

The Editorial Notebook Americana Is Where You Find It: Where Johnny ...

Huxtable, Ada Louise

New York Times (1923-Current file); Aug 1, 1980; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. A22

The Editorial Notebook

Americana Is Where You Find It

George and Martha Washington made their debut at the National Portrait Gallery this summer after the first of their triennial jet shuttles between Boston and Washington. People are queuing up to see this bit of itinerant Americana just as they are queuing in record numbers for the permanent new American Wing of New York's Metropolitan Museum. This is the season for artifacts of the American past, but what makes an artifact notable is the subject of heated debate.

At the heart of the controversy is a move by younger scholars away from the fine arts and the formal past to the popular present. They are fascinated with the commercial artifacts of a consumer culture. In the Metropolitan's original American Wing, only the carefully crafted and patrician products of the 18th and early 19th centuries were acceptable, with a cutoff date of about 1820. Now, half a century later, the range of displayable Americana has grown greatly, to include

Where Johnny Slopped Now Vies With Where Washington Slept

once-despised Victorian buildings and decorative arts. And the definition is still being broadened for 20th-century styles.

Indeed, the standards are being stretched even further, to embrace the America of suburbia and the commercial strip, the unsung vernacular of our time. Unsung until recently, that is. Now there are books on diners and gas stations. Hot-dog stands and Quonset huts have been placed on the National Register. And a Society for Commercial Archeology has been founded. What could be more American than tract housing and fast-food restaurants?

The Society of Architectural Histo-

rians recently held a forum on "The Assessment of American Roadside Architecture." If it has the gas and is up on revisionist art and history, the touring American family this summer can combine Old Sturbridge Village and Middle Mansard McDonald's in one cultural experience.

The American architectural heritage, in sum, no longer has to fit the correct standards of Colonial Williamsburg. The new, inclusive view raises serious questions about how to record and preserve so vast a phenomenon, not to mention the standards that are to be used. It would be ludicrous to freeze motels for posterity, but not much sillier than embalming all of George Washington's overnight stops or enshrining the excesses of consumerism in museums. But all of these artifacts — and the artistic curiosity about them — have redeeming documentary value, at least for the student of art and mores.

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.