

BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

**“AMBASSADORS OF GOOD WILL”:
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART’S *THREE CENTURIES OF AMERICAN ART*
IN 1930S EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES**

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the powerful role that museums played in constructing national art-historical narratives during the 1930s. By concentrating on *Three Centuries of American Art*—the 1938 exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) for viewing in Paris—I argue that the intertwining of art, political diplomacy, and canon formation uncovered by an analysis of the exhibition reveals American art’s unique role in supporting shared 1930s cultural ideologies. MoMA’s curators created the most comprehensive exhibition to date of the history of American art with works from 1590 through 1938, and with over five hundred architectural models, drawings, films, paintings, photographs, prints, sculptures, and vernacular artworks. With World War II on the horizon, these artworks took on new meaning as the embodiment of the United States.

Adding complexity to notions of display, five chapters trace in chronological order how curators, politicians, journalists and art critics reimagined American art in the display, canonization, and reception of *Three Centuries of American Art*. Chapter 1 gives a synopsis of the exhibition, places it within the larger discourse of American art

exhibitions in Paris, and documents how American and French relations developed during this pivotal time. Chapter 2 explores the different meanings ascribed to the artworks during loan negotiations and maps the works' transportation to Paris. Chapter 3 elaborates on the notion of a unified American art in the 1930s by examining the histories of art created by each of MoMA's departments. Chapter 4 offers the first substantive historiography of 1930s publications that examined American art across media to determine instances when MoMA curators echoed prior histories and when they deviated from them at a moment when scholars disputed the merit of such disciplinary histories. Chapter 5 grapples with the means by which audiences first learned about *Three Centuries of American Art* and unearths what American and international critics wrote about the exhibition. In sum, *Three Centuries of American Art* provides a model to understand how MoMA curators inserted their histories of American art into the emerging art historical discourse and how government agencies invested them with political meaning during the critical interwar period.