

androcentric character of established—or what she calls “legalistic”—Islam. In many ways, however, she finds the 1400-year-old faith no more inherently misogynous than other religions that originated in the Middle East, including Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Ahmed’s argument, too, has its apologetic tone—perhaps because, like her predecessors, she believes she is writing for an unsympathetic Western audience. All the same, she makes a strong case that there has always been a powerful ethical and spiritual strain within the faith that affirms the fundamental equality of the sexes. Some 2,210 *hadith* (traditional accounts of the Muhammad’s deeds) are attributed to Aisha, the Prophet’s favorite wife, and many cast women in a favorable light. Among such sects as the Qarmatians (a branch of Shiism) and the mystical Sufis, there have been articulate leaders, men and women, who believed that women were even superior to men.

How this strain became marginalized is a tale of realpolitik: The early Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1250) caliphates, to establish control and order throughout their growing empires, had to lay down the law in all areas of life. This required giving fixed interpretations of Muhammad’s teachings, including social and political ordinances that might have been nothing more than temporal expediencies in the time of the Prophet and his early successors. By the 10th century, arrangements deemed correct by any one of the four Sunni schools of law—arrangements that consolidated the inferior status of women—assumed the standing of divine law.

Ahmed has no good words for 19th- and early 20th-century Western colonizers who encouraged the unveiling of Muslim women. Their concern was more to Westernize than to liberate—and to Westernize only a small segment of the local elite that helped to manage the colonies. Moreover, many who advocated unveiling in the colonies were fiercely antifeminist in their native countries. (Lord Cromer, the British consul general in Egypt, criticized the degradation of women under Islam, but back in England he was a founding member of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage.) And despite their rhetoric of liberation in the colonies, European administrators often championed policies, including restrictions on gov-

ernment schools, that effectively blocked the advancement of Muslim women.

The only real solution to sexual inequality in the Islamic world lies within the Islamic tradition, Ahmed maintains. If her hope begs a large question—why *hasn’t* Islam’s egalitarian spiritual strain ever found effective political expression?—it poses a challenge to Muslim leaders who may listen.

### Arts & Letters

**AMERICAN GENRE PAINTING: The Politics of Everyday Life.** By Elizabeth Johns. Yale. 250 pp. \$40

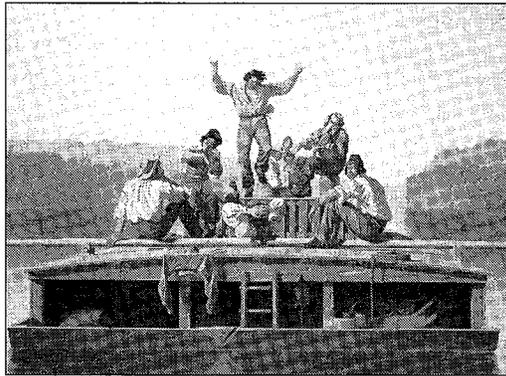
**AMERICAN VIEWS: Essays on American Art.** By John Wilmerding. Princeton. 357 pp. \$65

*American Genre Painting* is like an art movie—the production values are great. The reproductions, layout, paper, typesetting, and binding are all beautiful. But Johns, an art historian at the University of Pennsylvania, is anything but “artsy.” She brings sociology and hard politics to her analysis of American painting.

American art during the decades before the Civil War, with its visions of farmers, forthright women, Mississippi boatmen, blacks both slave and free, and other everyday folk, has long been taken “as evidence of a golden age in American culture and in American genre painting.” Johns argues that to see these paintings as “scenes of everyday life” is inaccurate. She asks a pointed question: “What is the relationship of the actors in this ‘everyday life’ to the viewers?” Johns finds that works by George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879) and William Sidney Mount (1807–1868) were not paeans to the common man but cynical put-downs, painted for an audience of New Yorkers ambitious for political and social leadership, who enjoyed seeing other citizens of the new democracy satirized. The Eastern patrons bought this art to “invest in social hierarchies, in their convictions that certain ‘others’ in the community were or should be revealed as deficient. . . . The successful painter, therefore, could be said to be an entrepreneur of the viewers’ ideologies.”

Johns’s argument is persuasive except for one consideration: Bingham’s boatmen, Mount’s blacks, and William Ranney’s trappers

do not *look* like an underclass. Indeed, they appear happy, noble, and at times heroic. By considering these (and other) 19th-century paintings not sociologically but iconographically, Wilmerding, an art historian at Princeton University, reaches quite different conclusions. In his collection of 19 essays, he tries to determine what is essentially "American" about American art. At the beginning of the 19th century, European painters ranked subjects in a definite artis-



tic hierarchy: Mythology, religion, and history were considered loftiest or highest in importance, portraiture next, and landscape and still life at the bottom. American painters quickly reversed this order, and in the romantic landscapes of Sanford Gifford, Frederic Church, and Thomas Cole, the "real" and the "ideal" were brought closer together than ever before in art history. In George Caleb Bingham's *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1845), Wilmerding finds an affinity between Bingham's geometrics (relying on the stable pyramid) and his subject matter: "Bingham, like America in 1850, held moving forces in balance . . . His artistic vision of stability, centrality, and equipoise perfectly matched its time and place."

Wilmerding produces a closer reading of the paintings themselves; Johns, a more knowing commentary upon the society on whose walls these paintings hung.

**TROLLOPE: A Biography.** By N. John Hall.  
Oxford. 581 pp. \$35

Anthony Trollope (1815–82) was a prodigious Victorian, if not a Victorian prodigy. His liter-

ary output was stupendous: nearly 70 books, most of them on the grand Victorian triple-decker scale. The quality of his writing was remarkably even, and this new biography is no doubt right to suggest that Trollope may have left behind him more good novels than any other writer in the language.

More astonishingly, Trollope accomplished most of this in his spare time while pursuing a successful career in the English postal system. (He invented the corner mailbox.) "Real exertion will enable most men to work at almost any season," Trollope observed. To prove his point, he wrote anywhere and everywhere—in trains, boats, and hotels. This larger-than-life man, whom his friend Wilkie Collins called "an incarnate gale of wind," was the embodiment not only of the work ethic but of English common sense. As Virginia Woolf put it, we believe in Trollope's characters "as we believe in the reality of our own weekly bills."

Trollope's reputation rests largely on his "chronicles" of Barchester and the Pallisers. They are suffused with the essence of Victorian politics, the efforts of the ruling class to adjust the political process just sufficiently to contain the restlessness of modern radicalism without losing its own grip. Trollope was an instinctive conservative, and his common sense was of the kind that dismissed John Stuart Mill's prophetic proposal of Irish land reform (which might, if enacted at that time, have solved the "Irish Question") as "visionary, impracticable and revolutionary."

Politics in Trollope's fiction is the great game, and it was also his great unfulfilled ambition. (He dreamed, in vain, of becoming a member of Parliament.) But, as Hall points out, only the unfinished *Landleaguers* is a truly political story in the narrower meaning of politics—in the way, for example, that American novels about presidential campaigns or even Cold War spy novels are political. But in a larger sense, his novels about the Pallisers, aristocrats dedicated to public service, reveal how the structure of politics duplicated the structure of social life in his England. The Palliser novels amply demonstrate that personal contact was the machinery that controlled the impact of ideals. The grand sweep of these novels, however, is in reverse proportion to the narrowness of the elite they portray, and since the