It doesn't mean they have to do anything with it professionally. It just becomes part of their own psyche. In a way, I think it changes thinking, because people can put their minds into arts problems. It teaches them problem-solving. So it's happening. But there are many, many areas that are deprived. Take arts education, because the cultural thriving of a community begins with the kids. The littler they are, and the more they're exposed to it in one way or another, the better it can be — and not just appreciating art, but also participating.

Q: It seems like arts programs in schools are always the first to go when there are budgetary constraints.

A: That would have been unthinkable at the turn of the century. Consider the United States priding itself on the fact that it had become an industrialized society, a "civilized" society, like Europe. The arts were part of that. Then you had the great philanthropists — [John D.] Rockefeller and [J.P.] Morgan and others building huge edifices. And it was part of your schooling, too.

Q: It seems, though, that the picture is starting to turn around, that arts education in primary and secondary schools is gradually expanding.

A: There's no comprehensive study yet on it. The Kennedy Center [for the Performing Arts in Washington] and the NEA are studying the schools in America with the U.S. Department of Education to discover exactly how much arts education there is in the schools. That's ongoing. But there definitely was a decline in the Seventies and Eighties.

Q: So that's one of the challenges for the future.

A: Absolutely.

Q: Let's discuss the role of the arts in one's individual life.

A: It's as vital as bread. What are we as an animal without language? And language is words, which then become expressed in the written word and so

on. You start there. Music is as old as time.

Q: It appears to me that American Canvas [a recent NEA report detailing the "national discussion" the Endowment initiated to consider the U.S. arts legacy] arose out of the budgetary crisis and the need to rethink approaches and priorities. Is that a fair presumption?

A: In some ways, yes. Congress was pushing us to that. We had to begin to define for legislators the value of the arts to society. And in doing so, we began to examine what the NEA had been doing all along, and what its purpose was. In short, we had to show them what the value of the NEA was.

Q: Why, with the beauty, the vitality and the creativity, are the arts such a catalyst for controversy?

A: Oh, well. Because some people want to define everything for society, and new art can be very frightening. It's the new art that scares people, not the old. It's just the same as what happens when the kids in the commercial music market do stuff that is a little *outré*. Everybody shakes and quakes.

Q: How do our budgetary tensions and challenges stack up against the situation in other countries?

A: We're unique in the world in that the ratio of public giving to private support is 1-to-10. Ninety percent of giving to the arts in this country is private. In the rest of the world it has been virtually the other way. Now Britain has been courting the private sector. The social democratic states in Scandinavia and the rest of Europe, which have always given heavily to the arts, are now courting the private sector.

Q: While we're on the international scene, touch upon the impact of the American arts on the global landscape.

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A: Oh, it's staggering. Obviously you feel the impact of our film, music and publishing on the rest of the world. It's a bit harder to assess the impact of visual arts.

Q: What would you say are the challenges we face as a nation, what we need to concentrate on, in terms of establishing or preserving our artistic legacy?

A: One is understanding that after more than 150 years of "civilization," with the Industrial Revolution in the United States, we do have a significant American cultural legacy. It may be influenced by those who came from Europe to the United States, but it is no longer dominated by European themes. So it's a great time to begin to define what that is, the different patterns, the diaspora. I mean, imagine if you were able to track the heritage of the Polish people or the Ghanaian people through the United States — what their cultural legacy was to any community to which they came. This would be fascinating! We also have to begin defining who we are as a nation in terms of the arts. As a nation of theater, are we just Broadway [the commercial theater], or are we all these other venues [the non-commercial theater]? If you go anywhere in the country and talk about theater, people seem to know only about their own community and about Broadway.

Q: I've often wondered why there hasn't been sharing among arts organizations in different regions.

A: They're beginning to do that now for economic reasons. It's being done in opera and music, too, believe it or not — communities sharing orchestras,

opera companies sharing sets and costumes. And among ballet companies, too — sharing cities. It's the smart thing to do — and it's a healthy trend. It means that performers have a life. They'll have 40, 50 weeks of work a year, though it'll be in different cities.

Q: Could you say a word about how technology is starting to have an impact both organizationally at the NEA and in the culture itself?

A: Right now, I just see it as a tool. I think that artists are still assessing how they're going to use it so that it becomes a way to express themselves artistically. It's wide open and so nascent that nobody really knows. But it sure is helpful for running organizations — just getting out and doing demographics and reaching the right people. For example, the show I'm in now, *Honour*, got its preview audiences through a mailing list that indicated the audience who might be interested in this play. That's such a boon!

Q: We haven't spoken about the NEA. It has a multifaceted role as grantor, convener, catalyst...

A: ...an ambassadorship to the world.

Q: Does it fill its role well?

A: I think it does. The genius of it is the peer panel system that brings citizens from all across the country to adjudicate the grant applications. My favorite thing to do at the Endowment was to sit in on those panels.

Q: In other words, artists within each discipline of the arts decide on grants for that discipline.

A: Yes. But we couldn't begin to fulfill all of the needs in the country with the budget that we had. Then, when it was slashed, we had to become very targeted and promote partnerships — which are great. But sometimes, you think, this visual arts organization in Des Moines [Iowa] really could use \$100,000. And now they're getting only \$10,000, and have to make up an awful lot of money to do

what they have to do. So what you're seeing is a decline in the most exciting kind of art, because people can't fulfill their vision. It's such a struggle to fulfill your technical dreams alone in a performing arts or visual arts organization. There's not a museum I know that doesn't have a deficit in their conservatorship budget. And they're not developing a lot of new conservators -- they don't have the money for it.

Q: Have the budgetary battles caused people to focus more on how vital the arts are in life?

A: I think they want culture, but we still have only 24 hours in our day. There are so many distractions. The computer has really taken over people's lives.

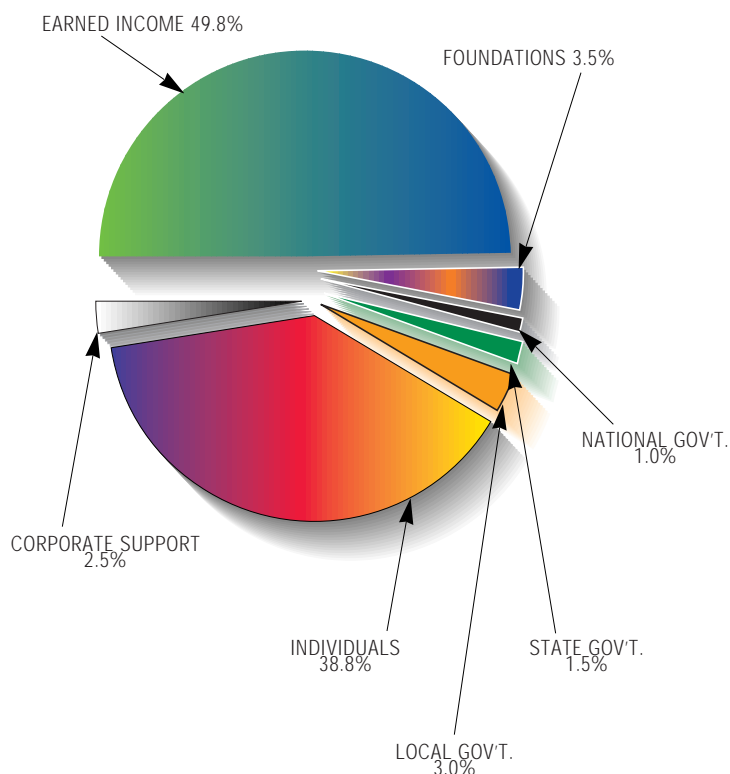
Q: What are you proudest of these past four years?

A: I think I'm proudest not only of keeping the Endowment alive, but bringing together the forces of arts advocacy, so they're working in concert, and not separately. There used to be more of a separation of the entity, of music versus art, and I said, "You know something? It's all the same thing - it's just manifested differently."

Q: What are you most optimistic about?

A: That artists will always persevere. They'll always find a way. Even if it's minimalist, they'll create. And I'm also optimistic that since there has been more vested in the arts when the economy is good, that will continue. ■

# NON-PROFIT ARTS FUNDING



*SOURCE: AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS*

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# ARTS & SOCIETY: MEETING AT THE CROSSROADS

A CONVERSATION WITH MORRIS DICKSTEIN

WHAT DO ART AND CULTURE ADD TO A SOCIETY? IS THERE A DEFINITIVE AMERICAN ART FORM? WHAT HAVE BEEN THE POINTS OF REFERENCE FOR U.S. CULTURE, AND HOW IS CULTURE REDEFINING ITSELF TODAY, SPECIFICALLY ON THE LANDSCAPE OF SOCIETY — OUR HIGHLY TECHNOLOGICAL WORLD? CULTURAL HISTORIAN MORRIS DICKSTEIN, DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES, CITY UNIVERSITY GRADUATE CENTER (CUNY) AND DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND THEATER AT CUNY'S QUEENS COLLEGE, REFLECTS ON THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS SCENE AND ITS HISTORICAL AND LITERARY UNDERPINNINGS IN THIS DIALOGUE WITH MICHAEL J. BANDLER.

**Q:** To begin with, in very basic terms, what does art mean to a society?

**A:** The artistic culture is society's examination of itself. It's the way it reflects on its own values, the way it contemplates itself. We also associate culture with leisure. It shows that a society is not all work — that it has an appreciation of beauty and elements of self-understanding, that presumably it can even change its way of behaving in the future. Culture is criticism in the form of imitation. It's amusement, but also contemplation. It's entertainment, but also it is insight.

**Q:** Focusing specifically on the arts in the United States, can we pinpoint what American art is, and perhaps how it has been shaped?

**A:** Some of the arts in the United States were slow to develop. For example, although there was painting in the 18th century, it looks like provincial English painting, with a few distinguished talents like John Singleton Copley. New American painting from the early 19th century is very primitive-looking. It seems like folk art. Only in the middle of the 19th

century did the visual arts begin to evolve, with the great American landscape painters like Thomas Cole and Frederic Edwin Church and the Hudson River School — and especially with the development of American realistic painting. There were those like Winslow Homer, who worked as an illustrator for Harper's, was sent down to cover the U.S. Civil War, and gradually developed his own style and his own interest in nature and culture, out of his commercial work. Similarly, Thomas Eakins went to Europe, seemed pretty much impervious to the new developments in European art, gradually developed his own style of portraiture in the United States, a genuinely new form of realism. In the 20th century, with the Ashcan School, you began to get realistic painters like Edward Hopper who were influenced by modernist and abstract developments, and integrated them into realistic representation.

Basically, the American arts took off when they began to break with European models, even though they were influenced by them. And they connected with elements that really existed only in the United States — for example, the growth of truly modern cities, the tremendous expanse of nature, the openness of the land, the movement westward, and later the influx of immigration, which created the tremendous variety of the U.S. population. This country never makes absolute distinctions between high and low art that you sometimes have in Europe. An illustrator like Frederic Remington, with whom we associate a lot of our images of the West and cowboys, and who made a tremendous impact on “western” films in this century, exists in that indeterminate space between popular illustrator and serious artist.

**Q:** You mentioned a moment ago the severing of ties with European models. That has taken place in all the art forms.

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A: Yes. The great articulate spokesman for this was Ralph Waldo Emerson, of course, with the idea that the United States had to create a new culture, with new beginnings, and not be dependent on European culture — though Emerson himself was fascinated by European culture. Then, when Walt Whitman came along, Emerson wrote his famous letter acclaiming Whitman as a new force in the world. You might say that Whitman and Henry David Thoreau were the first to try to enact the Emersonian program, but there have been many, many artists and writers who later found their own ways of doing it.

Q: Let's apply this same theory to music for a moment.

A: Some of the most interesting American artists — even if they weren't recognized in their time — are the ones who would mix advanced developments in art with what you might call populist elements of the folk culture. A composer like Charles Ives is a real American original and also was a great reader of and believer in Emerson. He even built one of his best known works, the Concord Sonata, around Emerson and his circle. And you get equivalent examples in the other arts.

Q: Stephen Foster is another original, I should think.

A: Sure. You can't really separate the art song from the popular song in the United States.

Q: Besides the influences of nature and the land, what else has affected culture in the United States?

A: We shouldn't underestimate the importance of regional differences and the growth of a varied urban population. But the other great influence on American artists of all types — as Alfred Kazin has shown in his recent book, *God and the American Writer* — is religion. It's usually not an orthodox religion. But it's often very self-created. The great example of this in the 19th century is Emily Dickinson, who was constantly wrestling in a very heterodox way with her New England background,

and developed a very original, existential set of religious views that were extremely modern and — as with many American artists — ahead of their time and only fully appreciated generations later.

Q: To go back for a moment to the visual arts, you had that religious focus in the works of Cole and others.

A: Right. The so-called luminist painters definitely had a kind of transcendental — if not orthodox religious — element in their work, suggested by the use of light as well as the responses to nature itself. There also was a high level of theatricality in their paintings. Some were sent around the world and staged as shows in themselves.

Q: Dance, of course, is another art that reflected a break between Europe and the New World, in the personages of George Balanchine and Martha Graham. And Graham went back to religion and nature — two elements you've cited — with her Shaker piece and *Appalachian Spring*.

A: These were done during a populist period in U.S. culture, the Thirties and Forties. There were modern dancers in the United States even before Graham, but without her intensity and determination. Reflecting the intermingling with Europe as well as the break with its traditions, you had a great emigre choreographer like Balanchine stripping away a lot of the ornamental and theatrical elements of the Russian ballet tradition. One of the first pieces he did here was *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, for a Broadway musical, *On Your Toes* [composed by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart]. A lot of Europeans who came here were even more fascinated by elements of the American mythology and American life than Americans themselves. Many Americans — especially New Englanders — looked to Europe as having a superior culture, and looked down on U.S. culture. But that was rarely the mistake of Europeans, who generally weren't that interested in our high culture, but were fascinated by

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the much more native elements. The Bohemian composer Antonin Dvorak, of course, is a famous early example.

Q: You had the school of artists and musicians — Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, and writers like Ernest Hemingway — who were in Europe in the Twenties.

A: The fashion in the Twenties was to go to Europe, and to fall under the influence of European modernism. Certainly the early Copland works are much more modernist than the music he began to write in the Thirties and Forties, such as *Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo*, *Fanfare for the Common Man* and other pieces that had much more populist elements in them. There was also the tremendously sophisticated show music of the Twenties and Thirties by George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern.

Q: You've been talking about high and mass — or populist — culture. Have the lines always blurred?

A: It was only in the Fifties that a handful of intellectuals tried to make very sharp distinctions between high-cult, mid-cult and mass-cult, but that broke down very quickly, because it didn't really reflect the realities even of modern writing. Modernists themselves did not recognize that distinction between high and popular culture. T.S. Eliot was influenced by the music halls. Franz Kafka was fascinated by the Yiddish theater. Samuel Beckett was a great fan of Buster Keaton movies.

Q: The modernist tendency would seem to have had a rocky run in U.S. culture. Is that a fair statement?

A: Each of the arts had elements of modernism that were brilliantly experimental, but not what you would call "user-friendly." In music, for instance, a lot of modernist elements were meant to clear the air of some of the clichés of late 19th-century composition — Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff and so on. It was like a cleansing of the palate, getting rid of the older forms of sentimentality and melodicism, and attempting a cleaner version of the satisfactions that

19th-century narrative and music provided to the audience. It's interesting how in today's music, there's been much more of a return — not exactly in the same way — to old-fashioned tonality. At this moment, it seems to me that most drastically experimental trends have receded. You look at a composer like Philip Glass, who used very limited elements in his early work, which were almost strictly repetitive and rhythmic, like a subway train on an interminable journey. Now they're much more melodic. There is a great vogue of opera now, not only among composers who are trying to create works that will hold the stage, but among poets, many of whom have been writing librettos — like J.D. McClatchy, with Tobias Picker's *Emmeline*. There's more of an interest in finding the points of intersection among the arts, and opera has always been the place where different art forms — staging, visual spectacle, music, drama — have intersected.

Q: The arts have been a political flashpoint for ages, probably going back to the Greeks. Why?

A: The arts have always had a political dimension. They deal with life and culture, and politics is part of that. During the modernist period, there were attempts to impose a rigorous aestheticism, but these have really broken down. In some of the arts, there is a tendency to go to the other extreme. For example, some of the recent Whitney annuals [exhibitions] have been largely political art. In fact, one of them had virtually no painting or sculpture. It was almost all conceptual art — video, written texts — things that were really commentary art, primarily on questions of race and gender. They were almost like visual essays, which had no strong visual appeal, but really were ideas being thrown at the spectator. I don't think this has much of a future. Visual art that has little visual appeal is doomed to be transient.

Part of it is the effect of post-modernism. Arthur Danto, the critic, has been developing the idea that



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starting with things like Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes, you really saw the end of art, that the aesthetic presuppositions of art no longer operated, and that anything that a museum or gallery placed on a wall was to be declared art. But it was really art that parodied art, or commented on the nature of art or the end of art. A lot of this was very thin stuff. The old tendency of the avant-garde to try to find new movements and new directions in each generation suddenly turned into novelties every two or three years.

I should also point out that one of the problems in culture today is that a whole creative generation has passed from the scene. This is certainly true in literature, in which the Depression generation and the World War II generation have more or less disappeared. In the 1980s alone, almost all the great masters of the American short story — John Cheever, Donald Barthelme, Raymond Carver, Bernard Malamud — died, leaving only John Updike as a great short story writer. I think the same thing has been happening throughout the arts. Both the abstract expressionist and pop art generations are gone. That World War II generation had a real forty-year run. So there was a scurrying around. This was followed by a search for new directions with misfires and much absurdity, and a bad influence of postmodern theory that argued that everything had been done, that there was no such thing as individual identity or individual forms of self-expression, that parody and pastiche and imitation were the only things left for artistic latecomers. For a time, this was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Q: But now, the picture seems brighter in certain disciplines — in music, as you pointed out earlier, and in theater. Even Arthur Miller and Edward Albee are still hard at work.

A: Of course, but we associate Miller and Albee mainly with their earlier dramas. Yet it's true that there's really a bright young theatrical generation on the scene. It's probably because of the strength of regional theater, no longer dependent on Broadway, that has taken the place of the old network of out-of-town tryouts. You have the equivalent in film with

the independents, where a lot of talent is being developed away from the mainstream.

Q: We haven't really spoken about film, actually, within the context of the evolution of the arts we've been discussing.

A: The main thing we've seen in film is the growth of the global culture, and the atrophy of some national cinemas that were very important in the world — the British cinema, the Italian cinema, to a lesser extent the French cinema — and the tremendous domination of the markets of these countries by the Hollywood product. Going along with this, to a great extent, is the dumbing-down of the Hollywood product to make it internationally palatable — much less characterization, less language, much more action. Of course, Hollywood has always been good at certain things — technology, special effects, production values. But this has led to a narrower kind of global cinema. I've always felt that the more monolithic any culture becomes, the more marginal elements will appear in order to challenge it. I think that the independent cinema has come along not only to challenge the clichés of Hollywood, but really to replace the old art cinema that we associated with European film. A lot of the young directors of today grew up on the new talents of the Sixties — Godard, Truffaut, Buñuel — and young Americans like Martin Scorsese and Brian DePalma in the Seventies. Sometimes the younger filmmakers seem to be imitating them, but very often they're quite creative in mixing these earlier techniques with elements of their own background, whether they grew up on Long Island [New York State] or in California.

Q: Of course, you also have the helter-skelter influence of the MTV [music videos for television] generation and television commercials in Hollywood studio films.

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A: The commercial world is almost an extreme example of the energy and technical innovation that you get in the Hollywood cinema. The problem is that often the MTV techniques do not mesh very well with a continuous storyline, or a depth of characterization. It's been hard for some of the younger filmmakers to rediscover those traditional values. I know someone who teaches film in California. He always assigns his students 19th-century novels to read, rather than having them see too many movies. They'll never learn narrative structure from other movies, but they will learn it from reading great novels.

Q: Commercials and MTV also have shortened our attention span.

A: Speed is one of the things that has affected television. The use of hand-held cameras on dramatic series like *Homicide*, or the way that not one, but two or three different narrative strands are woven together on shows like *Law and Order* or *E.R.* — in many ways, television is more advanced than movies or other popular cultures, which is a reverse of the way it used to be. On the other hand, some of the British television dramatic series and adaptations of the classics which have such a strong audience here actually represent a reaction against this speed, and a nostalgia for the older, more leisurely kind of storytelling.

Q: So here we are in the modern world, with instant access and gratification, communications overload, obsolescence, and the Internet.

A: Some of this is partly responsible for the jagged rhythm that's come into a lot of new art forms. We've also seen the creation of a new topical art, with so much on television, in the movies and the theater based on things that were in the headlines two or three years earlier — something like *Freedomland*, the new Richard Price novel, for example [centered on a carjacking and a subsequent high-visibility trial that turns into a media circus]. The media covers events so thoroughly that they quickly become part of the national mythology. We're going to see the ripple effects of the O.J. Simpson trial, for example, in a number of the arts, in which people will create something expressing their feelings but perhaps with little resemblance to the outcome of the original case.

Basically, we're living in a media-saturated environment. Media representations become part of the primary experience of people living in our culture today. The Internet is only going to multiply that manyfold, especially as we begin to integrate the Internet with films and other forms of representation. The electronic reality has become such a major part of contemporary life, something that artists are responding to, and trying to integrate into their work. ■

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# THE U.S. SCREEN SCENE

By Scott Eyman



Every year — sometimes it seems like every month — another film critic eloquently and pointedly fires across the bow of the contemporary U.S. film industry.

The complaints, generally speaking, follow two lines of reasoning.

First, movies were better 25 years ago — when, possibly, the person writing the commentary either began going to movies or began getting a salary for going. And second, the gap between movies people want to see — like *Titanic* — and movies critics urge them to see — like *L.A. Confidential* or *Boogie Nights* — has never been greater.

This mix of boredom and futility might make you think that movies are on their way to oblivion as an art form. But that's not necessarily the case. What does appear certain is that the barbs directed at Hollywood are written by critics who want to feel young again, who want to revel in the idea of the film art as a living, positive force rather than a stale procession of impossibly expensive, styleless "event movies."

It's been quite sobering to watch movies for a living in the 1980s and 1990s, after the bounty of the 1960s and 1970s — when old masters like John Ford, William Wyler and John Huston were slowing down and being replaced by a generation that was at least as ambitious and nearly as talented — the likes of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, of Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola. In fact, the disappointments of the past couple of decades have just enough truth to justify the point of view that moviemaking is in decline.

Still, every year has six or eight or ten good movies. That's true today, and it was true in the past. The difference between then and now is in the

vast middle range — the movies that are not supposed to win Oscars, but simply play a couple of weeks, help pay for studio overhead, satisfy the national audience to some extent, and go on their way. The reality is that any average James Cagney crime movie of the 1930s and 1940s offered snappier writing, sharper characters and a stronger and leaner narrative than its modern counterpart.

Cinema today has been damaged by the concept of the blockbuster — like the recent epic *Godzilla* — which can be defined as a disposable fireworks display, a long and noisy entertainment that completely disappears from the mind as soon as the credits roll at the end. These movies have no character development — just scenes that are free to clash or even contradict each other, as long as the cumulative logic of the explosions and car crashes grows ever larger. Writing, in fact, has never been less important to studio moviemaking than it is today. What counts up front is the profit possibility — from overseas sales and from such ancillary markets as pay-per-view cable and videocassette release.

For everything that is gained, though, something is lost.

In movies, it's been storytelling and style. As recently as 20 years ago, a Coppola film didn't resemble a Sam Peckinpah film, which didn't look like a Blake Edwards film — just as an earlier moviegoing generation could distinguish between the "look" of a Hitchcock thriller and a Ford western.

Today, most movies are shot in an indistinguishable style. Without the credits, it would be impossible to identify the director. Closeups predominate, because they play well on television, the small screen on which most films find their largest audiences. Contemplative long shots and a smooth, methodical pace have largely disappeared, as filmmakers worry that moviegoers will grow restless. Action has become confused with movement.

Perhaps the most regrettable consequence of the abrasive cleansing action of contemporary U.S. cinema has been the decline of the once-thriving national cinemas of France, Germany, England and Italy. Young European directors used to pride themselves on making strong, idiomatic statements

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in their own language, gradually achieving maturity as artists.

American movies of the 1950s and 1960s tended towards a narrative stolidity, but the lyrical French films of Francois Truffaut and the elegantly austere essays of Ingmar Bergman served as stylish nudges that infected U.S. cinema for the better. This worldwide aesthetic conversation between filmmakers and their audiences gave everyone's movies a more interesting texture.

Today, more often than not, promising foreign directors seek to become Hollywood directors. As movies from *The Fifth Element* to *Starship Troopers* have proven, they often succeed, regrettably so. As a character in Wim Wenders' *Kings of the Road* once observed, "the Yanks have colonized our subconscious."

This seeming decline, of course, could be just a temporary calm, symptomatic of the uneasy, slightly disengaged hammock into which the post-Cold War world has fallen. Look at it as a mental retooling, stemming from the reality that the movie industry as a business has changed more in the last two decades than it had in the previous 80 years.

One-auditorium movie houses have given way to 14-screen multiplexes. As a result, slow release patterns have been replaced by simultaneous 3,000-theater releases. A strong system of producer control has evolved into catch-as-catch-can control by directors, actors and even talent agents. The continuity of the contract system at studios has been displaced by freelancing, with each movie's creative team assembled from scratch. And television — particularly cable filmmaking — is siphoning off talent and audiences as well.

What does all this mean? Possibly that we're in the midst of a transition in which very few films will have the singular cultural importance of the past. Today, the speedier, snappier television-rooted sensibility is taking the mid-range, mid-budget cultural definition that once was populated by Cagney, Humphrey Bogart and John Wayne. It isn't

surprising that the new breed of studio executives, weaned on television in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, have approved for production so many big-screen adaptations of such TV series as *Sergeant Bilko*, *The Addams Family*, *The Flintstones*, *The Brady Bunch* and *Lost In Space*.

If the picture offered only gloom, though, I — and many other people — would be going to the movies much less frequently. The fact is that if we've lost skill and brio in some of moviemaking's component parts, we've gained a great deal as well.

Take acting, for instance. As screenwriting has declined, performances have grown measurably richer. Screen acting has never been better, more subtle. There is a wealth of great character acting — beginning with Robert Duvall and Gene Hackman and moving younger, demographically, to Kevin Spacey and Frances McDormand. Their work in such movies as

*The Apostle*, *Unforgiven*, *L.A. Confidential*, *The Usual Suspects* and *Fargo* exemplify this. Younger men and women — Sean Penn, Johnny Depp, Gwyneth Paltrow — are equally gifted. All consider themselves character actors, not movie stars. And even more are on the way — the likes of Christina Ricci and Elijah Wood — who have not yet become identifiable screen figures.

Even such stars in the classic mode as Brad Pitt, and this year's screen sensation, Leonardo Di Caprio (*Titanic*) make choices of assignments that sometimes tend to be more interesting in their ambition than in their execution. Still, they get points for trying. So, too, does Tom Cruise, who seems to have left mediocre selections behind.

Another bright spot is animation. It's better, more successful, and more widespread than ever. Disney is still on hand, creating films as it has for decades. *Mulan* is the latest, exploring Chinese legend from a female perspective. But Disney no longer is the only game in town. Twentieth-Century Fox has become a player, with *Anastasia*, its 1997 take on Czarist history. Fox recently opened a new animation facility in Arizona, evidence of the seriousness with which the studio is approaching this genre. Other major studios are expanding their animation horizons as well.



Most impressively, there is probably more variety in contemporary U.S. filmmaking than at any previous period. African-American filmmakers are far more numerous, not to mention more gifted, than ever before. The fact that Spike Lee, the Hughes brothers and John Singleton, among others, can coexist comfortably and not be dependent on the success of every single film — in effect, having as much right to fail as anyone else — is significant proof that situations have evolved. African-American directors also have enough credibility these days to leave parochial confines. Forest Whitaker, for example, who previously shot the black-oriented film *Waiting to Exhale*, has just directed *Hope Floats*, a mainstream drama centered on a young white woman, estranged from her husband, who must reintegrate herself into her Texas family.

With the expanding Hispanic population in the United States, there will, no doubt, be more movies — and more talent — on the nation's screens like *Selena* (Jennifer Lopez), *The Mask of Zorro* (Antonio Banderas) and the forthcoming *Dance With Me*, an exploration of the Hispanic youth scene costarring Chayanne, a Puerto Rican-born performer making his screen debut. Indeed, as part of the vast global interaction, Hollywood is embracing a wide range of gifted performers from abroad. Britain's Brenda Blethyn and Katrin Cartlidge, Italy's Asia Argento, Stellan Skarsgard (Sweden), Bai Ling (China), Djimoun Hounsou (Benin), Michelle Yeoh (Malaysia) and Selma Hayek (Mexico) all are making their marks as actors.

There has been a growing presence of women directors and producers in recent years — among them Jodie Foster, Barbra Streisand and Randa Haines. What's more, women today are moving into seemingly uncommon genres. Mimi Leder, who distinguished herself as a television director on *E.R.*, has made two unrelenting action films — *The*

*Peacemaker* and *Deep Impact* — to inaugurate her career as a movie director. And Betty Thomas, an actress who was well-regarded as a gritty presence on the dramatic TV series *Hill Street Blues*, has become a director of such mainstream comedies as *The Brady Bunch Movie*, *Private Parts* and the mid-1998 release, *Doctor Doolittle*.

One of the most vigorous sectors of the current film scene is that of independent films. This is the fertile ground out of which future directors and actors will emerge. Just in the past three or four years, new names like Quentin Tarantino, Parker Posey, Ben Stiller, Hope Davis, Stanley Tucci and Campbell Scott have come to the fore. The low-budget films they create and star in are first seen, typically, at Sundance and other film festivals, where talent scouts for the major studios have become a ubiquitous presence. As a result, the cream of the crop of independent movies these days usually finds a conduit to mass audiences.

The movie industry has been flexible enough, too, to allow access to people like Canadian director Atom Egoyan and David Cronenberg, and the homegrown Ethan and Joel Coen — gifted if inconsistent, with dark, mordant sensibilities that have brought a particularly valued lunacy to movie screens.

All this suggests that the old verities are dead, and no one really knows where the next wave of hits is coming from. The industry has to be open to all sorts of possibilities, however remote.

#### A CASE IN POINT:

Twenty years ago, Terence Malick made a gorgeous, hushed masterpiece, *Days of Heaven*. He spent the intervening years contemplating his possibilities and writing a few scripts that didn't see the light of day. This year, though, he'll be represented onscreen with a \$50 million adaptation of James Jones' World War II combat novel, *The Thin Red Line*.

This kind of expensive comeback from a director with only two art-house films to his credit — both of them commercial failures — would have been impossible in the more monolithic industry of a quarter-century or more ago, in which a legendary



filmmaker like Orson Welles was regarded with suspicion and mistrust and had to finance his movies on a pay-as-you-go basis.

So the good news is that because Hollywood's dominance in the global marketplace has created so much demand, it has necessarily been ready, willing and able to take chances. With the added revenue streams deriving from video and multichannel cable, there is a constant demand for more product. The result is that practically everybody gets their chance.

If the first century of film possessed more energy

and innovation in its middle years than in its dotage, well, life is like that. But it's also true that the next century promises great leaps.

If there's room for Terence Malick, anything is possible. ■

*Scott Eyman, critic for The Palm Beach Post, is the author of The Speed of Sound: Hollywood and the Talkie Revolution; Ernst Lubitsch: Laughter in Paradise; and Mary Pickford: America's Sweetheart. He is currently writing the authorized biography of U.S. director John Ford.*

## FILM DIRECTOR VICTOR NUÑEZ: TRULY INDEPENDENT

Independent filmmaking is all the rage these days in U.S. movies. But for most promising talents at the helm, it merely represents a means to a lucrative end — a studio contract.

**E**d Burns spends a modest sum to shoot *The Brothers McMullen* in his parents' kitchen and on his neighborhood streets, with his siblings and friends in the cast. The result: terrific reviews and a multimillion-dollar two-picture deal. Robert Rodriguez films *El Mariachi* at a cost of \$7,000, and is rewarded by receiving considerable attention from several major Hollywood studios.

Victor Nuñez will have none of that.

This director has resolved to follow the path of the lower budget in order to keep control and freedom within his hands.

His projects — the latest of which, *Ulee's Gold*, was widely acclaimed upon its release in 1997 — are decidedly “non-Hollywood.” They are not shaped by production schedules or budgets. They



are generally quiet stories, mood pieces, character studies, tales set on the landscape of northern Florida. They reflect the director's enthusiasm for “the admittedly wonderful process of making a film,” and less for the content itself.

“It's an amazing process to be part of,” Nuñez, 52, of Peruvian extraction, said recently of his penchant for selecting a theme that moves him, then writing a script that develops the theme. “You just



want to be out there doing it.” And he does it in Florida, where he grew up. In fact, he shot *Ulee's Gold*, in a series of towns not far from the capital city, Tallahassee, where Nuñez has lived since his pre-teens.

“I love this area. I discovered film and Southern literature at the same time. I decided to become a Southern filmmaker.”

*Ulee's Gold* starred Peter Fonda in an Academy Award-nominated portrayal of a solitary, bitter third-generation rural beekeeper, a Vietnam veteran who finds



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himself thrust into dire family circumstances that impel him to re-examine his life's choices. It was Nuñez's fourth well-received "small" movie — after *Gal Young 'Un*, *A Flash of Green* and *Ruby in Paradise* — a modest output, admittedly, for an 18-year period.

"Nothing sinister or spectacular, Nuñez's dramatic selections are extraordinary only because the emotional themes are so commonplace," Steve Persall wrote in the *St. Petersburg (Florida) Times* in mid-1997. "Dignity is more important than dazzle."

*Gal Young 'Un* (1979), which Nuñez based on a story by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, focuses on a lonely widow in Prohibition-era (1920s) rural Florida who is victimized by a fast-talking younger man. *A Flash of Green* (1984), which he adapted from a novel by mystery writer John D. MacDonald, deals with political scheming and environmental peril against the backdrop of a contemporary real estate boom. *Ruby In Paradise* (1993), an original Nuñez script, is a mood piece centered on a young woman who, passing through a small Florida beach community

in flight from a bleak past, yearns to realize elusive dreams.

Sought after ever since *Ulee's Gold* made a handsome profit on its \$2.4 million costs, Nuñez most likely will continue going his own way in the future. Not that he doesn't ponder the path so many of his independent colleagues have taken.

"You can't be a filmmaker in America and not consider the option of making big-budget films," he says. "The bad thing about not having much money is that there are things you can't do. The good thing is that the cast and crew are there because they believe in the picture. It's very clear this work is not some kind of gold mine, but it is rewarding."

As for independent filmmaking as a trend, the director brushes it off as simply something the critics invent every few years. "The truth is there will always be people who want to make independent movies and succeed. It's not a trend. It happens one film at a time." ■

— Michael J. Bandler

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# NEW MUSIC FOR A NEW CENTURY

By Joshua Kosman

In 1989, Americans and observers all over the world watched in amazement as the Berlin Wall crumbled, bringing down along with it an enormous complex of calcified belief systems. Whether because of synchronicity or simply the deceptive but irresistible human urge to draw connections, an observer of the broad spectrum of classical music in the United States might have detected something similar happening in that world as well. In the way composers operated and the kinds of music they wrote, in the sorts of performing institutions that brought that music and music of the past to the listening public, old models and ways of thinking that had begun to prove decisively unworkable were being chipped away.

Now, almost a decade later, U.S. classical music stands on the verge of an enormous rejuvenation. The process is far from complete — indeed, in some areas it has scarcely begun — but the seeds that have been sown over the past years unmistakably are bearing fruit. The music that is being written today boasts a combination of vitality and accessibility that have been missing from American music for too long. A similar spirit of adventure and innovation can increasingly be found among the country's solo performers and musical organizations.

Artistic liberation, of course, is a slower and more diffuse process than political liberation. In the absence of a single Promethean figure on the order of Beethoven or Picasso, old orthodoxies are more likely to be eroded than exploded. So it is that much of the musical life in the United States still clings to the old ways. Some prominent composers continue



to write in the densely impenetrable language forged during the modernist period and clung to in the face of decades' worth of audience hostility or indifference. Some opera companies and symphony orchestras operate as though the United States was still a cultural outpost of Europe, uncertain of the value of anything that doesn't derive from the Old World. But the signs of change are there — among younger composers struggling to find their own voice in defiance of old models, among performers eager to make those voices heard, and among organizations daring enough to give the nation's musical life a distinctively American profile at last.

Nothing is more important to this process than the production of new music, and here is where the picture is at once most heartening and most varied. From the end of World War II until well into the 1970s, the dominant vein in American music was the arid, intricate style that had grown out of early modernism and continued to flourish in the supportive but isolated arena of academia. Much of this music was based on serialism, the system derived from the works of Schönberg, Webern, and Berg in which the key-centered structures of tonal music were replaced with a systematically even-handed treatment of all 12 notes of the chromatic scale. Even composers whose works were not strictly serialist, such as Elliott Carter and Roger Sessions, partook of the general preference for intellectual rigor and dense, craggy surfaces. The

fact that audiences were nonplused by this music, to say the least, was taken merely as an indication that the composers were ahead of their time.

In the past 20 years, though, two important developments have effectively challenged that state of affairs. One is the advent of minimalism, a style of music that in its pure form is based on simple, tonal harmonies, clear rhythmic patterns and frequent repetition. The other is a movement that has tried to continue the development of tonal music where it was left by Mahler, Strauss and Sibelius; this trend has been dubbed the “new romanticism” (like most such labels, this one is potentially misleading and unavoidably useful). Between them, these two styles — the one with its search for beauty and simplicity, the other with its emphasis on expressive communication — delivered a potent reproach to the lofty abstractions of the high modernist school.

Though its roots go back further, Minimalism’s first big splash came in the mid-1970s from two important composers, Steve Reich and Philip Glass. The music that these men performed with their own chamber ensembles — long, determinedly static pieces whose repeated scales, chugging rhythms and simple harmonies seemed impossible at first to take seriously — turned out to have an enormous impact on a generation of composers.

**I**nterestingly, however, minimalism has turned out to be more a path than a way station in music history. Both Reich and Glass, now in their 60s, continue to write music of great inventiveness and beauty — Glass more prolifically, Reich (in my view) more arrestingly. In particular, Reich’s *Different Trains*, a meditation on the Holocaust scored for taped voices and overdubbed string quartet, stands as one of the great American scores of the past decade. But although the interlocking rhythmic patterns and tonal harmonies of minimalism have become common coin, there is no second generation of Minimalist composers; followers of Reich and Glass, instead of sticking close to the idiom they pioneered, have turned those musical

resources to their own ends.

The new romanticism, on the other hand — perhaps because it reflects an attitude toward music history more than a concrete set of musical gestures — has proved to be a more wide-ranging phenomenon. The name itself was coined in connection with a festival of new music sponsored in 1983 by the New York Philharmonic and curated by the late composer Jacob Druckman, who wanted to demonstrate the presence and viability of this

retrospective strain in contemporary music.

Perhaps the most prominent new romantic (although his music has recently faded from view) is George Rochberg, who went from being a hard-core serialist to writing music studded with quotations from Beethoven, Mahler and others. Among the other representatives of this style are the brightly colored scores of Druckman and Joseph Schwantner, the elaborate Straussian extravaganzas that David Del Tredici has composed based on Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books, or the ripely sensual works of John Corigliano. A younger generation of new romantics includes such important composers as Christopher Rouse, George Tsontakis and Richard Danielpour.

Although this music is written with skill and passion, there is something in its deliberate nostalgia that is inherently limiting (why rewrite Strauss, after all, when Strauss himself did it so well the first time?). On the other hand, some of the most interesting classical music now being written in America can be seen as a fusion of minimalism and the new romanticism.

Probably the most popular and widely respected composer now working in America is John Adams, whose music melds the two approaches beautifully. Adams, 51, may be best known for the two operas that he wrote in collaboration with librettist Alice Goodman and director Peter Sellars: *Nixon in*



*Nixon in*

*China*, a funny and moving account of the 1972 meeting between the late U.S. president and Chairman Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-Tung), and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, about the 1985 Palestinian hijacking of the cruise ship *Achille Lauro*. Adams began his career as a straightforward minimalist, but soon found himself unable to break entirely with the past. Beginning with his extraordinary orchestral piece *Harmonielehre* written for the San Francisco Symphony, Adams has managed to graft the surface gestures of minimalism onto an artistic impulse that is as overtly expressive as that of any 19th-century composer.

The most important American composer of the succeeding generation is Aaron Jay Kernis, 38, who recently won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for Music for his *String Quartet No. 2*. Kernis' musical language owes a less explicit debt to minimalism than Adams' does, but the impact of minimalism, as well as a variety of popular musical styles, can be heard in his music alongside those of Mahler, Strauss and Berg. This astonishingly gifted and prolific composer is capable of both deeply felt moral utterances, as in his powerful *Symphony No. 2*, and pure popular fun like his *100 Greatest Dance Hits* for guitar and string quartet.

Combinations of influences also shape some of the other important musical trends of the day. For many composers now in their 30s and 40s, for instance, the impressions of rock music have remained formative, showing up in the use of electric guitars (as in the work of Steve Mackey or Nick Didkovsky) and in a raw rhythmic power that has been practically unheard of in classical music.

The best exemplars of this development are the composers connected with "Bang on a Can", a seminal annual festival of new music founded in New York City in 1986. The festival's three artistic

directors, composers Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe and David Lang, write music that is as viscerally forceful as it is carefully crafted; Gordon in particular delves into rhythmic complexities that always stay just within the bounds of comprehensibility.

Yet another rewarding recent trend has been the emergence of a generation of Chinese immigrant composers who combine Chinese folk music with Western idioms. Chief among these composers are Tan Dun (who was commissioned to write a symphony for the occasion of Hong Kong's reversion to Chinese control), Chen Yi and Bright Sheng.

Most of these composers still depend on performing organizations — symphony orchestras predominantly — to turn the notes on paper into living sound. Throughout most of the 20th century, the American orchestral landscape provided as unchanging a vista as any aspect of the nation's cultural life. The hierarchy was clear-cut. At the top were the so-called Big Five ensembles — the symphony orchestras of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland and Chicago — and below them was everyone else. Well into the century, these

organizations saw their role primarily as importers of musical culture from across the Atlantic. Aside from Leonard Bernstein's heady tenure with the New York Philharmonic in the 1960s, the music directors, like most of the repertoire, have been European.

There have been odd bursts of vigorous innovation, such as Serge Koussevitzky's passionate championing of new music during his leadership of the Boston Symphony, or even the astonishing commissioning program run by the Louisville Orchestra throughout the 1950s, which produced major orchestral scores by Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, Virgil Thomson, Roy Harris and many others. But for the most part, America's major orchestras have functioned almost exclusively as conservators of the European tradition.

In the past decade or so, however, the picture has changed considerably — from the bottom up, as it were. The situation among the Big Five has not altered substantially. Even today, not one of them



has an American-born music director (New York's Kurt Masur, Philadelphia's Wolfgang Sawallisch and Cleveland's Christoph von Dohnanyi are all German; Boston's Seiji Ozawa is Japanese, and Chicago's Daniel Barenboim is an Israeli born in Argentina).

But those orchestras no longer dominate the scene as thoroughly as they once did. Any list of America's leading orchestras today would have to include those in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Houston, St. Louis, Baltimore, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. On a technical level, the best of these ensembles now play so well as to upset the age-old hierarchy; even if none of them is necessarily strong enough to force its way into the top five, several are good enough to make a list of five seem arbitrarily limiting.

Just as important is the change in the way some of these orchestras approach the task of bringing music to the public. Under the leadership of a generation of dynamic young conductors, most of them American, these orchestras have managed to infuse a sense of excitement and adventure into their offerings that is very far from the too-common notion that musical culture is simply something that is good for you.

The most prominent example is Michael Tilson Thomas, who in 1995 became music director of the San Francisco Symphony. The 54-year-old conductor and pianist began as a protégé of Leonard Bernstein. As a young conductor with the Boston Symphony and then as music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic in the 1970s, he launched a powerhouse exploration of the music of such American experimentalist composers as Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Henry Cowell and Edgard Varese. In San Francisco, Tilson Thomas has continued his advocacy of American music (in his first season, he included an American work on every subscription concert he led) as well as other contemporary and

out-of-the-way repertoire, and injected some much-needed energy into the local musical scene.

At the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the dashing young Finnish conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen has reportedly accomplished something similar, although his tastes in new music run more toward the European schools. Leonard Slatkin, who recently took over the helm of Washington, D.C.'s National Symphony Orchestra, has been a staunch supporter of contemporary American music, as has David Zinman in Baltimore. Gerard Schwarz, in his

recordings and performances with the Seattle Symphony, has been active in resuscitating the music of a school of mid-century American symphonists that includes Howard Hanson, Walter Piston, and David Diamond.

Individual performers also have a role to play in championing the music of our time. The cellist Yo-Yo Ma, for instance, has been active in commissioning and performing music by a wide range of living composers; the pianist Alan Feinberg is an eloquent advocate for American music of the last two centuries; and baritone Thomas Hampson and soprano Dawn Upshaw — in between

their operatic appearances — have performed a wealth of American art songs both past and present.

Where opera is concerned, the signs of progress are slower in coming but still clearly discernible. That's understandable. Opera is, after all, the most tradition-laden area of classical music. It's also the most international, with the same group of singers, conductors, and directors performing in New York one day, Vienna the next and Buenos Aires the week after that.

Still, there's no question that the state of opera in the United States is beginning to change. For one thing, it's burgeoning. The number of opera companies in the country continues to climb; many cities that once depended exclusively on tours by the Metropolitan Opera and other major operatic institutions now boast organizations of their own, even if the number and quality of the offerings is small. Audiences, too, are growing at a surprising rate — and getting younger as well, according to



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surveys by the companies. In 1996, when the San Francisco Opera presented a “Broadway-style” production of Puccini’s *La Boheme*, with cheap tickets and eight performances a week by four rotating casts, the company drew a record number of first-time operagoers. Companies elsewhere have seen a similar surge in opera novices among their audiences.

**E**qually encouraging is the sharp rise in the number of new operas being performed each year. True, many of them are resolutely traditional in character, including Corigliano’s *The Ghosts of Versailles*, Conrad Susa’s *The Dangerous Liaisons*, and Tobias Picker’s *Emmeline*, to name a few recent high-profile ventures. Some observers have also decried what have been dubbed “CNN operas,” whose plots are drawn from current or recent headlines — works like Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie’s *Harvey Milk* (about the slain San Francisco politician), Ezra Laderman’s *Marilyn* (about Marilyn Monroe), or Adams’ *Nixon in China*. Still, there have been notable new works by such inventive figures as Glass, Bright Sheng, or the brilliantly idiosyncratic Meredith Monk, whose *Atlas*, premiered at the Houston Grand Opera in 1991, remains the most magnificent and haunting opera of the decade.

It would be wrong to paint too rosy a portrait of American classical music at what continues to be an uncertain juncture in our history. There are still too many dangers, too many unknowns. The most daunting ongoing threat to the country’s musical future, certainly, has been the near disappearance of

music education from the curricula of U.S. primary and secondary schools in some states, chiefly during the 1980s. The U.S. Music Educators National Conference sees some improvements in recent years, while still expressing concern. If the pattern of the past decade is not reversed, it could only make it more difficult to ensure new generations of musicians and music lovers. Then, too, the social and economic plight of U.S. cities has had consequences for orchestras, concert halls and opera houses, all of which are predicated on thriving urban cultural centers. Other forms of entertainment and media, from cable TV to home computers to whatever new device is around the next corner, also draw audiences from serious classical music.

Still, the prognosis, for the first time in a decade or two, appears awfully good. From here, it looks as if America is heading toward a vibrant new musical culture. Just in time for the new century. ■

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*Joshua Kosman is the classical music critic for the San Francisco Chronicle.*



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## LEONARD SLATKIN: MUSIC STIMULATOR

There's more to conducting than flourishing a baton in front of 100 musicians and the occasional soloist or choral group.

**A**n orchestra's music director is responsible for the programming — deciding what is performed and when — creating a harmonious mix for the concert season. If the symphony as an organization is established and blessed with a comfortable endowment, the conductor has key input into the commissioning of new works for the repertory of that orchestra and, indeed, for 20th-century music as a whole.

Which brings us to Leonard Slatkin, maestro of the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) in Washington, D.C. His philosophy is quite simple: "Anybody taking on an orchestra has to go on with a focused vision," he has explained. "You can no longer show up and conduct."

Slatkin, who had a long and successful previous tenure on the podium of the St. Louis Symphony — establishing it as a jewel in the Missouri city's crown — is a rarity among conductors. At a time when few first-line U.S. orchestras have Americans in charge, he is taking his ensemble, in the nation's capital, to new heights in championing U.S. music at a time when that particular facet of world music is on the ascent. He has, in his own words, "a massive commitment to music of this country."

With a packed roster of activities that includes conducting other major orchestras and opera companies as well, Slatkin comes to his passions quite naturally. His father was concertmaster of a major Hollywood studio orchestra during the heyday of film

music before and during World War II. His mother, a renowned cellist, joined her husband in founding the Hollywood String Quartet. Leonard began as a pianist, but spent most of his formative years as a violist.

His quarter-century-plus in St. Louis was marked by his dedication to the full range of

American music, from Charles Ives to John Adams, and for his advocacy of new music by the likes of Joseph Schwantner, John Corigliano and William Bolcom, among others. He has brought that commitment to U.S.

composers to his post in Washington — and even to Europe on a recent National Symphony tour there.

Every Slatkin-conducted concert on the 1998-99 NSO schedule includes the works of U.S. composers — from Virgil Thomson and Samuel Barber to Ellen Zwilich and Elliott

Carter. In March 1999, the NSO — whose recording of Corigliano's First Symphony won top national classical disk awards — will perform the world premiere of that same composer's Second Symphony, a work for soloists and chorus based on texts of Dylan Thomas.

The Kennedy Center Concert Hall — home of the NSO — has just reconfigured its acoustics. With the vastly improved sound, and with Slatkin at the helm, the music scene in Washington is brighter than it has ever been. As critic Tim Page has observed in *The Washington Post*, this conductor and this ensemble "just might become the group to watch — and, more important, listen to — as we prepare to meet the new millennium."

— Michael J. Bandler



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# U.S. POP MUSIC

**A CONVERSATION WITH GARY BURTON**

POPULAR MUSIC IN THE UNITED STATES TODAY IS A MULTIFACETED MOSAIC THAT CHALLENGES SIMPLE DESCRIPTION. IN THE FOLLOWING INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL J. BANDLER, JAZZ MUSICIAN-COMPOSER-EDUCATOR GARY BURTON, THE WORLD'S LEADING VIBRAPHONIST, ANALYZES THE CURRENT SCENE AND THE FORCES AT WORK. BURTON, WHO HAS PERFORMED AROUND THE GLOBE AND RECORDED EXTENSIVELY, IS EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT OF THE BERKLEE COLLEGE OF MUSIC IN BOSTON, AN INSTITUTION WHOSE CURRICULUM IS DEVOTED TO ALL FORMS OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC.

**Q:** You came along about a generation ago. How would you compare the young musicians of that era with the talent you see these days at Berklee and elsewhere?

**A:** The biggest difference is education, in that the jazz and pop musicians of the Sixties, when I was starting my career, were the very first ones to have a chance to go to music college and learn more about music. The majority of the players were still self-taught, or intuitive, and learned from their experiences on the job more than in an organized academic setting. That began to change by the Seventies, and into the Eighties. Now it's far more common for young up-and-coming musicians to go to school somewhere and learn a lot more about music of different types, and music history, and the nuts and bolts of music, which makes them capable of more versatility and more sophistication in their work.

**Q:** Paula Cole [a leading U.S. pop artist] is an example.

**A:** She was actually one of our music production and engineering students. So she's quite at home in the studio from a technical standpoint, producing her own records.

**Q:** How has Berklee responded to the pop evolution, or revolution?

**A:** The original concept of the school, when it was founded in the late Forties, was to provide practical real-life experience and training for musicians who were likely to work in the commercial music industry, which at that time meant mostly jazz-based music that was used in television and in [advertising] jingles, as well as in concerts. That broadened over the years as other kinds of popular music got a foothold. Starting in the late Sixties and into the Seventies, we started adding courses with rock music styles and increased the offerings as the years went by, and added a major program for recording and for synthesizers, because that also was becoming more popular. We saw our enrollment for vocalists mushroom greatly because there was more emphasis on singers. So we've essentially followed, and tried to offer the best of what we could in each of these areas that have become more prominent as the music business has evolved.

**Q:** In the past, jazz, blues and country all came out of the roots of black society and Appalachia.

**A:** But in addition, there are influences from farther away. We've become much more globally aware of other kinds of music. We even have a whole genre called "world music" that's sort of a mix of ethnic music adapted to our modern western styles.

**Q:** World music takes in a lot. I don't think it even includes the Latin sound.

**A:** No — that's its own category. But it includes African, Indian, Asian, Greek — any ethnic music that isn't big enough to have its own category. Klezmer [a pop contemporary sound of East European derivation], for example, is about to get its own category. Latin music started working its way in even as early as the Forties and Fifties in jazz. Tito Puente and Dizzy Gillespie and George Shearing started adding Latin players, and gradually, more and more Latin music was available. Also, the Latin population of the United States increased, and that provided support. There was an audience for it. So now, given a higher level of communication among cultures, and a greater number of Latin citizens in the country, there's an expanded base of popular support for various kinds of Latin music. It even has its own genres within it.

Q: Arguably, jazz has been the most popular form of American music overseas.

A: That's right.

Q: Does it have any rivals for that audience today?

A: American pop music is steadily gaining fans overseas.

Q: How do you define pop music?

A: Music made by American artists in the popular field. It doesn't matter whether it's hip-hop or rap or whatever — rap less so because it depends so much on words. It's partly to do with celebrity — the teenager in another country hears the news, and reads about Michael Jackson or Madonna and the others who are on MTV [a television cable channel devoted to popular music] regularly, and have a pretty substantial following around the world. It's as much an American cultural interest as it is a specific music style. I think that's part of why jazz has been interesting worldwide. It's perceived as a very American kind of thing. People who are curious about the United States feel that jazz somehow tells them something about us.

Q: Is jazz on the decline?

A: No.

Q: What about the jazz radio stations?

A: Those are on the decline. The jazz clubs went through their period of decline about a decade ago and now have been sort of steady since then. But as radio stations have become increasingly valuable commercially, no station can afford to do alternative kinds of music, such as classical or jazz. So, there are also very few classical stations.

Radio, unfortunately, is becoming all the same — with various kinds of rock and popular music that doesn't offer the range or variety radio used to. But you still find jazz recordings, and sales have been steady. And new young artists seem to be discovered all the time. In fact, the complaint in the jazz field is often that the new young artists get more attention than the more established artists, who may be seen as not getting as much attention and time in the spotlight as they would deserve. Record companies are all hoping to find the next big star, the next Miles Davis, the next jazz artist who's going to be more than just a modest seller of records.

There is certainly a substantial audience for jazz. Ironically, the percentage of the entire record business for jazz and classical is about equal — about four percent for each. But it's more evenly distributed in the jazz field among a wider number of artists.

Q: What about blues — a legendary form of music?

A: It's the root of a lot of music — jazz, different kinds of popular music certainly can trace influences back to more traditional blues, from the time blues started being available to, say, the Bob Dylan growing up in Minneapolis [Minnesota]. He was able to hear it on records, and have it as an influence on his own music. I think it was the rock musicians of the Sixties — other than Elvis Presley — who were the first to really be influenced by blues. The Sixties was, in a sense, rock's first golden decade of acceptance. It had always been primarily teenager's music. It was not given any attention by the adult population until the Sixties, and then suddenly you had artists like the Beatles and Bob Dylan and the Grateful Dead who were redefining the audience for rock music.

Q: If rock in the Fifties was mostly embraced by teenagers, what can you tell me about the types of music being embraced by teens today?

A: I have two teenagers myself. I watch what they listen to out of curiosity. I will say that I don't understand it. It may be because I'm getting older. I think the brand of rock music loosely termed "alternative" is the hot phenomenon at the moment. I'm not sure exactly what defines it. My son has mentioned "ska." He played me a record with a ska band. It's an interesting mixture of rock with some jazz influences, of all things.

Q: What about grunge, punk, and so on?

A: Punk was around even in the Seventies. It was the first installment of alternative rock. It was more rebellious. The lyrics were more edgy. Little did anyone know that the lyrics of rap music were going to go to another level. Grunge came from Seattle. The musicians there needed a name for the

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emerging group of players there. Somehow, grunge became the term.

Q: Austin [Texas] has a role to play in music nowadays.

A: Oh, yes — some rock, some jazz, but mostly blues. That was very much a result of the music festivals put on by public radio and public television down there, and broadcasting from there.

Q: Talk for a moment about the development of the urban sound — which might include rap and hip-hop and Motown, but also Austin and Seattle.

A: I think you named the styles I would identify as urban. Certainly Motown was the first urban music. Blues was before that, but it wasn't considered urban. It was country. Motown had that city sophistication to it, style to it, that under the general umbrella of R&B [rhythm and blues], went on to eventually turn into what is now hip-hop and rap. I think most so-called urban music is identified with a black influence and style.

Q: While we're on the subject of urban music, have lyrics always had the significance, the prominence, the contentiousness that they have today in pop music?

A: No. There was always somebody who was being the "bad boy" on the rock scene — Elvis in his day, shaking his hips and using suggestive lyrics, versus the music for the bubble gummers, talking about typical love stories in their lyrics. That persisted through the Sixties. In the Seventies, there were always some artists who were singing very nice, pretty songs, and then there were always some others who were hard-edged, with more than a hint of violence or sexuality. The question has always been, how obvious do you want to be with it? The whole essence of rock 'n' roll, of course, is that there's a strong sexual undertone to it from the beginning — and of course there was to jazz as well. There was the equivalent in earlier generations. Cole Porter's song, "Love For Sale," was banned for years. There was Josephine Baker in the Twenties, who was considered far too risqué for audiences of her time, and she had to move to Paris in order to have a career. Today, though, as with everything, it always seems to be taken to another level. Each generation needs to somehow increase the shock value in order to express itself and stand out from the crowd. So we look at what goes on today and

are appalled by the language, but in fact it's a trend that's been going on throughout the century. It's an evolutionary phenomenon.

Q: Rap, as you sometimes hear it through an open car window or blasting out of a boom box, seems to have value not for any music, but for the lyrics and the percussive background.

A: You have to assume that these persons in the next car or on the street are doing this not for their own enjoyment. They're performing. They're sending out a message, an image. They want to be noticed. It's more important for us to hear them listening. I think that one of the reasons that there's so little music to rap is that the music isn't the point. It's almost like the more annoying it is, the more attention-getting, the better. But the whole phenomenon, I suppose, will be analyzed and written about from a sociological point of view for a long time. One of the real ironies of it is that the main audience for rap is suburban white teenage boys.

Q: Two components of pop music that, to my mind, virtually didn't exist a decade or two ago are New Age and Christian Contemporary — which is well-crafted popular music with non-secular themes. Albums have become hits on the Christian, country and pop charts. The number of albums of Christian music in 1997 was 44 million, compared to 33 million the year before. What sparked this rise?

A: Both have to do with style, psychology and spirituality. In the case of Christian Contemporary, it came about because the Christian religion became associated with the media in this past decade or two. It went from something in church on Sunday to being on television seven days a week. Some of the most powerful religious figures who have emerged are, more and more, television celebrities. Gradually, more performers were added to the mix for audiences who were more used to hearing pop and rock music than European choral music. That opened the door to any number of artists deciding it was the right combination for them, musically and message-wise.

Q: And New Age?

A: In an earlier day, it would have been called mood music. Most musicians disdain it, because there's very little "there" there. That's not the same as minimalism, like Steve Reich or John Adams. New

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Age music tends to be much less in terms of intelligent content. In fact, the whole purpose is to not really engage you too much. It's for relaxation without necessarily thinking, something quite innocuous. Musicians are offended by this because we think music should engage you. A lot of things are on the borderline between world music and New Age, depending on how rhythmic or complex it is. If it's simple, it tends to be considered New Age. If it's busier and louder and more ethnic, then it's considered world music. But the lines are fuzzy.

Q: Do these categories reach audiences overseas?

A: I doubt it. New Age might, a little bit. Don't forget, many countries have their own versions of innocuous local pop music that may be playing on the national radio stations, and the more serious listeners will be listening to either classical music or jazz or major pop artists like Sting or Paul Simon.

Q: We didn't talk about artists like these.

A: It's funny. For the first time, there's a senior citizen rock category. Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, Paul Simon, James Taylor, Arlo Guthrie. They're still identified as making youthful music. There's James Taylor. The ones we consider icons have been around for 30 years. They're all highly developed in their craft and in their experience, and have a whole list of lifetime releases of records that define their music. They're huge influences overseas, more so, in fact, than new artists who have only one record out. Even if that one record is a big hit, it's the more established star who probably has the broader influence.

Q: It's true in country, too — people like George Strait and Reba McEntire.

A: That's right.

Q: And you could fairly include Barbra Streisand in the group. She's been around for 35 years, and has a huge following, and continues to keep going.

A: Right. There's this thing of becoming a household name. In the jazz field, you ask the non-jazz fan whether he knows anything about jazz, and

he's likely to mention Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. The name in country music that most would identify with is Hank Williams, and he's been dead for years. But he's written so many songs that have endured.

Q: Where does the new technology play a role in pop music?

A: In some music, a lot — for instance, the sounds coming out of the car next to you. People who are not even musicians, have no idea how music works and what it's all about, are doing the equivalent of making a meal out of frozen entrees by putting them in the microwave. The end result is not so much how it's made, but the effect it has on the listener. If it works, then it's hard to fault how the person went about it, even if it doesn't seem to be very traditional or follow the approach that we tend to teach our music students. So technology has had a big influence in that regard. It has had a more subtle and general influence in the sense that recording is easier than it used to be. It's more affordable, effective and sophisticated.

Q: What can you say about the crossover phenomenon, as it exists throughout contemporary music?

A: I would point out that our cultural influences are much more readily available, and are bumping into each other a lot. We're not heading toward one big homogeneous style. What we are seeing are interesting meetings of different influences in projects here and there. The motivations are different, depending on the artist. I've done a lot of non-jazz projects. I have a tango record out at the moment. It's not because I thought there was a huge market for tango music. I happen to have a big interest in it. So people get into these projects for a variety of reasons — political or business oriented or simply artistically oriented.

Q: Tell me about the whole oeuvre you've developed with the vibraphone. How did you select it? What is so enticing about its sound?

A: The vibraphone was invented in 1929, and I started playing it at 6 years old in 1949. I had no idea about its history or its role. I stumbled into it because a woman who lived nearby played it and gave lessons. My older sister already played piano, so when my parents decided to find music lessons for me, they had to find something else, and came

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across this teacher. It wasn't until my teen years that I became aware that there was a whole world of music out there. I didn't start finding records until I was a teenager. By then, I had developed a fair amount of facility with the instrument, and had spent so much time with it that the sound of it and the way of playing it was pretty much second nature to me. So at that point, even though I experimented with other instruments for a few months at a time, I always came back to the vibraphone. It was a great opportunity, because it was a new instrument, and there were many techniques and potential uses that had not yet been exploited. Because I was the first, I was able to establish my own identity and put my own mark on the instrument. It was one of those rare, one-time-only opportunities.

Q: How would you define the technique you employed?

A: I treated the instrument as a keyboard. It looks like a piano. But up to that point, people had played it with two mallets, and a single line of melody, like a horn or a voice. I played alone, in my small town in Indiana, and I needed harmony. It sounded empty. So I kept playing with four mallets and adding notes and filling in chords and so on, and became fluent at playing that way. So I think like a pianist and play as a keyboard player. It allows the instrument to do a wider range of things. It can accompany other instruments. It can play unaccompanied, and still sound complete. There are a lot more opportunities for texture and color because of that capability.

Q: In terms of the elements that mark pop music's lyrics and sound — there are social, psychological, emotional, sensual, intellectual. It's probably all of those.

A: Yes. Music is one of the most basic experiences for human beings. We're the only animal that reacts to music that I'm aware of. You can put on a record with a driving beat, and you're sitting in the living room, and your body is now moving with it. You look down at the family dog who's lying on the couch next to you, and it's totally unaware that there's a beat going on. It doesn't feel that rhythm. It doesn't want to move with it. There's no sense of wanting to synchronize with it. It's a uniquely

human thing, a fantastic, intuitive language. To me it doesn't matter if it's classical or pop or Japanese. It has that capability, and it reaches us not only on the subliminal level, but also communicates culturally.

Q: Is there such a thing as an American sound in music?

A: Yes. It's no one thing, just like there's no one European sound — there's French classical music, German, Italian, opera, string quartets. But nonetheless there are certain elements that are frequently there, and a certain kind of sensibility to it that you sort of identify as American pop — a style that's there even though it's very hard to describe in words. There's diversity, a freshness, and that unique influence that has been at the root of American pop and jazz — which is blues. Even though it's highly evolved into other strains, that presence still sets American pop apart from the music of other countries.

Q: Do you see any trends on the horizon in pop music?

A: I don't. People ask me that about jazz all the time — where it's headed. Now that jazz and pop music have become so diversified, there's no telling. There used to be one "hit parade," one "top ten." Now there are so many different categories and subcategories, that the name of the game these days is diversity. It's an incredible range of choice, something that suits your mood for any occasion, and any kind of influences that you want to see included. It's great for music, and great for the listener. ■



U.S.  
**THEATER**  
IN THE NINETIES:  
A HEARTLAND PERSPECTIVE

BY DAN SULLIVAN

**M**INNEAPOLIS, Minnesota — Nearly a half-century ago, in September, 1951, *Theatre Arts* magazine noted that “the American theater” was, of course, the New York theater. “It is an unfortunate fact that very little of genuine worth or national interest originates outside Manhattan Island,” the article observed.

It wasn’t quite true, even then. An intrepid impresario named Margo Jones had been launching new plays in her little theater in Dallas, Texas, since 1947, notably Tennessee Williams’ *Summer and Smoke*. Playwright Eugene O’Neill had unveiled *Lazarus Laughed* at the Pasadena Playhouse in southern California as far back as 1928.

But there was some lingering truth to the magazine’s point of view. In effect, what existed was Broadway and off-Broadway. Everywhere else — Boston, Cleveland, Denver, Los Angeles, Chicago — was “out of town.” And “out-of-town” agreed with this perspective. When a touring production of a Broadway-launched play or musical came to the Orpheum Theater in Minneapolis in the postwar era, prospective playgoers needed reassurance that it was “direct from New York.” In other words, the real thing.

Even then the audience might be slim. The Orpheum had grown scruffy; road show standards were slipping; television was keeping people at home. Indeed, someone might have wondered, would there be any professional theater at all in Minneapolis fifty or sixty years from then?

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Now it is April 1998. Driving down Hennepin Avenue, in the heart of Minneapolis, I pass the Orpheum Theater, restored to its former glory. *The Lion King*, an adaptation of the Walt Disney animated film, now the talk of Broadway — had its pre-New York engagement here in mid-1997. *Bring In ‘Da Noise, Bring In ‘Da Funk*, a history of African-Americans told through the medium of percussive dance, spent the winter holidays in Minneapolis. One of Broadway’s most acclaimed revivals, *Chicago*, toured here in the spring. The national touring company of the new musical *Ragtime*, a colorful evocation of early 20th-century America, is enroute to this city. There is no stinting. “The road,” the touring circuit is back.

But another road — in fact, a whole network of roads, of developments — is now in place and visible through the lens of the heartland, of middle America. Other aspects are reflected here as well. The decentralization of U.S. theater — a process that has taken a generation — is a fact today, evident in Minneapolis, and in cities dotting the landscape, from Seattle, Washington, to Hartford, Connecticut.

A few blocks from the Orpheum, for example, another type of playhouse comes into view. The Tyrone Guthrie Theater opened 35 years ago, with legendary director Guthrie’s staging of *Hamlet*. The Guthrie wasn’t the first regional — or resident professional — theater to be built in this country, nor would it be the last. In the course of the past generation, the theater world’s pendulum largely has swung from Broadway to the regions, with New York theater frequently beholden to the rest of the country

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for an infusion of activity. These days, if new companies aren't springing up all over, the ones that were established largely between 1950 and 1975 are constructing new homes, and second stages, to expand their activities.

In the 1940s, Margo Jones dreamed of driving cross-country and finding a resident professional theater offering "good plays, well done" at every stop. In the 1990s, it's a reality. One glance at a list of offerings at more than 200 resident theaters from Hawaii to Maine, printed in the current issue of *American Theatre*, successor to *Theatre Arts*, proves the point.

Driving east from California in April, one could catch Brecht in Los Angeles, comedic playwright David Ives' *All in the Timing* in San Diego; Emily Mann's *Having Our Say* and August Wilson's *Jitney* — two plays about the African-American experience — in Phoenix and Denver respectively; an Oscar Wilde revival in Chicago; new works by contemporary playwrights A.R. Gurney and Richard Greenberg in Cleveland and in Princeton (New Jersey); and an Edward Albee anthology in Boston.

All this activity takes place in what is known, familiarly, as the "nonprofit sector." Today, nonprofit theater happens to be more non-profitable than ever. Support still comes from foundations, state arts councils, corporations, and individual patrons, but less so than before from the National Endowment for the Arts — whose budget has been drastically cut.

So the vocabulary has had to be changed. One seldom hears the phrase "repertory theaters" nowadays. Changing the bill every night turned out to be a lot more expensive than producing one's season a show at a time, as the old stock companies used to do, perhaps leaving a few weeks vacant at the end of the season in case the last show, often a comedy, is a hit. Given today's cash-flow problems, theaters need hits.

The term "acting company" is still heard, but it usually means tonight's acting company rather than its original meaning: an ensemble meant to serve a number of roles over an entire season. Tyrone Guthrie would frown; the Guthrie's new artistic director, Joe Dowling, is philosophical. A veteran of Ireland's Abbey Theatre, Dowling knows that an

acting company can become too permanent. Besides, today's actors are reluctant to commit to a full season. And more often than not, theaters cannot afford to keep a large group of actors on staff.

Dowling's first two seasons have been more audience-friendly than those of his predecessor, Garland Wright, and subscriptions are up. "A fellow called me a crowd-pleaser the other day," Dowling says. "I suppose I am. I've got 1,300 seats to fill every night. I like crowds; I want to please them."

How far to stoop, though? That is the dilemma most nonprofit theaters face. They often want to be experimental, daring — to discover the bright new playwright or to tinker artistically with traditional venues of classics and the eras in which they are set, or to create an imaginative stage setting. But to demand too much of audiences is to risk angry letters, cancelled subscriptions and decreased corporate support. If these companies were invented to shake up the social order, they certainly aren't doing so at the moment.

Another challenge is the very regularity of the resident-theater schedule. Broadway shows are a temporary alliance of zealots obsessed with making their present work the most stupendous production in the history of the theater. The pressure is ruthless, the emotional cost great, and the results, on occasion, sensational.

**B**y contrast, take the recent opening of A.R. Gurney's *Sylvia* at the Cleveland Play House, a literate and amusing play about a man who (figuratively) falls in love with his dog. It was a charming script, well-acted, and thoroughly enjoyed by the audience. But a sense of danger, of experimentation, was certainly not in the air.

Yet given all that, our resident theaters still retain their commitment to what Peter Hackett, artistic director at the Cleveland Play House, still calls "art" theater, a phrase so old (shades of O'Neill and the





Provincetown Playhouse) that it's new again. Hard as it is to define "art theater," it doesn't mean the plunging chandeliers of *Phantom of the Opera* and *Miss Saigon*'s helicopters buzzing the stage. Resident theaters are supposed to offer meaningful entertainment, and in the main they do so.

As a result, the serious theatergoer anywhere in the United States no longer feels cheated if a well-received play closes in New York City before he or she can see it. Very likely, it will turn up one or two seasons later on the schedule of the local resident theater, in a production that quite often will equal and sometimes surpass the original. I still regret spending \$60 to watch a young movie actress — cast for name value — struggle with Paula Vogel's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *How I Learned To Drive*, off-Broadway, when I knew that a smart Minneapolis director, Casey Stangl, was about to stage the play at her home theater, Eye of the Storm. Stangl's leading lady might not boast Hollywood credits, but I felt certain she would know something about shaping a monologue. The same, no doubt, would be true of the actress performing the role this season in Providence, Rhode Island, or Baltimore, Maryland, and next season in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.

And they might be stars at that — in their home venues. One of the happiest developments in theater today is that a good actor can put together a career in one or more regional theaters without moving to New York City or Los Angeles. Fame and fortune may not come, but you might be warmly approached in the supermarket by someone who saw your performance last night here in the Twin Cities, at the Guthrie or the Theatre de la Jeune Lune.

Fame and fortune aren't excluded, to be sure. John Mahoney, who only began his acting career in his late 30s, is a product of the Chicago theater scene. Today, he can afford to buy a comfortable Hollywood mansion following his success in numerous films and, more recently, in the successful

television situation comedy, *Frasier*. But he chooses to live back in Chicago, and to perform there as frequently as possible — in the spring of 1998, for instance, in a revival of Kaufman and Hart's Thirties comedy, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, which he then was taking to London.

Similarly, Robert Prosky, a product of Washington's Arena Stage, has followed his longtime residency with a role on television in *Hill Street Blues*, and many movie portrayals as well.

Actor Jeff Daniels, who costarred with Jim Carrey in *Dumb and Dumber*, is so committed to the stage that he opened his own theater, The Purple Rose, in his home town, Chelsea, Michigan. In mid-1998, the troupe was boasting a world premiere, *Book of Days*, by Lanford Wilson, one of the more honored U.S. playwrights of the contemporary scene.

Kevin Kling performs solo shows like *21A* and *The Education of Walter Kaufman* all over the world, but similarly remains a Minnesota artist, whether performing *Diary of a Scoundrel* at the Jungle Theatre, adapting Goldoni's *Venetian Twins* for the Guthrie or doing a voice-over to pay the rent.

Compare that with the experience of a Midwestern playwright of an earlier era. William Inge was discovered by Margo Jones in the 1940s. Determined to get to New York City, he finally did so with *Come Back, Little Sheba* in 1950. Following four straight hits (including *Bus Stop* and *Picnic*), however, Broadway declared his talent obsolete. Feeling too disconnected to return to Kansas, he fled to Hollywood, where he languished until committing suicide in 1973.

Still, this sad tale has a happy ending. The William Inge Festival was founded in his memory 17 years ago by a determined secondary school teacher named Margaret Goheen. It takes place every spring in Inge's birthplace, Independence, Kansas, as typical a small town as you'll find in the United States. The most unexpected people turn up in this prairie setting to be honored during the festival — Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, August Wilson, Neil Simon, Wendy Wasserstein and, this year, Stephen Sondheim.

Partly they come to honor Inge, whose career remains emblematic of the displaced American artist. Partly they come to be honored: Broadway composer-lyricist Sondheim's tribute, featuring songs by Bernadette Peters — his leading lady in his Pulitzer Prize winning work, *Sunday in the Park With George*, as well as *Into the Woods* — drew 1,000 people to Memorial Hall. And partly they come to talk theater with the students of Independence Community College.

"You're known as an uncompromising artist, but you made changes in *Passion* when it was trying out—isn't that compromising?" a young woman asked.

"No," Sondheim replied. "It's making changes. I don't do it to please the audience. I do it to make my intention clear to the audience. Once they know that, they can either accept it or reject it. In *Passion* they rejected it."

In Independence, we also heard a new script by David Ives, once an emerging playwright, now a successful one. His comedy, *All in the Timing*, was resident theater's most-frequently performed play in the 1995-1996 season. How had he become a playwright? "Theater is such a fluke. I sent a play to some guy in Minneapolis, who told me about a theater in L.A...."

Flukes aside, there are established channels these days for new-play development — even for musical theater. There are so many, in fact, that critics have condemned some regional theaters for "developing scripts to death" — giving them so many trial readings and audience discussions that in the end not even the playwright can say what the play is about. One also hears the opposite complaint: that



Two scenes from *Ragtime*, the new Broadway musical based on E.L. Doctorow's novel. Photos by Catherine Ashmore (top) and Michael Cooper (bottom).

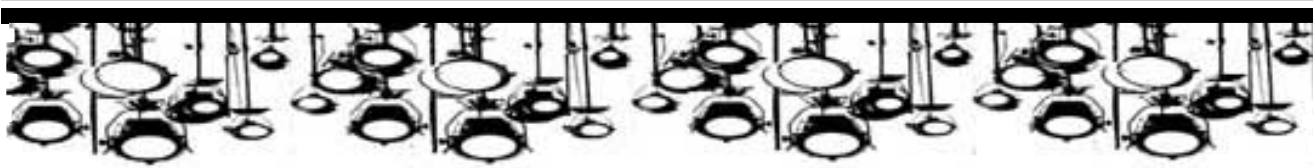
a theater will retain a script for a year and then return it without comment. In general, though, a young U.S. playwright finds it easier to get a hearing today than ever before. And often, a premiere will follow — sometimes a double premiere. Christopher Sergel's *Black Elk Speaks* went from its debut at the Denver Theater Center Company to the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in 1995, in return for the Taper's production of Leslie Ayvazian's *Nine Armenians*. Syl Jones' *Black No More* was co-commissioned by the Guthrie Theater and Washington's Arena Stage. Actors Theatre of Louisville's annual Humana Festival has introduced more than a dozen new dramatists of note to the U.S. stage. The Denver Center Theater sponsors two new-

play festivals — one devoted to the works of women playwrights.

While women dramatists have yet to achieve parity with their male counterparts in the United States, there are encouraging signs. Tina Howe, Marsha Norman, Wendy Wasserstein and Emily Mann continue to make their mark — Mann as artistic director of the McCarter Theater in Princeton, New Jersey, as well. Indeed, some of the most acclaimed works premiered in New York City this season were by Howe (*Pride's Crossing*), Jane Anderson (*Defying Gravity*) and Amy Freed (*Freedomland*).

African-American women dramatists are especially visible these days. In addition to Naomi Wallace, Suzan-Lori Parks and Cheryl West, Pearl Cleage saw her *Blues for an Alabama Sky* unveiled at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, with subsequent stagings around the United States. And Kia Corthron is a prolific newcomer who has had works performed in cities from Baltimore, Maryland, to Seattle, Washington.

To bring this discussion of theater in the United States full circle, I have to cast my eyes far from Minneapolis — to the East Coast, and a suburban



Connecticut setting. There, in Waterford, on an old farm, is the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, named to commemorate the great U.S. playwright of the first half of this century. It houses a playwrights conference, a musical theater workshop, and a critics seminar. The playwrights conference stages readings of a dozen new scripts every summer. Its alumni include John Guare, Israel Horowitz, and August Wilson, the United States' most celebrated contemporary African-American dramatist.

Wilson has drawn criticism recently for taking what some regard as a separatist position on African-American theater. He maintains that black writers and artists need to resist the mainstream white theater establishment, found their own stages, and act in them. The irony is that Wilson himself continues to unveil his own plays in mainstream

theaters across the United States.

This doesn't obscure his basic argument that the United States could use more black theaters, more Asian-American theaters, more Hispanic theaters, to meet the enthusiasm of expanding multicultural audiences. This might lead in turn to the presence of more multicultural critics on the scene, to join two prominent African Americans, *The Denver Post's* Sandra Brooks-Dillard and Rohan Preston of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*.

So theater in the United States has its work cut out for it. But at least it is, now, a genuine American theater. ■

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## EAST WEST PLAYERS: CROSS-POLLINATING

When the curtain went up several months ago on a production of Stephen Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures* at the new home of East West Players in downtown Los Angeles, it marked another new chapter in the annals of this troupe, and, in a broader sense, the history of multicultural theater in the United States.

**E**ast West Players is the oldest, and one of the most influential, Asian-American theater companies in the nation, with a three-decade-plus track record of affording Pacific Rim actors a place to practice their craft, hone their skills and gain insights into the business of acting.

The troupe's success is "preceded by that of its alumni," Jan Breslauer wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* recently about this "invaluable nurturing ground." Actors Pat

Morita, John Lone and Sab Shimono — all of whom are well known in the U.S. film and television industry — are among those who have passed through the company's doors, along with playwrights David Henry Hwang (who has had four of his plays staged there) and Philip Kan Gotanda.

East West Players is now in residence in the 220-seat David Henry Hwang Theater in a former church, known today as the Union Center for the Arts, which also houses an art exhibitor and an independent film organization. Lead donors included Henry and Dorothy Hwang, parents of the playwright for whom the theater was named. Hwang, author of such Broadway dramas as *M. Butterfly* and *Golden Child*, is the most successful Asian-American playwright on the contemporary scene.

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The company's first artistic director was Mako, a familiar face as a character actor in a skein of Hollywood films who later starred in the original Broadway production of *Pacific Overtures*, Sondheim's 1976 musical depiction of the opening of Japan by the West in the 1850s. Mako recalls that he and his colleagues weren't "consciously working to establish a model" when they began to stage plays. "What we were trying to do, consciously, was to be honest with ourselves, learning to cope with elements that were surrounding us, such as racism and discrimination."

Beulah Quo, another gifted Asian-American actress and an original East West player, recalls that in the beginning, "we were really the first group of Asian Americans working together in Los Angeles. That's common now. But in those days, people never thought of it."

With the passage of three decades, East West Players reflects the themes of U.S. society from the identity politics of the Sixties and Seventies to more mainstream issues of life and love. The company, which inspired the creation of other Asian-American companies in the Seventies in the aftermath of its own

success, also typifies the multicultural theater scene in the United States. It represents its constituency in the same manner as Hispanic-American theater in Los Angeles, New York City and elsewhere, and African-American theater in all parts of the country. And as with these other forms, Asian-American theater is flourishing.

"The audiences are larger," Hwang said recently in *The Washington Post*. "It's more accessible. It's more visible than we would have thought 20 years ago. It's exciting, the way you'd be excited about seeing any child grow up."

Tim Dang, the current artistic director, told *The Daily Bruin*, the University of California at Los Angeles newspaper, that he hopes the new site will evolve into an arts center rather than simply a theater. "I think that's one of our goals — to have a cross-pollination of audiences, where hopefully the audiences that come to see the theater will come to the art exhibits as well, and if we have any film screenings, we will invite [patrons] to come see theater." ■

— Charlotte Astor

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# DANCE



## AT THE CLOSE OF THE CENTURY

By SUZANNE CARBONNEAU

THE ENVIABLE REPUTATION ACHIEVED BY DANCE IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE FORMATIVE 20TH CENTURY RESTS ON THE WORK OF TITANS IN THE VARIOUS DISCIPLINES.

**G**eorge Balanchine, Agnes de Mille, Antony Tudor and Jerome Robbins pioneered American ballet. Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Katherine Dunham, Merce Cunningham and Alvin Ailey blazed unforeseen trails in modern dance. The uniquely New World “tap” terpsichore has had as its masters Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, John Bubbles, the Nicholas Brothers, Jimmy Slyde, and Gregory Hines. As for musical theater and vocal choreography, we are indebted to Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Michael Kidd, Bob Fosse and Cholly Atkins. And artists such as Twyla Tharp have worked in a variety of dance genres.

Then there are the generally anonymous contributors who brought the world such social dances as the Charleston, Lindy Hop and break dance, all of which developed into global crazes.

The first generation of dance masters has passed on, and the second is graying. Still, as a newer contingent comes to the fore, at a time of significant decline in vital U.S. government funding, dance in the United States continues to be innovative, with works of high quality. And, significantly, new forms are evolving as dance maintains its presence in the general globalization of culture.

### Modern Becomes Classic

Modern dance in the United States, an established form for most of this century, has settled into the status of a classic. Yet it continues to generate new roots. Companies bearing the name and choreographic insignia of the likes of Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey have been joined by such adventuresome stylists as Mark Morris and Bill T. Jones. Even in the aftermath of the death of the founding generation, today’s prevailing troupes continue to honor those early artists through a devotion to dance that is seen as an expression of the individual body and soul, that hints at social and political ideals, and that employs the technical vocabulary of their elders. Most of all, they honor the pioneers by doing as they did — rebelling against the concerns and modes of those who came before them.

As always, modern dance reflects its times. The younger choreographers today often favor the postmodernist over the modernist aesthetic. This means that contemporary choreographers have assimilated ballet, martial arts, social dances, gymnastics, folk dances and other techniques into the modern dance lexicon, so that there no longer exists an easily definable style of modern dance movement. It means that the forms and formulas for constructing dance have changed in response to the post-Einsteinian view of the physical world, the influence of new modes of perception that have come with technology, and the postmodern idea of

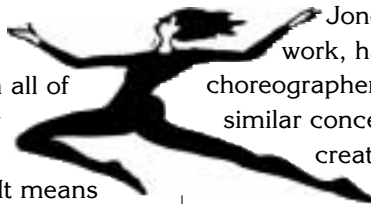
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reality as a relative social construct. (For example, choreographer Doug Elkins is a true postmodernist for whom all of history and world culture is an aesthetic grab-bag from which he selects, deconstructs and reconstructs at will.) It means that choreographers are questioning who is allowed to dance and what they must look like, as well as whose voices are being heard. It also means that content has come back to the fore in modern dance as taking precedence over form. This represents a serious philosophical and aesthetic rupture with the style in modern dance that has been dominant since Cunningham began choreographing in the 1940s and since the Judson Dance Theatre of the 1960s brought modern dance into the formalist fold.

This aesthetic break was most famously (and infamously) brought to the attention of the larger public and arts community in 1995, with the publication in *The New Yorker* of dance critic Arlene Croce's diatribe against Bill T. Jones as a representative of what she termed "victim art." Speaking for a portion of the arts establishment, Croce expressed a contempt for the work of Jones and others which ultimately demonstrated that Croce's real concern was that the modernist aesthetic — the only one she recognized as legitimate — no longer was guiding many younger choreographers. However, the trends against which Croce and others were railing had already been present in dance as a major force for at least a decade.

#### Social and Political Context

A cyclical trend that re-emerged in modern dance more than ten years ago and continues today has seen choreographers focusing on making art with social and political content. This work dealt with the "isms" of hatred (including racism, sexism and homophobia), on the politics of identity, and on issues surrounding the AIDS crisis. In addition to



Jones (who, ironically, in his most recent work, has embraced formalist concepts), choreographers across the country are expressing similar concerns. David Rousseve in Los Angeles creates dances in which personal history is excavated for larger social issues.

Stuart Pimsler of Columbus, Ohio, works with health caregivers in developing his dances. In Seattle, Washington, Pat Graney brings dance into women's prisons. In her choreography for Urban Bush Women, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar of Tallahassee, Florida, tackles issues associated with female African-American identity. And Ralph Lemon, whose most recent work explores how identity is created by race and culture, is among the many choreographers in New York City working in this arena.

Even in modern dance companies whose work focuses on more purely aesthetic concerns, there is evident a vastly different attitude about the body and gender roles. A growing recognition has emerged about the way that dance has been restricted by notions about physical perfection and "beauty," and an attempt is being made to open up professional dance companies to include those who would have been restricted from it even a few years ago. As the physical abilities of dancers seem to increase exponentially (as it does with athletes) with each passing year, there is now beginning to be room on American stages for a more heterogeneous range of physicality. It is becoming rare among younger choreographers to see dance that replicates traditional gender roles as they were idealized and promulgated in ballet and earlier modern dance. Today, women partner and lift men, and men can display softness and vulnerability.

Beyond this, however, there is a new trend in dance that is even more audacious in its challenges to the bodily aesthetic — so-called wheelchair companies. These companies can consist entirely of dancers who are disabled or can include a mix of wheelchair-bound and "standup" dancers. American choreographer Victoria Marks, who is currently based in Los Angeles, first brought wide attention to the form with her 1994 film *Outside In* (created with director Margaret Williams), that featured the members of the British company CanDoCo. In

1997, Boston Dance Umbrella challenged its audiences with its presentation of an International Festival of Wheelchair Dance that featured eight wheelchair dance companies, as well as troupes from Europe.



Wynton Marsalis on *Griot New York* in 1991. Fagan and Marsalis are at work again on a dance, as yet untitled, that Fagan describes as “a yellow brick road to the Millennium.”

Choreographers Dianne McIntyre, Bebe Miller, Bill T. Jones, Danny Buraczeski and Donald Byrd have commissioned

Other artists are also confronting notions about who is allowed to dance by opening a place on their stages for previously unheard voices and experiences. Liz Lerman, artistic director of the Washington, D.C.-based Dance Exchange, has defied ageism in dance by expanding her company to include members over the age of 60, whom she has dubbed “dancers of the third age.” Likewise, New York choreographer David Dorfman has created a series of projects that recruit untrained dancers in a variety of sites across the country to perform customized versions of dances that address their life experiences. The Everett Dance Theater of Providence, Rhode Island, also has blurred the lines between outreach and artmaking in its focus on creating work with social messages that is developed improvisationally and shaped by feedback from the community about which it dances. And New York-based choreographer Ann Carlson is known for her “Real People” series, in which she has created dances to be performed by people gathered together by a common profession or activity. So far, the project has included lawyers, security officers, basketball players, fly-fishers, fiddlers, corporate executives, a farmer and her dairy cow, schoolteachers, nuns and horse wranglers.

#### Dance with Jazz

One of the side benefits of modern dance’s expansion has been the resurgence of interest in vernacular American music. While jazz largely bypassed modern dance in its heyday, this is no longer the case. There are enough collaborations currently in the works between modern dance choreographers and jazz composers for it to qualify as a bona fide trend. Garth Fagan, choreographer of the hit Broadway musical *The Lion King*, first collaborated with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer

scores from jazz composers that bring this music to a new generation of dance artists. And joining forces are the American Dance Festival and the Kennedy Center. They are seeking to match choreographers with jazz composers, including Billy Taylor who is creating a new score for choreographer Trisha Brown. Even the ballet world is adapting the trend: Peter Martins, artistic director of the New York City Ballet (NYCB), has commissioned Marsalis to compose his first full work for a symphony orchestra, for the company’s 1999-2000 season., with the composer conducting the Ballet Orchestra. It will be Marsalis’s first composition for a full symphonic orchestra.



Despite those who feared the worst for American ballet following the death of NYCB director-choreographer George Balanchine in 1983, American ballet, as a whole, is in a singularly healthy state under Peter Martins’ direction, commissioning a string of new ballets from other choreographers, adding to the tradition

etched by Balanchine, Jerome Robbins and others. American Ballet Theater, the United States premier ballet repertory company, has assumed the mission of spreading ballet across the nation by establishing a presence and community roots in such far-flung locales as Newark (New Jersey), Detroit (Michigan), Washington, Costa Mesa (California) and Los Angeles. And Dance Theater of Harlem, founded by performer Arthur Mitchell in 1968 following the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., has long been acknowledged as among the most important international companies, as evidenced by its

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precedent-breaking visit to South Africa in 1992, when the company performed before racially-mixed audiences in Johannesburg.

Another recent bright spot has been the significant maturation of regional ballet troupes in cities across the United States. Indeed, several companies outside of the dance hub that is New York City have transcended the regional label by establishing a national and global presence.

One of these is the Miami City Ballet, founded in the late 1980s in the rapidly expanding ethnic Florida city. The company is headed by Edward Villella, whose virile presence as a New York City Ballet soloist from the 1950s to 1970s had a significant impact in eroding negative stereotypes about the male dancer. As artistic director, Villella has created a world-class company from the ground up. Reflecting its regional roots, the troupe is imbued with a Latin style as evidenced in the verve and spirit of its dancing, and in the large number of Hispanic dancers in its ranks, as well as in the contributions of its resident choreographer, Jimmy Gamonet De Los Heros, a native of Peru.

Another notable company which has recently come to prominence under a Balanchine alumnus is the San Francisco Ballet. While it is the oldest continuously existing ballet company in the United States (founded in 1933), it was given a new lease on life when Icelandic native Helgi Tomasson assumed directorship of the company in 1985. The company performs masterworks of the 20th-century repertory, as well as full-length 19th-century classics in updated versions by Tomasson.

The creative ecosystem of U.S. ballet is kept in balance by smaller independent companies that exist to serve the vision of a single choreographer, a model that is more familiar in modern dance. Probably the most notable example is Eliot Feld, who continues to challenge himself and his audiences to find the relevance of classical ballet in this time and place. Feld, who first burst onto the scene in 1967 with his choreographed pieces *Harbinger* and *At Midnight*, has gone on to head a series of companies devoted to presenting his own aesthetic. Established just a year ago, Feld's newest company, Ballet Tech, is composed exclusively of



young dancers trained at his tuition-free school of the same name. Drawing all of its students from New York City public schools, Ballet Tech democratizes and diversifies an art that had its origins in the European courts. Presenting dances such as *Yo Shakespeare*, the company reflects the culture, look, texture, zeitgeist, and rainbow of ethnicities of contemporary urban America.

An increasing number of ballet troupes are acknowledging their responsibilities to the communities in which they reside, developing significant educational and outreach programs that focus on serving those who traditionally never would have had access to ballet training or theatergoing. Based on the model established by Eliot Feld in New York City, the Boston Ballet, Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle (Washington), Hartford (Connecticut) Ballet and others have begun to devote significant resources to the establishment of tuition-free schools and programs. Other companies are saluting their communities by commissioning works focused on their home locales. For example, Ballet Arizona, based in Phoenix, is preparing a new work on Native American themes and stories developed through dialogues with members of the area's Native Americans, so as to bridge the Anglo and Indian worlds.

#### Corporeal Noise-making

The most ubiquitous trend in contemporary dance seems to be the enormous popularity of various forms of percussive dance — Irish step dance, tap dance, flamenco and other hybrid forms of corporeal noise-making. Dance has not been this popular in the American commercial theater since the early years of this century, when social dance dominated Broadway and vaudeville stages. Today various forms of percussive dance have made themselves known in the New York City theater and elsewhere, in touring versions of the shows. *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*, *Bring in 'da Noise! Bring in 'da Funk!*, *Tap Dogs*, and *Stomp* — some from abroad and some homegrown — all attest to the sudden and seemingly insatiable mania for these aural dance forms that are accessible and highly



theatrical. This passion may have emerged from the tap dancing revival of the 1970s, which introduced a new generation to dance that carries its own beat with it. While the aesthetics range from the unabashed pop commercialism of Riverdance and *Stomp*, which rely on glitzy lighting, smoke machines and deafening unison clamor for their effects, to the more subtle and complex use of tap to embody the history of the African-American experience in Noise/Funk, all of these shows find their appeal in their re-definition of what contemporary audiences were brought up to think of as dance.

*Noise/Funk* has brought Savion Glover, a 24-year-old wunderkind, the attention that he deserves. Almost single-handedly, Glover has made tap relevant to the newest generation by updating its jazz rhythms to embrace those of the hip-hop sensibility. Glover's astonishing technique has led older tap masters under whom he served his apprenticeship to declare him potentially the greatest tap dancer who has ever lived.

The percussive dance mania is nothing if not global, bringing attention to forms of dance that have their roots in other cultures. While dance has always existed in the United States as a "folk" form — a means of celebrating ethnic roots within this nation of immigrants — there has been a recent tendency toward the professionalization of traditional dances in companies that follow models of modern dance and ballet. This movement reflects the change in the governing immigrant metaphor in the United States, as it turns away from the melting pot toward the idea of a savory stew in which the ingredients coexist and complement rather than blend.

#### Preserving Cultural Traditions

Outstanding models of professional folk companies include DanceBrazil, based in New York, and directed by Jelou Viera. This country's leading exponent of capoeira, the martial arts-dance form that originated in Brazil during slavery, DanceBrazil aims at a fusion of the traditional and the modern. Recently, DanceBrazil completed an extended residency in San Antonio (Texas) where it worked



with gang members in the poorest neighborhoods of that city. Celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, the Caribbean Dance Company, based in St. Croix, Virgin Islands, also aims at preserving the region's heritage while using the discipline inherent in dance to offer skills and hope to impoverished island youth.

A strong African heritage movement that has been gaining momentum over the past 30 years has also been abetted by the establishment of DanceAfrica, a two-decades-old annual festival of performances and workshops at eight sites across the United States that brings together companies whose work celebrates African roots within the diaspora.

Another kind of cultural enrichment is being brought to the United States by newer immigrant populations seeking refuge, which has resulted in the preservation of dance forms threatened by contemporary political events. A prime example is classical Cambodian dance, a thousand-year-old tradition which, as a potent symbol of national identity, was targeted by the Khmer Rouge for eradication. A number of the survivors of the "killing fields" found their way to the United States where they made a systematic effort to establish a home-in-exile for Cambodian dance. Groups such as Sam Ang Sam's Cambodian Network Council in Washington, D.C., have kept this form alive, training a new generation in the art. A similar effort is currently being conducted for the performance traditions of the former Yugoslavia. Based in Granville, Ohio, the Zivili Kolo Ensemble, specializing in Balkan dance, is currently concentrating its energies on dances from areas that are changing their borders and populations, particularly the regions of Slavonija, Vojvodina, the Posavina corridor, and Lika.

Another trend in the professionalization of dance forms is occurring in the transfer of street, social and club styles to the stage. While break dance as a street phenomenon is now more than twenty years old, it is only recently that it has begun appearing in concert venues. It is inevitable, too, in this era of cultural sampling, that break dance would be assimilated into the vocabulary of other dance forms. Hip-hop is a strong influence in the current form taken by *bhangra*, an exemplar of a peculiarly

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American dance phenomenon that is, at the same time, truly global in its roots. Originally performed by Punjabi farmers, *bhangra* has emerged as an exciting new force on American college campuses. A recent national intercollegiate bhangra competition filled a 3,700-seat auditorium in Washington.

While the astonishing variety and fecundity of American dance can only be outlined here, it becomes clear that — despite shortages of funds in both the public and private sectors — this art form continues to reflect American culture in a lively,

vital, and socially-conscious manner. Well into the next century, dance can be expected to continue to be a mirror for our deepest concerns, our fondest hopes, our crassest dreams, our most starry-eyed idealism, and, ultimately, our truest selves.

As Martha Graham fondly quoted her father, “movement never lies.” ■

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*Suzanne Carbonneau has written extensively on dance for The Washington Post and other publications.*

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## MARK MORRIS: MILLENNIAL ARTIST

A quick look at U.S. choreographer Mark Morris’s current schedule of projects is cause for a double-take.

Indeed, the extraordinary range and omnipresence in an array of venues — including ballet, modern dance, opera, musical theater, video and film — does challenge belief. How is it possible for someone to stretch across the breadth, dynamism and unfettered creativity that is necessary to sustain this kind of one-person cultural empire?

By the time he was 35, Morris had produced so large and important a body of work as to make him a worthy subject for an acclaimed critical biography (*Mark Morris*, by Joan Acocella, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993). Now, at 41, he continues to move from strength to strength, placing his uncommon choreographic and directorial stamp on new works.

More than any other choreographer working today, Morris deploys his dancers in intriguing spatial relationships and configurations, creating geometric patterns that are choreographic equivalents of the Renaissance concept of the music of the spheres — the theory that the proof of God’s existence resides in the beauty of the patterns of the

heavens.

Known for the transcendent musicality of his works, which are grounded in his deep and imaginative understanding of musical structure, Morris has choreographed to seemingly every kind of music, using his dancers’ movements to present a visual picture of the score. He is probably most noted for his deep affinity with Baroque vocal music, such as he employed in his 1988 work, *L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, set to the Handel score. A work for 24 dancers, a 30-member chorus, five soloists and full orchestra, *L’Allegro* won several awards at its world premiere in London and will have its U.S. debut in Washington late in 1998.

Morris is regarded as a musician’s choreographer and is engaged in significant ongoing collaborations with composer Lou Harrison and cellist Yo-Yo Ma. In celebration of Harrison’s 80th birthday, Morris commissioned the score for *Rhymes With Silver*, his fifth teaming with the composer. Ma and the Morris troupe will tour together soon, presenting dances that include the new Harrison

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piece as well as *Falling Down Stairs*, a work set to Bach's Third Suite for unaccompanied cello.

*Falling Down Stairs* received its premiere on U.S. public television in April 1998, as part of a series of video documentaries focused on Ma's collaborations with artists in various media. The filmed version of Morris's *Dido and Aeneas*, which also had its inaugural showing on cable television in the United States in April, is scheduled to be broadcast worldwide throughout 1998.

The Mark Morris Dance Group has one of the most extensive national and international touring schedules of any dance company in the world. Morris has choreographed over 90 works for his company, but he receives commissions from other troupes as well. At present, he is working on a piece for the San Francisco Ballet, the fourth Morris work that will be entered in its repertory.

A considerable amount of Morris's

energy recently has been devoted to music theater, both popular and classical. He choreographed and directed the new musical, *The Capeman*, with music by Paul Simon, that had a short run on Broadway early in 1998. Morris also has directed and choreographed operas for the past ten years.

Despite this astonishing amount and variety of activity, until recently Morris and his troupe lacked a permanent base, a luxury that is, nonetheless, vital for growth and stabilization. That challenge has been met: He expects to move his company soon into a facility in central Brooklyn (a New York City borough) that will house the administrative and artistic staff and provide two studios for uninterrupted choreographing. In a real sense, this new home for Morris will also be a new home for U.S. dance. ■

— Suzanne Carbonneau

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# THE VISUAL ARTS: ON THE CUSP OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

## A TALE OF TWO EXHIBITIONS

Last winter, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City presented a pair of exhibitions that together suggest the pluralistic state of the current art scene in the United States. One consisted of a series of large dramatic video installations by the artist Bill Viola. The viewer could watch transfixed as figures projected on large screens were consumed by fire and water, or they could peer into the peephole of an enclosed room where a monastic cell was periodically overwhelmed by dramatic flashes of lightning, waves and raging storms. The exhibition reflected Viola's interest in spiritual traditions ranging from Zen to Sufism to Christianity.

The other exhibition was a retrospective devoted to the work of Arthur Dove, a lesser-known U.S. abstract painter of the 1930s and 1940s. Dove's small, understated abstract compositions represent the artist's effort to synthesize music, movement and the visual experience of nature. Dove's work is in the collections of major museums around the United States. However, until recently he was often dismissed as a provincial figure whose exploration of abstraction was overshadowed by the more celebrated accomplishments of Picasso, Matisse and other members of the French avant garde. In recent years, however, art historians have begun to rewrite the standard history of modern art. According to this retelling, American art only became interesting after the arrival of emigre artists in New York City at the end of the World War II. Dove's re-emergence signals a new willingness among scholars and critics

to evaluate the genuine accomplishments of an earlier generation of American artistic pioneers.

Side by side, the two exhibitions were a study in contrasts. One was very theatrical, relying on the latest in video and digital technology and drawing viewers into a physical relationship with pulsing video imagery. The other was quiet and contemplative, exploring an undervalued history and offering a celebration of that most accepted of art forms: painting. Yet more than one viewer noted how surprisingly compatible the two shows were in their ability to meld different kinds of sensory experiences.

The pairing of these shows reveals an important reality about the current U.S. art scene. This is a time of flux in which contrasting and even contradictory developments can coexist and cross fertilize. The comfortable old picture of art history as a story that unfolds in an evolutionary manner, with one movement leading logically and inexorably to the next, no longer seems to have any relevance to the so-called postmodern era in which we find ourselves. Instead, artists draw for inspiration on every period of the distant and recent past, speak to subjects as diverse as post-colonial politics, artificial intelligence and psychoanalysis, and direct their work at audiences that range from hard-core art aficionados to intrepid Web surfers to the harried traveler rushing through a train station or airport.

## THE GLOBALIZATION OF ART

The disorder in the contemporary art world is actually a mirror of the larger upheavals being experienced by society at large. The end of the Cold War, the rise of global markets and the emergence of radically new forms of electronic communication have transformed contemporary life in the United States in ways that would have been unimaginable even 10 years ago. It should be no surprise that the art world reflects this state of radical transition.

In fact, one of the most striking developments in contemporary art can be tied directly to these larger social, political and economic currents. Just as the collapse of the Cold War has focused attention on parts of the globe that were overshadowed by the monumental battle between superpowers, so also, the art world has begun to widen its geographic focus. Art professionals can no longer limit their attention to developments in the United States and Europe. Now any serious study of contemporary art must embrace artists from all over the globe. Artists, curators, critics and collectors have begun to resemble cultural nomads, constantly on the move in search of new developments.

As one consequence of the widened field of view, museums today cast a much wider geographic net than they used to. As I write this essay in New York City, an exhibition of Chinese historical and contemporary art is on view at the Guggenheim Museum. The New Museum just took down a show by a Palestinian artist based in England and put up an exhibition of the work of an artist based in Spain. The Museum of Modern Art has a show of drawings from Latin America. Meanwhile, in San Antonio, Texas, a new art foundation called ArtPace provides residencies for young artists from all over the world.

### WHAT IS AN AMERICAN ARTIST?

In this climate, questions of national identity become more and more nebulous. An issue that arises with increasing frequency is the question: What exactly is an American artist (or for that matter an Italian or Nigerian or Filipino artist)? Is an



American artist someone who was born in the United States? Is it someone with U.S. citizenship? Is it someone currently residing in the United States? What about expatriate Americans — do they still qualify?

Similar questions arise about definitions of American art. Is it a style? Or is it an attitude, a kind of training or a choice of subject matter? These issues still matter because often funding for such exhibitions is determined by one's national origin. Government agencies provide money to support the inclusion of their artists in such



international exhibitions. While some still take a strict view, others take a more liberal stance. The United States Information Agency, for example, which funds many international biennales, simply requires that artists be based in the United States.

### THE IMPACT OF ELECTRONIC MEDIA

The emergence of new electronic media reinforces these changes. This article, which you are reading in an online publication, demonstrates how the electronic highway negates national borders and connects people from opposite parts of the globe. In a similar vein, artists have begun exploring the ways that new technology can radically alter our concept of self and art. Artist Web pages help artists bypass the institutions of the art world in order to introduce their work to a new virtual audience. Many are putting their work on CD-ROMs in order to explore a new order of interactivity. Using newly available technology, they can design art works that allow viewers to follow their own paths and create their own connections and narratives. Meanwhile, museums and galleries are finding that personalized Web sites allow them to make art exhibitions available to those who cannot come to them.

As might be expected, these new developments have inspired a spirited debate within the art world as to the value and function of new technology and

new media art. Some argue that the virtual presentation of art devalues the viewer's direct contact with the object which has heretofore been the essential aspect of an art experience. Others say that it is a mistake to think of these new digital techniques as new art forms — that they simply expand our means for conveying the kinds of ideas that art has always conveyed. Yet others are dubious about the promise of new audiences. They ask, what is the depth of the Web art experience? Does art on the Web encourage a greater sense of democracy and participation, or does it merely create a new class divide, separating those with access to technology from those without in a far more decisive way than the old, so-called elitist art museums? Does Web art require a completely new understanding of aesthetics?



placed? Is a garden or a set of signs really art? Is art beginning to converge too closely with social work?

As might be expected, such radical upheavals in the definition and distribution of art are having an effect on the institutions that present it to the public. One striking recent development is the emergence of the international biennale as a primary mechanism by which artists become known internationally. Biennales are international exhibitions organized every two years in art capitals around the world on some topical theme. For people in the art world, these exhibitions are important meeting grounds where ideas are exchanged, new work is discovered and reputations consolidated.

Until recently, biennales were largely limited to locations in Europe or the United States. In the last decade, however, that has begun to change. Art organizers in far-flung art centers are organizing their own shows, luring the important curators and critics to their cities and putting themselves on the map. Often they place special emphasis on artists from the region in which the biennale takes place.

The themes adopted by such exhibitions suggest a new agenda. With titles like “Beyond Borders,” “Transculture” and “Esperanto,” they tend to stress the idea that art today transcends nationalism and national borders. And their locations suggest how truly global the art world is becoming. In 1997 alone, there were biennales in Kassel and Meunster, Germany; Venice, Italy; Lyon, France; Kwangju, South Korea; Johannesburg, South Africa; Istanbul, Turkey; Ljubljana, Slovenia; Havana, Cuba; Sofia, Bulgaria; and Montenegro and Sao Paulo, Brazil.

#### THE CHANGING NATURE OF PUBLIC ART

Questions of audience also lie behind another development in contemporary art, namely the growing interest in public art. While the Web promises to create a vast new virtual audience for art, public artists are interested in bringing art to real, localized communities. There has been a definitive change in thinking about public art from the days when it was seen primarily as a decoration or monument plopped in a public space. Contemporary public artists work in a variety of ways. Some create projects as part of “percent for art” programs, in which a percentage of the construction budget for a public or private building is set aside for art. Others are more engaged in temporary projects that take such diverse forms as billboards, artist-designed magazine sections and community projects in which artists work with members of particular communities. These neighborhood projects can range from the creation of a community garden to an art education program that gives disadvantaged children access to art and photography equipment, to a joint exploration of local history.

Again there are questions and controversies. What is the nature of the public artist's responsibility to the community in which his or her work is

#### THE EXPANDED ROLE OF THE MUSEUM

The new focus on globalism is also having its effect on museum organization. The global model is most strikingly articulated by the Guggenheim Museum which has expanded beyond its base in New York City with branches in Venice, Berlin and

Bilbao, Spain. Conceiving of the museum less as a library or archive and more as a network, Guggenheim Museum director Thomas Krens moves art and exhibitions between these international branches. He argues that too many museums keep the bulk of their collections in storage, out of sight of both casual viewers and specialists. The branch system allows him to make a far greater percentage of the museum's vast holdings available to the public.

Krens' new conception of the global museum is a response to the heightened expectations for museums at the close of the 20th century. There is ever greater pressure for museums to be responsive to their audiences. Financial pressures from donors and competition from other sources of entertainment have forced museums to be much more attentive to the cultivation of visitors. One result of this has been an elevation of the field of museum education. Once considered a peripheral activity which centered on setting up school tours of museum shows, museum education has become one of the institution's primary purposes.

Two much-celebrated, newly-inaugurated museum projects reveal the ways that museums are expanding their traditional roles. The new J. Paul Getty Center is a billion-dollar arts complex which opened late in 1997 on a hill with a majestic view of the city of Los Angeles. Though its centerpiece is a museum devoted to Greek and Roman antiquities, decorative arts and European old masters' paintings, the six-building complex includes institutes for historical research, conservation, arts and humanities information, education and arts funding. With an annual operating budget of \$189 million, it is expected to radically enhance Los Angeles' profile in the international art world.

Equally spectacular is the new Guggenheim branch in Bilbao. The spectacular building, designed by U.S. architect Frank Gehry, is being hailed as an art work in its own right. Meanwhile, the museum itself is seen as a boon and is expected to bring tourists to the region. The \$100-million construction cost and the annual operating budget have been provided by the Basque government. In turn, the Guggenheim Museum provides its extensive collection and expertise in creating educational and research programs.



What kind of art suits these volatile times? The diversity of contemporary art in the United States is suggested by the artists chosen to represent the United States for the last three Venice Biennales. In 1993, the choice was Louise Bourgeois, a French-born sculptor in her 80s whose sensuous, surrealistic sculptures evoke the human body without specifically representing it. In 1995, the choice was Viola, the video artist. And in 1997, it was painter Robert Colescott, who draws on his experience as a black man in the United States to satirize the state of race relations and the white bias inherent in conventional U.S. history.

These three artists only begin to suggest the range of media and concerns explored by contemporary U.S. artists. Painting today ranges from the hyper-realism of Chuck Close, whose gargantuan portraits are based on photographs broken into grids and recreated with a kind of finger painting; to Elizabeth Murray, whose domestic abstractions break the square of the canvas to twist and turn in an almost sculptural manner; to Robert Ryman, whose career is an ongoing meditation on the infinite variations of the white canvas.

Installation artists turn the gallery into a theatrical space. The artist team Kristen Jones and Andrew Ginzel explore the infinity of the cosmos and the cyclical nature of time with environments composed of such low tech materials as shadow puppets, dry ice and strobe light. Ann Hamilton takes on the theme of manual labor in installations in which she herself is an element, as she sits quietly in the gallery engaged in some simple, repetitive task.

Side by side with this are the works of artists exploring new media. These include Nam June Paik, the Korean-born artist who is known as "the father of video art" and who assembles televisions into comic robots; Kenneth Snelson, who has translated his atom-like sculptures into cosmic fantasies using the most advanced digital software; and Paul Garrin, who has created an interactive installation in which a very threatening virtual guard dog follows the viewer around the room.

Adding to the mix is the growing presence in American art of emigre artists whose work explores the complexity of hybrid culture and identity. For

instance, Russian expatriate artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid came to the United States in 1978 after making an underground reputation in the then Soviet Union for their witty and affectionate parodies of Soviet-sanctioned socialist realism. Now their work is likely to contain comically heroic representations of figures like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and the sturdy, upright American working man, thereby acknowledging that the idealization of history knows no geographic or ideological boundaries.

Chinese artist Xu Bing was raised in Beijing but now lives in New York. He grew up during the Cultural Revolution, a period in which books deemed counterrevolutionary were destroyed and their authors “re-educated.” His work deals with the subversive power of written language through the creation of books whose text is a nonsense hybrid of



English and Chinese. And Japanese-born artist Yukinori Yanagi, a resident of New York City, expresses the instability of borders and national identities with giant ant farms whose inhabitants gradually disrupt arrangements of colored sand patterned to replicate the flags of many nations.

As U.S. art heads into the 21st century, it becomes more and more evident how much the world of the future will differ from the world of the past. For artists, as for all of us, these are uncertain times. But uncertainty offers its own creative challenges. In the 21st century, artists may help us understand how to think and function in a world that we can now only barely imagine. ■

*Eleanor Heartney, a writer and critic for Art and America and other publications, is the author of Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads*

## ARTIST ELIZABETH MURRAY: SPEAKING TO THE PRESENT FROM THE PAST

Elizabeth Murray, best known for her large, irregular-shaped and layered canvases, is one of the most important painters currently working in the United States.

**H**er work has been described as a fusion of abstract expressionism and what one critic called the “highly sophisticated funk figuration” of the painter’s Chicago roots. Murray was born in the Illinois city and grew up there and in Michigan. She studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, receiving her bachelor of fine arts degree in 1962 and later a master’s degree from Mills College in Oakland, California.

When she arrived in New York City in the late 1960s, minimalism was a premier art form. Murray began to develop her own way of painting. At first it derived from minimalism, a reductive, geometrically-based aesthetic, but over

time it gained energy and narrative. By the end of the 1970s, she became a symbol of the reinvigoration of painting in the United States, and about a decade later was generally hailed as a leading figure of her generation.

Her works are smart, animated, and easy to recognize. She often slips ordinary objects into abstract images. Her big, colorful canvases are loaded with jazzy colors and seemingly abstract forms that are full of references to homey objects such as coffee cups, tables and human figures full of energy and vibrant disarray.

In a 1991 article in *The New York Times*, author Deborah Solomon noted that Murray’s work “recapitulates great moments in 20th-century art. Cubism’s splintered planes, Fauvism’s jazzy colors, Surrealism’s droopy biomorphic shapes, the heroic scale of Abstract Expressionism — it’s all there in a Murray painting. This isn’t to say that she ‘appropriates’ in the



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1980s manner to mock the past. Rather, she shows how past images can speak to the present.”

One of Murray’s newest works is also the largest and most ambitious of her career — a 120-foot mosaic mural that graces the mezzanine of a subway station in midtown New York City. Called *Blooming*, it is one of more than 60 artworks throughout the New York subway system. The mural depicts a richly-colored fantasy of sunbursts, coffee cups and serpentine tree branches.

Murray, 58, who has been riding the subway for more than 30 years, told New York Times writer David W. Dunlap in a May 1998 article that the mural was inspired by “workers.”

“I had this vision of people getting up really early, half in a dream state, putting on their clothes, drinking a cup of coffee and getting on the subway to go to work.”

Ultimately, her art evolves out of life. “When you walk out of the studio...down the street, that’s where you find art... Or you find it at home, right in front of you.”

Murray does not view herself as an

abstract painter. “The images in my painting all represent something. They’re not pure the way abstraction is; they’re not trying to be beautiful or eternal or higher than life. Abstraction left out too much.”

Part of Murray’s appeal, Marlina Doktorczyk-Donohue wrote in *ArtScene* in February 1997, is the fact that her work cannot be pigeonholed.

“The work is rigorously abstract, yet figuration and narrative are always looming. The formal elements possess a warm-blooded life that allows the abstract notion to enter our collective consciousness. ...If the art world can get head-heavy, Murray, like an insouciant child not noticing anyone else on the playground, creates beauty from someplace in her wild and wacky heart.”

“I paint about things that surround me,” Murray explains, “things that I pick up and handle every day. That’s what art is. Art is an epiphany in a coffee cup.”

— Charlotte Astor

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This consortium of arts institutions is recognized as a principal advocacy organization for the professional arts community. Arts Wire, a national computer-based communications network for the arts community, includes fact sheets on national support of the arts and its economic impact.

American Canvas: An Arts Legacy for Our Communities  
(<http://arts.endow.gov/Community/AmCan/Opening.html>)

A 1997 report from the National Endowment for the Arts, "American Canvas" analyzes and examines the current state of the nonprofit arts in America.

Americans for the Arts  
(<http://www.artsusa.org>)  
Formerly known as the American Council for the Arts, Americans for the Arts "is dedicated to advancing the arts and culture in communities across the United States by working with cultural organizations, arts and business leaders and patrons to provide leadership advocacy, visibility, professional development and research, and information."

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One of a series of guides that provides a central access point for value-added topical guides that identify, describe and evaluate Internet-based information.

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National Endowment for the Arts  
(<http://arts.endow.gov>)

The NEA's mission is to "foster the excellence, diversity and vitality of the arts in the United States, and to broaden public access to the arts." In addition to detailed information on grants and regulations, the site provides information about international activities, showcases U.S. arts abroad, and provides contact information and links to arts service organizations, state arts agencies, and regional arts organizations.

Smithsonian Institution  
(<http://www.si.edu/newstart.htm>)

The Smithsonian is composed of "sixteen museums and galleries and the National Zoo and numerous research facilities in the United States and abroad." Links to the National Museum of American Art, the Renwick Gallery, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the National Portrait Gallery, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum are contained on this site, as well as links to research centers such as the Archives of American Art and the Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies.

World Wide Arts Resources  
(<http://wwar.com/>)

A large, comprehensive gateway to the arts on the Internet with detailed sections on the visual arts, including indexes to artists, galleries, museums, publications, arts agencies and schools. Film, literature, theater, and dance links are provided as well.

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"On June 1, 1998, PBS Online launches an exhaustive Web resource devoted to independent filmmakers, producers and Web site producers. Seeking to highlight the work of independent artists, PBS will showcase at least one independent film production on the site each month . . . Finally, there will be a host of other electronic resources, including numerous links to other independent film organizations and festivals."

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The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers is a membership association of composers, songwriters, lyricists and music publishers, which protects "the rights of its members by licensing and paying royalties. . . ." The Resource Guide includes links to reference books, newsletters and organizations related to music business issues. A searchable database with information on all compositions in the ASCAP repertory called ACE on the Web (<http://www.ascap.com/ace/ACE.html>) is also available.

Berklee College of Music  
(<http://www.berklee.edu/>)  
Founded in 1945, the Berklee College of Music is a large independent music college, which specializes in the study of contemporary music. A brief biography of Gary Burton, Berklee's Executive Vice President is included.  
([http://www.berklee.edu/html/ab\\_exec.html#burton](http://www.berklee.edu/html/ab_exec.html#burton))

bmi.com songwriter's toolbox  
(<http://www.bmi.com/toolbox/>)  
Broadcast Music Inc., a not-for-profit organization representing composers and music publishers, collects and distributes royalties. The toolbox provides information for songwriters about performing rights, music publishing, copyright and the business of songwriting. The site also includes a searchable database of song titles licensed by BMI.

The Classical Hotsheet  
(<http://www.sirius.com/~arts/links.html>)  
These selected links from classical music resources on the Web cover composers, musicians, vocalists, conductors, orchestras and other groups, instruments, opera, academic programs and masterworks of all periods. Audio files in MIDI formats are also available.

Duckworth, William. *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1995.

Feather, Leonard. *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Jazz*. Revised and enlarged. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. (Forthcoming)

Festival Finder  
(<http://www.festivalfinder.com/>)  
Provides details on more than 1,300 music festivals in North America, including the annual "Bang on a Can" music festival in New York.  
(<http://www.festivalfinder.com/cgi-bin/viewer?555>)

Gary Burton Discography  
(<http://www.mediapolis.com/ecm/artists/440.html>)

Gann, Kyle. *American Music in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1997.

Hitchcock, H. Wiley and Sadie, Stanley, eds. *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*. 4 vols. New York: Grove's Dictionaries of Music, 1986. (Reprinted 1992)

Jackson, John A. *American Bandstand: Dick Clark and the Making of a Rock 'n' Roll Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

#### JCS: The History of Jazz

(<http://www.jazzcentralstation.com/jcs/station/newstan/history/index.html>)

Author Dan Morgenstern, a professor and former editor-in-chief of *Downbeat* and *Metronome* magazines, wrote this electronic text. It begins with "The Jazz Story, An Outline History of Jazz," which provides an overview, followed by "The Roots," "Birth of the Blues," "Brass Bands and Ragtime," "The Coming of Swing" and so forth. Recommended recordings and books.

#### "John Adams: American of Our Time."

(<http://www.azstarnet.com/public/packages/reelbook/153-3982.htm>)

Profile of John Adams from *The Timid Soul's Guide to Classical Music*.

Kernfeld, Barry, ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. (Reprinted 1994)

*Musical America: International Directory of the Performing Arts*, 1998. New York: K-III Directory, 1998.

#### National Symphony Orchestra

(<http://www.kennedy-center.org/nso/>)

Based at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, the orchestra features the standard and 20th-century orchestral and operatic repertoires with generous representation of American music. A biographical sketch of conductor Leonard Slatkin is included. (<http://www.kennedy-center.org/nso/slatkin.html>)

#### OPERA America

(<http://www.operaam.org/>)

"OPERA America serves and strengthens the field of opera by providing a variety of informational, technical, and administrative resources to the greater opera community."

Rich, Alan. *American Pioneers: Ives to Cage and Beyond*. London: Phaidon, 1995.

#### San Francisco Symphony

(<http://www.sfsymphony.org/>)

This site highlights the artistic, community and organizational goals of the San Francisco Symphony. Music director Michael Tilson Thomas is profiled.

(<http://www.sfsymphony.org/hframestaff.htm>).

Schwarz, K. Robert. *Minimalists*. London: Phaidon, 1996.

Slonimsky, Nicolas. *Music Since 1900*. 5th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1994.

Thomas, Michael Tilson. *Viva Voce: Conversations with Edward Seckerson*. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.

Tommasini, Anthony. *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle*. New York: Norton, 1997.

Williams, Martin. *The Jazz Tradition*. 2d rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

#### "A Winning Composer."

The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer

([http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june98/kernis\\_4-22.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june98/kernis_4-22.html))

A conversation with composer Aaron Jay Kernis. Transcript, April 22, 1998.

### MUSIC/AUDIO SITES

All of the sites below contain audio files. Most also provide access to software necessary to listen to the files on a computer.

#### Biograph

(<http://www.biograph.com/>)

A renowned label for classic American jazz, ragtime, blues and period recordings.

#### Blue Note Jukebox

(<http://www.bluenote.com/jukebox.html>)

The Blue Note Jukebox uses Real Audio Streaming Technology and Xing Technologies' StreamWorks Server. It provides "REAL-TIME audio of some of the world's greatest jazz music."

#### CDnow

(<http://www.cdnow.com/>)

A major commercial site that sells an extraordinary variety of music via the Internet. The site features a variety of special collections. For instance, June readers can examine a special feature offering both music and film (on video) of Frank Sinatra. Also provides audio clips from a number of albums.

#### Decca-Nashville

(<http://www.decca-nashville.com/>)

Decca-Nashville is a good source for country and western music.

Polygram

(<http://www.polygram.com/>)

A rich and varied site featuring a variety of U.S. and international labels with jazz, classical and various alternative sounds.

Telarc International

(<http://www.telarc.com/>)

"Telarc International is a Grammy award-winning independent record label based in Cleveland, Ohio. Our catalog includes classical, crossover, jazz and blues releases, which you can sample on this site. We offer over 6,000 Real Audio clips, each of which you can listen to in a continuous stream."

## THEATER

Bordman, Gerald M. *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*. 2d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

East West Players

(<http://www.eastwestplayers.com/>)

The East West Players, which recently opened a new theater in Los Angeles, is the nation's first and foremost Asia Pacific American Theater.

Mamet, David. *3 Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Secrest, Meryle. *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*. New York: Knopf, 1998.

theatre-link.com

(<http://www.theatre-link.com/>)

Formerly called "Scott's Theatre Links," this site is organized around the following topics: Academic Programs, Broadway and West End, Casting and Contract Services, Goods and Services, News and Information, Shakespeare, Shows and Performances, Theaters and Venues, Groups and Organizations, and other theater-related resources.

Theatre Communications Group (TCG)

(<http://www.tcg.org>)

Since 1961 TCG, the national organization for American theater, has provided a national forum and communications network for all the companies and individual artists that comprise our national theater. TCG's chief programs include grants, fellowships and awards to theater artists and institutions; conferences, workshops and roundtables;

government affairs; surveys and research; a national arts employment bulletin; and publications, such as the annual Theatre Directory.

Wilmeth, Don B. and Bigsby, Christopher, eds.

*Cambridge History of the American Theatre: Beginnings to 1870*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. This is the first volume of a planned three-volume set.

Wilmeth, Don B. and Miller, Tice L., eds. *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Reprinted in 1996.

## DANCE

Acocella, Joan Ross. *Mark Morris*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993.

Anderson, Jack. *Art Without Boundaries: The World of Modern Dance*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997.

Carr, C. *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.

Dance Resources at World Wide Arts Resources

(<http://wwar.com/dance/index.html>)

From academic resources to therapy resources, this comprehensive site includes thousands of dance related resources.

Dance/USA

(<http://www.danceusa.org/>)

This national service organization for not-for-profit professional dance "seeks to advance the art form of dance by addressing the needs, concerns, and interests of professional dance."

DeMille, Agnes. *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*. New York: Random House, 1991.

Dunning, Jennifer. *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996.

Easton, Carol. *No Intermissions: The Life of Agnes de Mille*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1996.

Graham, Martha. *Blood Memory*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Jones, Bill T. *Last Night on Earth*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995.

Mark Morris Dance Group  
(<http://www.mmdg.org/>)  
The latest touring schedule, news and booking information about the Mark Morris Dance Group are highlighted here.

Vaughan, David. *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*. New York: Aperture, 1996.

## VISUAL ARTS

Alternating Currents: American Art in the Age of Technology  
(<http://www.sjmusart.org/AlternatingCurrents/>)  
A joint production of the San Jose Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, this site examines the interplay of technological advances and American art over the past 30 years.

*American Art Directory*, 1997-98. New York: Bowker, 1997.

Art in Context: Elizabeth Murray  
(<http://www.artincontext.com/listings/pages/artist/0/2kkq5x00/menu.htm>)  
Provides information on galleries, dealers, museums and recent exhibits. A biographical sketch on this artist and an exhibition schedule are available on the PaceWildenstein gallery site.  
(<http://www.pacewildenstein.com/murray>).

Art Museum Network — Index  
(<http://www.excalendar.net/amn/amn.home.asp>)  
Includes exCalendar.net (<http://www.excalendar.net/>), the official exhibition calendar of some of the world's leading museums; AMICO.net (<http://www.amico.net/>), the Web site of the Art Museum Image Consortium; and the Association of Art Museum Directors (<http://www.aamd.net/>) site.

Danto, Arthur Coleman. *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*. New York: Noonday Press, 1995.

Felshin, Nina, ed. *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995.

Fineberg, Jonathan D. *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*. New York: Abrams, 1995.

Gaze, Delia, ed. *Dictionary of Women Artists*. 2 vols. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997.

Guggenheim Museum  
(<http://www.guggenheim.org/>)  
This site encompasses "the activities of the four affiliated museums that make the Guggenheim a truly international institution," including the new Guggenheim Museum Bilbao  
(<http://www.guggenheim.org/bilbao.html>).

Heartney, Eleanor. *Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Hughes, Robert. *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*. New York: Knopf, 1997.

Los Angeles Times Special Report: The Getty Center  
(<http://www.latimes.com/HOME/ENT/ART/GETTY/contents.htm>)  
A series of over 30 articles tracing the evolution, development and completion of the new Getty Center.

Museums Index — USA  
(<http://wwar.com/museums/index.html>)  
Part of the World Wide Arts Resources site, the USA Museums Index contains links to numerous online museums. It is searchable by region, type of collection, and keyword.

Sandler, Irving. *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996

Whitney Museum of American Art  
(<http://www.echonyc.com/~whitney/>)  
See especially the "art on the web" page, which offers "a link to other museum sites, where some of the most interesting online delivery of museum content is occurring. . . ."  
(<http://www.echonyc.com/~whitney/weblinks/main.html>)



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