



AMERICAN ART: A NARRATIVE &
CRITICAL CATALOGUE

by E.P. Richardson

[Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco]

THREE CENTURIES OF AMERICAN
PAINTING

by F. Lanier Graham

[M.H. de Young Memorial Museum and
California Palace of the Legion of Honor]

Ware R. Smith

AMERICAN ART IS TENACIOUSLY beginning to make a place for itself in the minds and imaginations of the outside world and—more slowly it seems—of Americans. For years, American literature, American painting, and American culture in general have been the stepchildren of the humanities, both in universities and out, despite an eager and growing audience. Even in the Bicentennial the University of California has no chair in American art history. In academic institutions American culture are, ironically,

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'Railroad in Spring,' both paintings done in the Thirties. Nothing is made of the pathos of poverty displayed in the still life paintings of John Peto. (I find Richardson's remark on the lush richness of 'Harnett's peculiar, haunting poetry' misplaced and his evaluation of Peto's tragic and harsh subject matter as 'gentle and unworldly' as dead wrong.) Yet the catalog is elegant, clear, and relatively inexpensive; and the paintings, although displaying no fresh forces in American art, are well chosen and present an overview of much of major American art until this century.

While Richardson is not serious, we can find a deeper intention in the companion catalog to the deYoung Collection, *Three Centuries of American Painting* by F. Lanier Graham. This is a good critical introduction to the scope of American painting. No short book is as filled with such a generous and sane perspective on American painting. Graham is constantly pushing us to re-see the paintings and to enlarge our view of their implications. Instead of treating an unmanageable series of individual painters, he holds our attention by focusing on themes: Portraits, Genre, Still Life, and Landscape. Interwoven with these are discussions of the interactions of various artists, the interrelationships of American artists and European art movements, and most importantly for our purposes, repeated discussion of the specific qualities one could label 'American.' For instance, he notes that in American art, 'There is a special fixation on the figure which is focused with such intensity that it usually is separated from its environment' and such figures are usually 'frozen in a moment of balance' and 'isolated from their surroundings.' Artistic advances in America are 'primarily of subject matter rather than form.' And we can have a fresh view of our landscape if we recover the feeling that the early 'American saw himself like Adam in the landscape of Eden.'

At times, Graham does press too hard. Charles Willson Peale did not give his allegiance to painting for its own sake, rather, one area of interest in the history of the other. The painting did not exist in a vacuum. Bingham and the