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**ROW 1 LEFT TO RIGHT**

Roland Garros

Emile Durant

Ferdinand Ferber

**ROW 2 LEFT TO RIGHT**

Maurice Rimbaud

Louis Bleriot

F.T. Marinetti

**ROW 3 LEFT TO RIGHT**

Alberto Santos-Dumont

Henri Farman

Gabriele D'Annunzio

All images from "A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1908-1918"

**MODERNIST VISIONS**

Introduction to the History of Technology

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**BOOK REVIEW**

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November 21, 2006

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*Thomas P. Hughes; American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870-1970*

**Robert Wohl; A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1908-1918**

## Modernist Visions

I looked to American Genesis, Thomas P. Hughes' account of America's boom century of technological innovation, to do the job of any survey worth its salt. As an artist taking an excursion to Hughes' world of order, systems and control, I had major gaps to fill between Menlo Park, the Model T, and the Manhattan Project. I was focused on absorbing a large amount of new information. Which is why, when Hughes took a chapter to praise the European avant-garde for being the first group to understand the cultural implications of America's technologies, I took a bit of a breather. Of course, I was interested in the way the players that I knew from my own field fit into the story. But I was not doing my closest reading about Picabia or Duchamp. I was preserving my energy for the forthcoming tale of enriching uranium and building the atomic bomb.

This essay affords the opportunity to go back to Hughes' chapter on America's (alleged) artistic myopia to see how the author used his sources to construct his argument. I will follow that analysis with a look at the treatment of the European avant-garde in A Passion for Wings, Robert Wohl's cultural history of aviation. Wohl's book and his use of sources provide an apt counterpoint to Hughes' work.

It should first be stated that Hughes is writing a history of American inventors, industrial scientists, engineers and system builders. His book is by no means a history of art, and on the whole, should not be judged as one. Art, primarily painting, appears in one section of one chapter. And the topic is addressed to serve the author's thesis about America's inability to perceive its accomplishments in technology and invention. However, despite its supporting role in the book, the section on visual art provides an interesting example of the way Hughes researched and assembled his narrative.

Within the space of about thirty pages, the author touches on Dada, Futurism and New Objectivity. He then traces the way artists like Duchamp and Picabia turned the attention of American artists to the aesthetics of American industry. Painters like Joseph Stella, Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler mixed with the Europeans at salons and exhibitions in New York. According to Hughes, this is how new movements in American art were born.

As is to be expected in a survey such as Hughes', the sources are almost exclusively secondary. Each of the handful quotes from the artists is taken from scholarly texts. It appears that with the exception one Marinetti quote pulled from a book on the founding of Futurism, the author derives the rest of his information on that movement from the catalog of a single exhibition. The curator, Pontus Hulten is also the source of the bulk of author's information on Picabia. It seems that a few exhibition catalogs comprise much of the research done on those artists.

The architectural theorist Stanislaus Von Moos, who is cited in Hughes' section on LeCorbusier and Gropius, provides much of the author's insight on Marcel Duchamp. Specifically, Hughes relies on Von Moos for his discussion of readymade sculpture. In one sentence, Hughes reduces the ambiguities and complexities of the readymade to artists' desire to highlight the way America was defined by its systems of mass production. (334) I was curious what kind of authority Stanislaus Von Moos was on Duchamp's work, so I contacted Helen Molesworth, a Duchamp scholar and the curator of Harvard's Fogg Art Museum. Her response to my inquiry came in five telling words: "never heard of him."

With that bit of pointed criticism, I should point out that Hughes has not been completely remiss in his work on the avant-garde. A quote that suggests the heading for Hughes' chapter, "The Second Discovery of America," is taken from the work of Calvin Tomkins an art

writer, journalist and expert on the twentieth century avant-garde. In Tomkins' The World of Marcel Duchamp, Marius De Zaya, a Mexican critic, gallerist and caricaturist is quoted as follows, "Of all those who have come to conquer America, Picabia is the only one who has done as did Cortez: he has burned his ship behind him." (331.)

Unlike Hughes, who uses creative culture as one small part of his thesis, Robert Wohl's book, A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1908-1918 deals exclusively with the inextricable link between modern culture and aviation. In his introduction, Wohl specifically cites that relationship as being a leitmotif of the book. Because Wohl's thesis is focused on culture and because he is addressing a decade, rather than a century, he has the luxury of unpacking his argument with a great deal more leisure than Hughes. As such A Passion for Wings differs dramatically from American Genesis in its style of relaying information and in its use of sources.

Wohl's book is chock full of primary sources. Even as he introduces his argument about Western culture's captivation with flight, he cites the forms in which people expressed their fascination. Documents "ranged from newspaper articles, illustrated magazines, books, photographs, postcards, and newsreels that reached a mass public to poems, novels, short stories, drawings, and paintings that were directed towards small coteries who identified themselves with the modernist avant-garde." (2) Indeed, it seems that Wohl is acquainted with most of them.

Perhaps the book's most significant firsthand accounts of the early days of aviation are the hundreds of photographs that Wohl included. He explains that flight lent itself to visual representation (3) and that the airplanes themselves were considered aesthetic objects. Almost every page has multiple photographs, art reproductions or illustrations. It is from

Wohl's book that I pulled the portraits of the nine mustachioed characters on the cover of this report.

Along with giving the reader a great deal to look at as the history unfolds, Wohl manages to convey a sense of the work of several poets and novelists who were profoundly influenced by flight. Excerpts and thorough descriptions of the writing of authors like H.G. Wells, Kafka, Rostand and D'Annunzio find their way into chapters on poetry, war and death.

"Painters Take Flight" Wohl's quasi-counterpart to the Hughes chapter discussed above, offers in depth analyses of Futurism, Constructivism, Suprematism and significant biographies of artists like Malevich and Delaunay. Each of those movements and artists had a particular relationship to movement, speed, flight and visual dynamism. Wohl makes the connection between the age of flight and its impact on their work abundantly clear.

Finally, it is important to comment on the notes section of Wohl's book. It practically comprises a work unto itself. In the notes for the chapter on visual art, almost every citation offers multiple sources for the argument being made and many include quotes from the artists themselves. For example, after a remark in the text on Malevich's conviction that technology was driven by emotion and not simply utility, the reader is directed to a notation which includes the following quote, "The aeroplane has appeared, not on account of the socio-economic conditions being an expedient cause, but only because the sensation of speed and movement looked for an outlet and in the end took the form of an aeroplane." It is impressive that Wohl has gathered so much material that content so integral to his argument finds room only in the endnotes.

Both Wohl and Hughes deliver quantities of information that border on overload. However, the structure of their works and the types of histories that they are writing make for a

dramatically different approach to constructing their arguments. It is ironic that Wohl's book about a passion for speed unfolds with great care at a pace that feels decidedly patient. And Hughes book about order and control races along in a way that can practically be described as manic. These varying levels of detail and scope are made eminently apparent when the sources of each book are mined for further meaning.