
LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES:
*A History of Art Dealing in
the United States.*

By Malcolm Goldstein. Oxford Univ.
Press. 370 pp. \$30

In 1937 Peggy Guggenheim, whose Uncle Solomon founded that famously circular museum, opened an art gallery in London. Hilla Rebay, the German artist who was helping Solomon amass his collection, chided the fledgling dealer: "It is extremely distasteful . . . when the name Guggenheim stands for an ideal in art, to see it used for commerce. . . . Commerce with real art cannot exist. . . . You will soon find you are propagating mediocrity; if not trash." By 1940, Peggy had closed her London gallery—not because she took Rebay's point, but because she hadn't turned a profit. She went to Paris, checkbook in hand, buying a picture a day on the cheap for her own little museum. Only Picasso rebuffed the bulb-nosed American. "Now, what can I do for you, madame?" he asked when she arrived at his studio. "Are you sure that you are in the right department? Lingerie is on the next floor."

Though necessarily episodic, this history of American art dealing is pleasingly written, attentive to nuance, respectful without being sycophantic, and rife with tales of the titans and oddballs who made art their business. The economy and grace of the metaphoric title apply to the admirable book as a whole. The publisher is touting it as "the first history of art dealing in America," but Goldstein, a professor emeritus of English at the City University of New York, makes a far more modest claim. As in Saul Steinberg's cartoon, the states beyond New York scarcely exist here, and only the most influential dealers in American and European art get much play. "Surely that is enough for one book," the author writes courageously. And it is.

American art dealing scarcely existed before the latter part of the 19th century, when European dealers played to Gilded Age millionaires' sense of cultural inferiority by selling them Old Masters. While the dealers showed European paintings, among them Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crosses the Delaware*, American artists struggled: Thomas Cole's paintings hung in a frame shop, available for \$25, and Frederic Church advertised his landscape-painting services in a magazine. An important cultural exchange eventually took

place. European dealers such as Alfred Knoedler and the Scotch-Irish William Macbeth recognized the value of the American product, and American dealers such as Peggy Guggenheim promoted and supported European modernists.

The narrative lingers at midcentury, when the author was a poor student traveling down from Columbia University to 57th Street to buy paintings he could ill afford, on installment. The dealers he met then—Grace Borgnicht, Edith Halpert, and Antoinette Kraushaar—were informed, generous with their time, and not unprincipled. By Goldstein's reckoning, they, and those who followed them (especially Betty Parsons, Sidney Janis, and Leo Castelli), genuinely advanced the cause of serious art. While Goldstein gives scant attention to art dealings' last few confused decades, no one could yet call them historic, and perhaps no one ever will.

—A. J. HEWAT

THEREMIN:
Ether Music and Espionage.

By Albert Glinsky. Univ. of Illinois
Press. 403 pp. \$34.95

In 1920, Russian engineer Leon Theremin arranged a demonstration for colleagues at his Petrograd research institute. He stood in the



Leon Theremin demonstrating his eponymous device in Paris in 1927.

front of the room, “his arms outstretched, his two hands hovering, fluttering, and diving in air” around two antennas attached to a high-frequency oscillator, according to Glinsky. From a rudimentary loudspeaker came the melody of Camille Saint-Saëns’s “Swan.” Theremin (1896–1993) had developed a musical instrument that could be played without physical contact.

Theremin and his “etherphone” (soon called the “theremin”) won worldwide acclaim. He played concerts in the Soviet Union, Europe, and the United States, for audiences that included V. I. Lenin, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Arturo Toscanini, and George Bernard Shaw. Some reviewers likened the ethereal music to “celestial voices,” though Shaw remarked that he had heard pleasanter sounds from a tissue-covered comb. Theremin believed that his instrument, inexpensively mass-produced, would replace the parlor piano. Without any training, people could “wave their hands and express their own musical personality,” he said, “providing they possess a musical feeling.” He moved to New York City and tried to market the instrument while working as a musician, teacher, inventor, and perhaps spy.

In 1938, Theremin returned to the Soviet Union—and disappeared. Caught up in Stalin’s purges, he was imprisoned for eight years and then assigned to a secret research facility. (One of his Cold War inventions came to light in 1952 when a British radio operator in Moscow heard U.S. ambassador George F. Kennan dictating letters. Technicians searched the ambassador’s house and found a listening device hidden inside a bas-relief Great Seal of the United States, a hand-carved goodwill gift from Soviet boy scouts seven years earlier.) Invisible and presumed dead for 25 years, Theremin reappeared

in the mid-1960s, around the time the Beach Boys used a theremin in “Good Vibrations.” During the remainder of his long life, he was honored as the father of electronic music.

Glinsky, a composer who teaches at Mercyhurst College in Pennsylvania, faced many obstacles in writing Theremin’s life story. “Theremin routinely supplied different versions of the same incident to different interviewers at different times,” he writes. “And when he was finally politically free enough to tell his own story he could no longer be counted on to tell it reliably.” In addition, Theremin’s contemporaries were mostly dead, and many of the materials were incomplete or infected with historical revisionism.

Through indefatigable research, Glinsky has nonetheless managed to provide a nuanced, comprehensive portrait. Though he is no word-smith—paragraphs lack transitions, characters are introduced out of place, the chronology meanders—his biography is a triumph. The tale is so bizarrely dramatic that the book is nearly impossible to put down.

Glinsky skillfully uses the inventor’s life to contrast communism and capitalism. After Theremin designed a television during the 1920s, for example, the Soviet government confiscated it, stamped it classified, and transformed it into a surveillance device for border guards. During his decade in the United States, by contrast, the Radio Corporation of America hired Theremin as part of its effort to place a television in every living room. “The divergence of Soviet and American culture can be almost unfathomable,” Glinsky observes. “And it would be laughable, had it not been so tragic and so typical.”

—STEVE WEINBERG

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

*THE UNDERGROWTH
OF SCIENCE:
Delusion, Self-Deception, and
Human Frailty.*

By Walter Gratzer. Oxford Univ. Press.
328 pp. \$27.50

A scientist can go bad in any number of ways. Some of them, such as trimming facts to fit theories, are lamentable but almost

understandable. Others, such as making up facts altogether, are unforgivable.

One way of going bad, however, is harder to judge. A reputable, even eminent scientist discovers something unexpected and nearly undetectable. The scientist is intrigued, then enthralled, then obdurately convinced. A few fellow scientists concur, but others, unable to repeat the discovery, attack. War