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Picturing The Banjo



Synopsis

The history of the banjo is as haunting as its music. Made popular in minstrel shows of the nineteenth century, the *æbanjar* derives from the stringed gourd instrument African slaves brought with them to plantations in the Caribbean and American South. From minstrelsy to the folk music revival of the twentieth century, the banjo has continued to attract audiences and acquire meaning. *Picturing the Banjo* gives this long history an entirely new dimension by tracing the instrument's representation in American visual culture from the eighteenth century to the present. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name, *Picturing the Banjo* offers the first examination of the instrument's portrayal in images that range from anonymous photographs of performers to paintings by Thomas Eakins and prints by Dox Thrash. Leo G. Mazow, contributing editor of the volume, and his collaborators demonstrate that the banjo became an American icon that links popular music to fundamental issues of race, class, and gender. Simple and appealing as the instrument may seem in Henry Ossawa Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* or Eastman Johnson's *Old Kentucky Home*, it carries powerful associations with social conflict and change. Through its many color and black-and-white illustrations, this book allows readers to experience the works of visual art and period instruments brought together in the pioneering exhibition organized by the Palmer Museum of Art of The Pennsylvania State University. *Picturing the Banjo* will be of interest to banjo lovers, scholars in American studies, and all those concerned with the musical and artistic heritage of slavery.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The instrument proper to them [slaves] is the banjar, which they brought hither from Africa.

--Thomas Jefferson
Earlier studies of the banjo in American art have focused on its cultural and sociological context. Building on this groundwork, a new exhibition and its accompanying catalogue explore the banjo as a symbol in American art from the eighteenth century to the present. --Allison Eckardt Ledes, Antiques Magazine
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The book is filled with beautiful color examples of how artists have incorporated the banjo in their work. Leo Mazow's insightful writing is the best in the book. Some of the essays are stretching the truth quite a bit but such is the problem with speculative art criticism. The book is bound beautifully and it is enjoyable to just sit back and look at the images. I wish it were hardcover. I did not know that the banjo originated in Africa. The history of the banjo as described in the book is excellent.

splendid pictures

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