



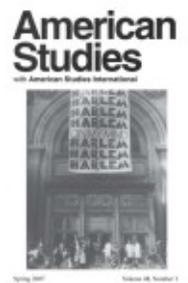
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*American Icons: An Encyclopedia of the People, Places, and Things That Have Shaped Our Culture* (review)

Karal Ann Marling

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to worry about than the joke itself. It is the serious opinions and the actions informed by these opinions that should be the objects of concern.

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Elliott Oring

AMERICAN ICONS: An Encyclopedia of the People, Places, and Things That Have Shaped Our Culture. Edited by Dennis R. Hall and Susan Grove Hall. 3 vols. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 2006.

It is hard to dislike a trio of volumes with shiny, high-school-textbook covers adorned with images of Oprah, the Alamo, and the Babe. And the announced goal of the editors was to provide essays on American icons for browsers in public libraries, students writing term papers, and scholars of popular culture. The first two groups may well benefit from the big type, the plethora of photos, and the generally reader-friendly format of the project. But the scholarly community will not be so pleased, I fear.

The problems are several. In the 20-plus essays I sampled—they ran the gamut from Mickey Mouse and Crayola Crayons to Elvis and Whistler's *Mother*—the writing was easy to follow but lacking in depth or a sense of the inherent complexity of the subjects. The lists of sources skirted texts that treat the objects of inquiry as problematic: the references were, in most cases, the first things a "Google" search would be liable to turn up, albeit not the studies that most professional historians of a given topic would find challenging and significant.

The more serious problem, however, is the icons chosen for inclusion. Why Coney Island—and not Disneyland? Johnny Cash without the Grand Ole Opry? The Kodak Camera and not the Polaroid, the Xerox machine, etc.? The Dollar Bill and not currency and philatelic design in general? Tara without *Gone With the Wind*?

It is this decision to select narrow categories and to avoid contextual issues that limits the usefulness of *American Icons*. I found myself thinking of Howard Lamar's admirable *The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West* (Harper & Row, 1977), a volume I still consult regularly. And every time I do, I find myself lost in one of its lengthy, informative, and literate essays, chockfull of all the specific "icons" a reader could ever desire along with what were, for the date, remarkably detailed bibliographies. Is today's library user so witless (or myopic) that a densely printed book—a *real* book—is somehow unattractive? Another more recent example of a fine reference work on American culture is the one-volume *Encyclopedia of American Folk Art* (ed. Gerald C. Wertkin) published by Routledge in 2004. The margins are wider, the typography more legible, but like the Lamar book, it is well written, well researched, and manages to retain a firm grip on the sweep of cultural history while sparing no pains to get the details straight.

In the end, I can't imagine why *American Icons* would be a welcome addition to a library given its hit-or-miss list of topics and disinterest in relating one theme to another—or to the nature of American culture. It's a great pity, though. The cover photo of Oprah hugging Elmo is a genuine icon!

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THE NEEDLE'S EYE: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution. By Marla R. Miller. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 2006.

In *The Needle's Eye* Marla R. Miller has rescued for a twenty-first century audience New England needlework and needleworkers in the generations before, during, and after the American Revolution. Her account offers a broad perspective, viewing needlework as