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The Artist as Observer: A Biography of Robert Gwathmey

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The Artist As Observer:
A Biography Of Robert Gwathmey

Michael Kammen. *Robert Gwathmey: The Life and Art of a Passionate Observer*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999. 240 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$49.95 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

Robert Gwathmey (1903-88), like many twentieth-century American artists, enjoyed considerable success during his lifetime yet did not make it into art history survey texts or attract the attention of many scholars of American art after his death. Michael Kammen's biography of the artist promises, therefore, not only to provide valuable information about the artist and his work, but also to help explain why Gwathmey has suffered such art historical neglect. Kammen's intentions are twofold: "to understand and explain the intimate relationship between Gwathmey's life and his art" and "to develop and give voice to Gwathmey's aesthetic values, and especially the transformative way that he responded to certain artistic influences" (pp. 6-7). Kammen wants, in particular, to supplement the existing literature on Gwathmey, which focuses on his southern roots and themes, with greater attention to the influences of European artists, in particular Honoré Daumier (1808-79) and Jean-François Millet (1814-75).

Kammen draws on a wide range of sources—historical, art historical, literary—as he attempts to piece together the artist's life. His efforts are made more difficult by a factor he describes at the beginning of his introduction: "We know from the men and women who were closest to him that Robert Gwathmey, despite being delightfully charming and loquacious—a captivating raconteur—customarily remained reticent about his own art. He simply would not talk about it—certainly not about particular paintings and their composition and meanings" (p. 3). Gwathmey, it appears, shared the belief of many artists that his paintings "spoke for themselves." To describe them in words would be either superfluous or misleading. Kammen was forced to rely heavily, therefore, on three in-depth interviews conducted with Gwathmey in 1966, 1967, and 1968 for the artist's views on his own work. Fortunately, he had access to several individuals who were close to Gwathmey throughout much of his life, notably his widow, Rosalie Hook Gwathmey, his son Charles **[End Page 410]** Gwathmey, the art historian Milton W. Brown, and the art dealer Terry Dintenfuss.

Kammen turns first to Gwathmey's youth in Richmond, Virginia, and begins to weave together a series of events and locations that would serve as sources for the artist's mature style and subject matter—the steam locomotive (his father was a railroad engineer and died when his locomotive exploded eight months before his son was born), the brightly colored store signs and posters, the speeches of Socialist Norman Thomas, the flat land and wide roads that made objects appear in sharp silhouettes. These influences lay dormant during his years as a student in the late 1920s at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, where he attended classes taught by George Harding, Daniel Garber, and Franklin C. Watkins. They only emerged at the end of the following decade, when, two years after leaving his job teaching art at Beaver College in Glenside, Pennsylvania in 1937, and a year after he had destroyed most of his earlier work because he felt it was too derivative, he received a federal commission to paint a mural for the Eutaw, Alabama, post office. The painting, *The Countryside*, completed in 1941, shows two white men, a white woman, and two black men working together in a field and marked the beginning of Gwathmey's focus on the South and on the lives of the rural poor, both black and white.

In the early 1940s Gwathmey's work began to attract the attention of museum curators and art critics. He moved to New York City in 1942 and began teaching at the Cooper Union School of Art, where he remained until 1968. He was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1944...

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