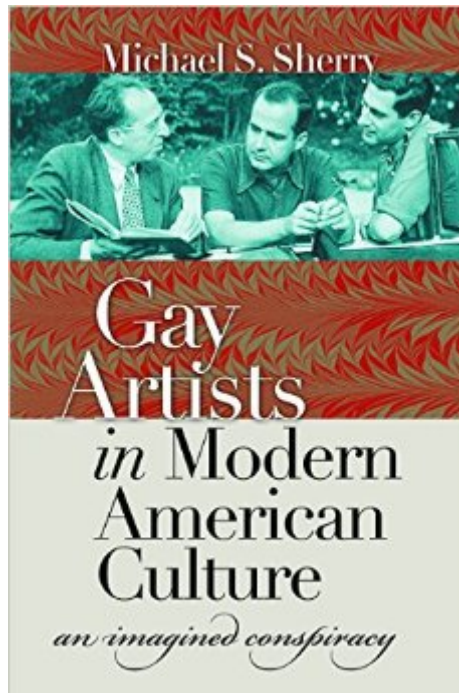


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Gay Artists In Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy (Caravan Book)



Synopsis

Today it is widely recognized that gay men played a prominent role in defining the culture of mid-twentieth-century America, with such icons as Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, Montgomery Clift, and Rock Hudson defining much of what seemed distinctly "American" on the stage and screen. Even though few gay artists were "out," their sexuality caused significant anxiety during a time of rampant antihomosexual attitudes. Michael Sherry offers a sophisticated analysis of the tension between the nation's simultaneous dependence on and fear of the cultural influence of gay artists. Sherry places conspiracy theories about the "homintern" (homosexual international) taking control and debasing American culture within the paranoia of the time that included anticommunism, anti-Semitism, and racism. Gay artists, he argues, helped shape a lyrical, often nationalist version of American modernism that served the nation's ambitions to create a cultural empire and win the Cold War. Their success made them valuable to the country's cultural empire but also exposed them to rising antigay sentiment voiced even at the highest levels of power (for example, by President Richard Nixon). Only late in the twentieth century, Sherry concludes, did suspicion slowly give way to an uneasy accommodation of gay artists' place in American life.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

At first I was reading this book rather grudgingly due to what I perceived as its flaw, the almost total absence of West Coast-based artists among his case studies. In fact I still don't know why that

would be, the book is about "Modern American Culture" not "Modern Upper East Side Culture," nevertheless there it is, and what's here is almost bewilderingly good in all the best ways. It takes up a topic you thought you knew all about, and it brings to light the documents themselves that force you to see the whole "conspiracy" in a different light. AN IMAGINED CONSPIRACY shows us the intricate web of enemies any gay artist had to deal with in the 1940s and the 1950s, and perhaps in response the art of the men in question became more and more patriotic and American. Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" was praised for its universal qualities. Rock Hudson became the most manly and appealing of all movie stars, while Aaron Copland saw his composition "Fanfare for the Common Man" become a second national anthem. The most riveting and heterosexually erotic musical, "West Side Story" was composed by an entire troupe of gay artists including Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim. Sherry shows us how the State Department and other proponents of American imperialism cynically pushed forward these cultural products as weapons in the Cold War with Russia and the hated Red Menace of communism, and until such time as these tactics ceased to matter, the artist were protected to a certain extent from public exposure.

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