



Smithsonian American Art Museum

“The Plague of Jocularity”: Art, Humor, and the American Social Body, 1863–1906

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My dissertation examines the contested place of humor in American art in the years following the Civil War, when the nation was engaged in developing, for the first time, a truly ‘high’ sense of culture. Conservatives sought to present an image of unshakable seriousness on the world stage, one demonstrating that the nation had finally achieved some level of civility. Humor undermined this image and was seen accordingly as something that had to be contained or concealed.

My study demonstrates the ways in which painters and sculptors struggled to preserve a place in fine art for an ambitious and critical humor. They worked against conservative impulses that sought to channel humor into a restrictive set of normalizing guises or to ghettoize it as properly belonging to more mass forms of artistic production. Winslow Homer breaks with the hackneyed conventions of antebellum genre painting to establish the seriousness of humor, in effect theorizing its place in American art and culture; Enoch Wood Perry violently deconstructs humor’s capacity to inoculate citizens against the disruptive effects of difference; William Holbrook Beard runs humor underground, revealing the depths to which it had to be repressed; Augustus Saint-Gaudens invokes the ridiculous in his sublime and relentlessly humorless artistic statements; and John Haberle exploits humor’s protean shiftiness, pointing the way toward the high intellectual value that humor would achieve in art of the twentieth century.