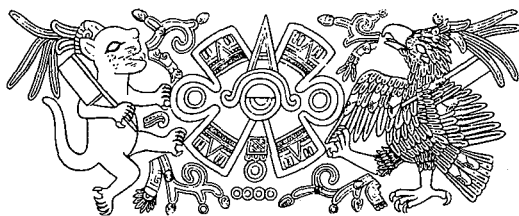


Scholars previously resolved this contradiction by marginalizing Aztec sacrifice, dismissing it as a top-of-the-pyramid affair concerning priests and rulers. Here, however, Australian historian Clendinnen shows that most of the butcher's work was done in full view, with all of society helping to prepare the victims and to distribute their dismembered heads and limbs. Clendinnen studies this "intimacy with victims' bodies, living and dead; [and] how that intimacy was rendered tolerable; what meanings were attached to it," to understand "how ordinary Mexica men- and women-in-the-street made sense of the vital world." Her *Aztecs* not only supersedes Jacques Soustelle's classic *Daily Life of the Aztecs* (1961) but also overturns most scholarly dicta about the Aztecs, from their honoring the elderly (on the contrary) to the role of sorcerers in society (far greater than was supposed).

Aztec sacrifice was intended to initiate human beings into the universe of the gods: Even the sun's rising out of darkness required continual human bloodletting. Young warriors were taught that their destiny was to be as much victim as victor, that their "precious eagle-cactus fruit" (their heart) would one day be "drink, nourishment, food to the sun, the lord of earth." The Aztecs conducted "Flowery Wars" against their allies—perhaps the strangest battles in history—fought not for territory or economic gain but "solely for the mutual taking of prisoners worthy of sacrificial death." With only the highest-ranking soldiers participating and fighting prearranged opponents, these battles involved what often appeared to be the ritual courtesies of a family reunion: The victor would ceremoniously address his captive as "my beloved son" and in turn be addressed as "my beloved father."

Scholars have long struggled to apply the



modern understanding of war, politics, and civil life to the Aztec empire. Clendinnen, by demonstrating that barbaric sacrifice was the defining act of Aztec society, makes such efforts seem misguided. Her approach derives from that of an American anthropologist working in an entirely different part of the world. Studying the Balinese, Clifford Geertz abandoned models from the contemporary social sciences and interpreted his subjects' system of government as a form of ritualized theater. Similarly, Clendinnen reveals a system of political governance that was so much a stylized mythological ritual that it barely seems to us like politics at all. Comparing Aztec researchers to "Ahabs pursuing our great white whale," Clendinnen concedes that it is "our own limitations of thought, of understandings, of imagination we test as we quarter those strange waters."

WOMEN AND GENDER IN ISLAM:

Historical Roots of a Modern Debate. By Leila Ahmed. Yale. 296 pp. \$30

What is the place of women in Islam? The success of fundamentalist movements in many parts of the Islamic world—which today includes some 40 nations and more than one billion people—adds urgency to the question. Countless Western news stories imply that the return to the veil required by Iran and other Islamizing regimes heralds a reign of repression that Muslim zealots will impose on women should their movements take hold in such comparatively "progressive" states as Turkey and Algeria.

For the past quarter century, much of the discussion about women under Islam has followed an argument put forth by the militant feminist, Dr. Nawal al-Saadawi of Egypt: Yes, Islamic women were oppressed, Saadawi conceded, but Islam itself could in no way be blamed. Rather, pre-Islamic conditions or reprehensible Persian or African codifications were smuggled into the essentially nonmisogynous religion of the Prophet. Ahmed, director of the Near Eastern studies program at the University of Massachusetts, brings balance and evidence to what has too often been a polemical debate.

Ahmed frankly admits the sexist,

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