
Richard Megraw's compelling new history, Confronting Modernity: Art and Society in Louisiana, transports us back not so much to another time, as to another universe—one animated by a conviction that the federal government should serve as the primary patron of art and make it accessible to every citizen. Even as we witness the government once again taking on an activist mantle, it is still difficult to imagine a staunch federal commitment to employ starving artists or, perhaps more significantly, to bolster support for a modernizing agenda by spreading a modernist aesthetic. And yet the latter, according to Megraw, is precisely what New Deal art programs, by design, did. In Louisiana, however, artists, like politicians, responded warily, as the systemizing thrust of the New Deal spelled trouble for aesthetic localism just as it did for political localism. The New Deal endangered the localized crafts of Louisiana artists, individuals predisposed to see the subject of their art—their state and its most important city, New Orleans—as exceptional.

Megraw focuses his lens on the responses of two Louisiana artists who spent the bulk of their careers in New Orleans. Though stylistically and temperamentally different, both men struggled to defend their own brand of aesthetic localism against the threat posed by the New Deal. From 1894 to 1931, Ellsworth Woodward devoted himself to his pottery enterprise at Newcomb College in New Orleans. As he trained young ladies to become potters, Woodward pursued his two passions—producing beautiful domestic objects that refined personal tastes and honoring the role of environment in artistic creativity. The arrival of several New Deal art programs in Louisiana spoiled both. The Public Works of Art Program (PWAP), for which Woodward himself served as director beginning in 1933, demanded that its participating artists obey the tenets of American Scene painting. American Scene painters captured the moment and the people as they were, a reality-based approach intended to appeal to the masses. The PWAP thus imposed a national style that ignored the influence of place. It was also a style that was thoroughly modernist, "confronting reality directly and elevating the vulgar and vernacular to worthy subjects of artistic exploration." (p. 49) By the time the PWAP closed in 1934, Woodward had become disillusioned, anxious over the future of local art rooted in the genteel. Other New Deal artistic endeavors that came quickly on the heels of PWAP—such as the iconic post office murals of the Treasury Section and the standardized prints of the Federal Art Project—only further undermined his vision. There was no way to meet national demand, or to tell a national
story of suffering and eventual triumph, without violating the very aesthetic principles he held dear.

Lyle Saxon was not a painter but a writer, the famed literary voice of twenties and thirties Louisiana or, as he liked to say, a man "internationally known locally." Like Woodward, Saxon was a committed localist, determined to use his art to preserve the distinctive character of Louisiana and of two of its locales in particular—Cane River country near Natchitoches and the French Quarter in New Orleans. Unlike Woodward, however, Saxon rejected genteel Victorianism and any role it might play in artistic creativity. Saxon was, instead, a "reluctant modernist" who was compelled by the real, the uncertain, the heterogeneous, the fluid—all of which he found in abundance in the French Quarter, especially. (p. 158) But he shared Woodward's disdain for the forces of modernization, which threatened assimilation into a national ideal. As head of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) in Louisiana, Saxon oversaw the production of the Louisiana and New Orleans guides, intended to be the definitive literary portraits of the state and city. A quasi-modernist, he hoped to show-case them as multi-faceted and exotic. As the guides took their place alongside others published by the FWP, however, cultural diversity emerged not as the exception, but as the rule, "contributing vital clues to the ongoing effort not to preserve local integrity but to define national identity." (p. 196) His work with Farm Security Administration (FSA) photography projects in Louisiana had similar consequences. Confident that FSA photo-graphs would reveal the uniqueness of Louisiana and, thus, the necessity of cultural preservation, Saxon instead saw his home state become universalized. His affinity for an aesthetic localism with a modernist twist, in short, crumbled under the New Deal's centripetal force.

There is little with which to quibble in this book. Megraw's narrative style is lively and lucid. Indeed, the introduction, in which he takes on modernization, modernity, and modernism, shines as an example of how to define inherently slippery concepts without either losing their complexity or bogging down in a morass of indecipherable jargon. His research is prodigious. And his argument is convincing: art mattered in New Deal Louisiana, bringing to the surface a clash of values over what qualified as artistic, what merited precious federal resources, and what, ultimately, art should do in a battered society. All in all, this is a great book.