

self in order to make sense of women's social experience."

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Selling Culture: Bloomingdale's. Diana Vreeland and the New Aristocracy of Taste in Reagan's America

by Debora Silverman

New York: Pantheon Books 1986

Theodore Adorno once wrote that the amateur is incomparably more comfortable in the museum than is the expert. Indeed it is the conflict of interest between the scholars and connoisseurs, who have schooled the modern museum, and the uneducated public, whom they have reluctantly come to see as their audience, which has created the current atmosphere of uncertainty. Although the present crisis of the museum is largely a result of the waning of government funding in the wake of economic decline, it is also attendant on the museum's failure to capture an audience which it never really wanted in the first place. The fear expressed by a French curator some forty years ago, that "if the public at large took to visiting museums, it would be the end of everything," has proved groundless. Repeated surveys taken over the last thirty years have shown that the museum audience has remained middle class and middle-aged. Children and youths, the elderly and the working class are conspicuous by their absence. The populist political tendencies of the sixties and seventies followed closely by increasing economic hardship, have led museums to attempt to justify their existence both by trying to broaden their audience and make money. Although the two endeavours are undoubtedly linked, a neo-conservative trend in government led to the money-making project attaining first priority. The absurdity of the entire exercise is pointed up by recalling the elitist nature of the museum: its origins lie in the personal collections of cultivated aristocrats and scholars of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

It is against this background that Debora Silverman's book is to be read. Much of its force comes from her discomfort at the incursion of the amateur not only into the museum, but the domain within it reserved for the expert: that of curator-consultant. The amateur in question is Diana Vreeland, socialite, *raconteuse* and ex-editor of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. After an introduction setting the cultural and political scene, Sil-

verman begins with two events: Bloomingdale's "China" campaign in the fall of 1980, and Vreeland's concurrent exhibition of Chinese imperial court dress of the Ching dynasty (1644-1912) at the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute. The interest in Chinese exotica is further traced to the costumes worn by Nancy Reagan and others at Ronald Reagan's first inauguration in January 1981. The second chapter covers the period 1981-84, when Diana Vreeland presented three shows at the Costume Institute with French Culture as their theme. They were: "The Eighteenth Century Woman" which detailed the extravagant and frivolous lifestyle of the French aristocracy on the eve of the revolution, "The Belle Epoque" looking back at Parisian high and low life just prior to the First World War, and Bloomingdale's campaign "Fête de France" which immediately followed it. "Twenty Five Years of Yves Saint Laurent" was a retrospective of the works of this *haute*

couture designer who is a close personal friend of Vreeland. The third chapter is an extended review of Vreeland's memoir, *D.V.*, which was marketed by the museum in conjunction with the Saint Laurent exhibition. Chapter Four describes the exhibition "Man and Horse," a display of equestrian clothing used by the English aristocracy, and notes its sponsorship by the designer Ralph Lauren. The final chapter traces these equestrian and Anglophile themes through Reagan's second inauguration and other mass cultural events in 1985. Two other exhibitions, Vreeland's "Costumes of Royal India" and the (Washington) National Gallery's "Treasure Houses of Britain" are also described. The book has numerous black and white illustrations of material from the exhibits and sales campaigns, as well as the principal persons mentioned in the text and some comparative historical material.

Silverman sees all these events as being closely connected to the expansion

of political neo-conservatism. While Reagan and his entertainment and fashion associates posture on stage, social services are dismantled to feed the maw of the industrial-military complex. Silverman has set herself an extremely ambitious project, especially when the work purports to be little more than "a discrete cultural reading to stimulate thought and discussion." Unfortunately, the issues that this book tries to tackle are far beyond the intellectual tools brought to bear on them.

One of Silverman's constant refrains is the lack of scholarship and correct museological practice, evident in Vreeland's displays. She defines a good museum exhibit as one which fills three criteria: correct historical interpretation, public education, and technical perfection. Silverman has apparently little background in museology and seems not entirely aware of recent developments in this field. Even the most hidebound of curators have been forced in the present



Diana Vreeland in her Park Avenue Apartment
photo: Pricilla Rattazi, reprinted from *Selling Culture*

climate to concede that their audience is entitled to an aesthetic experience or even simple pleasure. Indeed, it was the enthusiasm of the connoisseurs which first created collections and provided them with a public. Furthermore, some of Vreeland's seemingly questionable practices, such as the use of perfume in actual exhibits, were suggested as long ago as 1967 by Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker of the Royal Ontario Museum. Silverman's outrage at the use of store mannequins to display the costumes is particularly ironic since much of the exhibition techniques of the modern museum have been copied from department stores and trade fairs.

The lack of an adequate theoretical framework condemns Silverman's book to be little more than an outburst of rage against forces which she cannot understand. The popularity of Vreeland's exhibitions is not a monument to the cupidity and intransigence of those who run the Metropolitan Museum. Still less is it an outcome of the Reagans' entry into the White House. The commodification of culture has been taking place at an accelerated pace since the sixties and is a direct result of the development and consolidation of a late capitalist political economy. The apparent dichotomy between life and art has evaporated as the work of art itself has begun to incorporate elements of life through collage, and other techniques. On the other hand, social life has been transformed by an infusion of aesthetic values. This end, one of the major desiderata of the modernist avant-garde, has been adopted as the most important marketing strategy of post-industrial capitalism. The question of whether any resistant, progressive culture can exist in an environment where there is no longer anywhere that is "outside" art has provided much of the material for the "Postmodernism" debate which is now some five years old in the U.S.

It is perhaps because of her own intellectual and class background that Silverman has chosen to ignore this literature. A holder of three degrees from Princeton, she seems to adhere to an upper class liberalism with elements of *noblesse oblige*. She makes much of the many foundations and bequests provided by industrialists for American museums in the late nineteenth century, as well as the "historical" consciousness of Jackie Kennedy as manifested in her project to restore the White House to its "original" appearance. Despite her knowledge of modern cultural history, Silverman does not seem to be aware that the foundation of museums in the last century was part of a movement which aimed at substituting culture for religion as the consolation of the masses. That the Kennedys were no

less media creations than are the Reagans is obvious. Yet it seems that the greatest offence of the Reagans' circle in Silverman's eyes, is that they are upstarts, lacking taste and breeding. It is also from this perspective that she misinterprets Vreeland's *gaucheries* as evidence of an unfeeling, even sadistic character. They are more likely attributable to a combination of a desire to shock with the lack of a formal education. Silverman even accuses Vreeland of showing disrespect for Queen Mary.

In this light, Silverman's attack on Vreeland's lack of scholarship and supposed untruthfulness about herself is particularly irritating, especially when it becomes apparent that the author often fails to adhere to the rigorous standards of academic research which she claims to uphold. Although Silverman is obviously well informed about the social and cultural history of France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (it is after all, her "field"), she seems a lot less authoritative on events in China which formed the background to trade agreements with the U.S. and gave rise to such phenomena as Bloomingdale's "China" campaign. The only relevant work listed in the bibliography is Orville Schell's coffee table book *To Get Rich Is Glorious: China in the 80s* (Pantheon 1984). Most of the other items included here, apart from the monographs, were culled from such sources as *The New York Times*, *Time* and *New York* a "lifestyle" magazine. In the chapter devoted to Vreeland's memoirs, there are many instances where passages are misquoted, taken out of context or wilfully distorted. To protest that *D.V.* is "a memoir without memory, an autobiography without time" is to miss the point. The scholarly method which Silverman claims to be defending is supposed to be based on a careful and unbiased examination of all relevant material.

I would also like to point out the role that rhetoric plays in this book. To begin with, it partakes of its central thesis: that the hyperbole of politics and advertising in the hands of inveterate liars like Ronald Reagan and Diana Vreeland has converted culture and scholarship into the dross of commerce. It is perhaps because of the nature of her material, as well as a strongly emotional reaction to it, that Silverman is tripped up by her tropes. She seems unable to distinguish pertinent fact from irrelevant anecdote. Are we seriously expected to believe that Diana Vreeland and Nancy Reagan are in close cahoots because Nancy once "invited Mrs. Vreeland to dine at the White House and she shares her passion for the colour red?" It also seems unlikely that a chance remark by Nancy's hairdresser, that he "loved Lauren/Polo" hints at some vast



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and sinister conspiracy to undermine good taste and grind the faces of the poor. Silverman's comparisons of the Reagan elite with the French aristocrats of the *ancien régime* are just as misleading and inaccurate as Vreeland's own ahistorical musings. Given her material, it is not surprising that Silverman has blown trivial personages out of all proportion. Lacking a self-conscious point of view, she cannot understand that there is room for playfulness and enjoyment in cultural activities. When she criticises the Vreeland persona, Silverman seems to have forgotten the psychological truism that everyone is their own creation. As recent work in this field has shown, the fabrication of autobiography is part of a process of invention beginning in young children and set in motion by the acquisition of language. Where there is text, any text, there is duplicity, where there is narrative, there are lies. It is the failure to deal with these issues that limits *Selling Culture's* contribution to the study of cultural history and museology.

I do not wish to give an entirely negative impression, however. As Borges put

it: "After rereading I am apprehensive lest I have not sufficiently underlined the book's virtues. It contains some very civilized expressions..." It does indeed. Silverman's wit, when it is displayed, is neither heavy-handed nor excessive but points up well the monstrous absurdity of the protagonists. Her obvious familiarity with and deep understanding of recent Western cultural history holds out many an unexpected pleasure for the reader. Even if Silverman still cherishes a dream of the fulfillment of the Enlightenment project, we cannot doubt her good will in so doing. As I suggested above, her failures stem in most part from mapping out too large a terrain of enquiry, and not least from venturing into the modern museum in a critical spirit, where few have gone before her.

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