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Review of: Eric Storm, *The Culture of Regionalism: Art, Architecture and International Exhibitions in France, Germany and Spain, 1890-1939*

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Storm, Eric. *The Culture of Regionalism: Art, Architecture and International Exhibitions in France, Germany and Spain, 1890-1939*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010. xi, 319 pp. [8] p. of plates : ill. (some col.).

Fascism certainly ruined a lot of folklore for future generations. What may have once been art was now camp. But Eric Storm's important book now rescues us from the stranglehold of fascism by showing us how European cultures of regionalism were thoroughly *modern* constructions meant to compete with official culture during the period roughly spanning 1890-1945. Storm's work is an ambitious study of regionalism in France, Germany, and Spain via the media of painting, architecture, and exhibitions, and it is through his comparative explorations that he tells us a great deal about nationalism and cultural creation in this period.

Instead of viewing regionalism as something that was subsumed by the construction of national identities, he argues that "[r]egional identities . . . were more precisely defined or even invented after 1890 when the corresponding national identity had already largely crystallised" (6). Regionalist cultures remained "organically connected to the broader fatherland" and they really represented "a new phase in the nation-building process as most 'new' regional identities supplemented the existing national identities by vastly broadening the national heritage and by providing it with local roots" (10). He also argues that regionalist culture was innovative, international in scope, and--most compellingly--that it vied with *avant-garde* culture as the most competitive alternative to official culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For the purposes of this review and for the book itself, it is important to note that Storm sees "regionalism" as a neutral term describing a "movement that promoted the study, construction and reinforcement of regional identity" (6). This definition is in contrast to what scholars might call "regional nationalism," which was a political and cultural call for regional autonomy or independence, as seen in places like the Basque Country or Catalonia. This distinction is necessary because regional nationalists tended to reject the regionalist cultural movements discussed in this book.

Storm's work covers painting, architecture, and international/national exhibitions. He examines the ideological suppositions behind French, German, and Spanish regional artists' works, as well as critics' responses to these works. France took the lead in regionalist painting, whereas the Germans accelerated the

trend toward regionalist architecture, and the Spanish toward regionalist exhibitions.

Generally, regionalist painters appropriated the impressionists' artistic techniques, but instead of choosing an impressionist picturesque tableau, the regionalists sought to depict "quite unimpressive, flat landscapes of coastal planes and arid plateaux" (think Castile) and peopled their canvasses with "clearly identifiable types . . . dressed in the traditional costume of a specific village . . ." (27). The regionalist painters chose to paint regions that they deemed "most typical" (67) of their nation and which seemed least touched by foreign influence, such as Brittany and Castile. The painters of these regions believed that by capturing the essence of these harsh landscapes and their inhabitants, they could "reveal the most profound character of the nation as a whole" (68). Storm provides an intriguing analysis of regionalist artists' contributions to artistic modernism when he states that regional artists "were taken seriously by [their] opponents . . . as an almost completely forgotten negative impetus to twentieth-century avant-garde movements" (66). On a weaker note, while Storm makes a good case for Ignacio Zuloaga's role in developing Castile as the focus of regionalist painting in Spain, the other important regionalist painter, Joaquín Sorolla, is mostly ignored in the narrative.

Turning to architecture, Storm traces the development of regionalist styles and ideology in the early twentieth century. Influenced by the British Arts and Craft movement, German architects--followed closely thereafter by the French and Spanish--rejected both "historicist" and urban architecture in favor of an organic one that took as its inspiration the on-site materials of a particular (rural) region--e.g., local trees, stones--and the climatic conditions of said region. Although regionalist architects might have been hampered by the choices their wealthy clients made, they still strove to make houses that adhered to these organic conditions, building dwellings that were more function than facade, and using local artisans to complete the projects. These country houses would then be retreats for the urban bourgeoisie who needed calming from the disorienting effects of the modern city. For the proletariat who could not escape the confines of the city, regional architects began to build "garden cities" in various regional styles in the hopes of domesticating the increasingly politicized workers by providing them with cheap, clean, well-ventilated dwellings. All of these regional architectural styles were meant to contribute to the general *Volksgeist* of the nation, but "in many cases a more dogmatic regionalism was soon diluted to a more generic identification with the countryside . . ." (185). After World War One, France and Germany faced housing shortages, and regional, artisanal housing priced itself out of the market.

The final section of the book concentrates on the representation of region and nation in the international exhibitions in Barcelona and Seville (1929) and Paris (1937), and the national exhibitions in Munich (1934) and Düsseldorf (1937). In all of these exhibitions, architects constructed a medley of “regional” areas that were meant to represent their respective nations as a whole. By this time, however, as Storm notes, “these immense shows were partially meant to revive regionalism, [but] in the end they would only confirm its inevitable decline” (195). In the end, these architectural regional-nations writ small would not serve to revive the nationalist impulse, but to sell tickets to tourists (the Poble Espanyol in Barcelona comes to mind) or to simulate regional architecture in suburban housing.

There is much more to say--but little space--about this fascinating book. The book leaves one with questions that cannot be settled here, but that might be worth looking into in the future. Since, as Storm has argued, regional painting and architecture were created in Europe as gateways to reinforcing national identity, and since regionalism represented a stage in a long process of creating national identity, did emerging regional nationalisms like those emanating from Catalonia, the Basque Country, or Galicia require different cultural idioms to express their more separatist agendas? In other words, did Catalan or Basque nationalism have to be expressed linguistically, through poetry and prose only, in order to express differences from the nation-state at large? How do places with strong regional identities like those found in Spain, recover or recreate regional cultural identities that became kitschified by fascism’s cultural manipulations? Is regional culture really possible in an increasingly interconnected world?

Eric Storm has provided us with a window into European nationalism and regionalism at the turn of the twentieth century, and his book will be most valuable to cultural historians and historians of nationalism, no matter which nation they study.

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